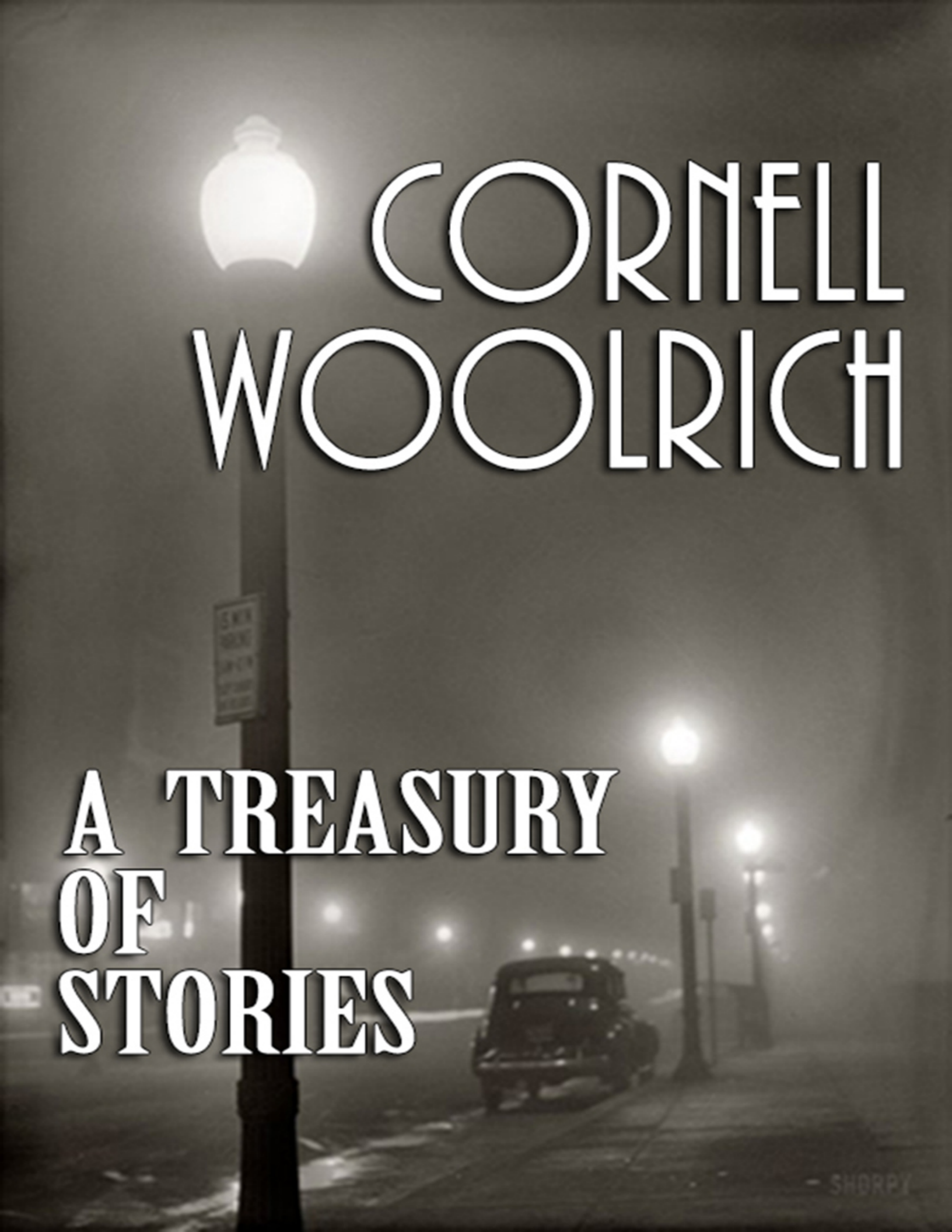
CORNELL
WOOLRICH
A TREASURY
OF
STORIES

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A TREASURY OF STORIES

CORNELL WOOLRICH

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A Treasury of Stories

Cornell Woolrich

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INTENT TO KILL
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CORNELL GEORGE HOPLEY-WOOLRICH was born in New York City on December 4, 1903, but lived his early years in Mexico until his parents separated; and eventually divorced. Shortly thereafter, Woolrich and his mother, Claire Attalie Woolrich, moved back to America.

He attended Columbia University but left in 1926 without graduating when his first novel, *Cover Charge*, was published. *Cover Charge* was one of six Jazz Age novels inspired by the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Woolrich is best known for penning the short story, "It had to Be Murder" [which is loosely-based on H.G. Wells' short story "Through a Window"], that Alfred Hitchcock based the film, *Rear Window* on. In 1990, ownership of the copyright in Woolrich's original story "It Had to Be Murder" and its use for *Rear Window* was litigated before the United States Supreme Court in Stewart v. Abend, 495 U.S. 207.

He went on to be the father of American "noir fiction", with his numerous short stories published in the pulp fiction magazines of the 1930's, 40's and 50's; as well as his legendary "black" series of novels, many of which have been turned into major motion pictures.

Getting a Hollywood contract in the late 1920's he worked as screenwriter. Woolrich was homosexual and was very sexually active in his youth. In 1930, while working as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, Woolrich married Violet Virginia Blackton (1910–65), daughter of silent film producer J. Stuart Blackton. They separated after three months, and the marriage was annulled in 1933.

Woolrich returned to New York where he and his mother moved into the Hotel Marseilles (Broadway and West 103rd Street). He lived there until her death on October 6, 1957,

which prompted his move to the Hotel Franconia (20 West 72nd Street).

He soon turned to pulp and detective fiction, often published under his pseudonyms: William Irish and George Hopley.

In later years, he socialized on occasion in Manhattan bars with Mystery Writers of America colleagues and younger fans such as writer Ron Goulart, but alcoholism and an amputated leg (caused by an infection from a too-tight shoe which went untreated) left him a recluse.

François Truffaut filmed Woolrich's *The Bride Wore Black and Waltz Into Darkness* in 1968 and 1969, respectively, the latter as *Mississippi Mermaid*. He did not attend the premiere of Truffaut's film of his novel *The Bride Wore Black* in 1968, even though it was held in New York City. He died weighing 89 pounds. He is interred in the Ferncliff Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York.

His biographer, Francis Nevins Jr., rated Woolrich the fourth best crime writer of his day, behind only Dashiell Hammett, Erle Stanley Gardner and Raymond Chandler. A check of film titles reveals that more film noir screenplays were adapted from works by Woolrich than any other crime novelist, and many of his stories were adapted during the 1940s for *Suspense* and other dramatic radio programs.

Francis M. Nevins Jr., writes in his preface to the recent reprint of *Manhattan Love Song* of his last days, *". . . his last year spent in a wheelchair after the amputation of a gangrenous leg, thin as a rail, white as a ghost, wracked by diabetes and alcoholism and self-contempt".*

Cornell Woolrich died on September 25, 1968 in New York City. He bequeathed his estate of about $850,000 to Columbia University, to endow scholarships in his mother's memory for writing students.

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I was trying to cheat death. I was only trying to surmount
for a little while the darkness
that all my life I surely knew was going to come rolling in on
me some day and
obliterate me. I was only to stay alive a little brief while
longer, after I was already gone.

CORNELL WOOLRICH

DANCE IT OFF!

Wally Walters had been told more than once that he was a cake eater. Now a cake eater is one who having arrived at years of discretion toils not neither does he spin. In other words he lets the bread and butter of life go by him and concentrates on the cake—sugar icing and all. How he gets away with it is nobody's business. But Wally Walters, in particular, wore a three-cornered, low-crowned hat down over his eyes and nose with a little green feather stuck in the band. Being unable to fasten a bow-tie himself, he wore his on a rubber band under the collar of his shirt. It looked just as good anyway. His trousers hung about his legs in folds; they extended to the tips of his shoes, and when he walked he looked elephant-footed. The funniest thing about him, though, was his raincoat. When it rained, and sometimes even when it didn't rain, Wally came out in a soapy looking yellow slicker with a little strap around his throat like a dog-collar. On his back he had a drawing of a bobbed-haired flapper in a pink chemise and black silk stockings, and underneath was the legend "Ain't we got fun" for all the townspeople to marvel at. The blonde cashier at the candy store had done it for him. She had also done some six or eight others. All the boys told her she had a great deal of talent going to waste. She agreed with them.

It is only fair to mention in passing that although Wally Walters was undeniably a cake eater, he never touched cake, or pie either for that matter. He dined in cafeterias

whenever he did dine, which wasn’t as often as it sounds, and he ate things like ham sandwiches and custards because they cost less and were far more substantial. Several evenings a week he devoted to billiards, but on Saturday nights he was always to be found at the Rainbow, the local dance center, where they took the precaution of searching you for liquor as you went in. Some of the brighter ones got around this by carrying it internally. On Saturday nights Myrtle and Rose and Lily were always to be found there, outdoing one another in the grotesqueries of the Charleston. All that was needed was plenty of room, a pair of strong ankles, and lots of terpsichorean ambition; and these were the very things that Wally Walters seemed to have most of. Consequently he was a howling success and always in demand—as Rose and Myrtle and Lily thought that the cleverest Charleston contortionist was bound to make an ideal husband, in which case they wouldn’t have to go out any more but could do their practicing right at home.

But not for Wally. He knew too much about girls. Girls were a necessary evil, nice under Japanese lanterns at twelve o’clock with all their bagatelles and war-paint on, but not so nice at nine the next morning over the cereal and the coffee pot. Wally was an idealist. He had dreams and he hated to see them spoilt. He got a little older and he got a little older and finally he put his trust in one girl and one girl only, a girl in a castle of dreams.

There was Carfare Connie. They called her that because she would ride in anything from a limousine to a mail truck, but she always took along about a dollar and a half for spending money. She called it her emergency fund. She’d had the same dollar and a half for three years now and still her luck kept up. She used to read the motto engraved on the silver half dollar, “In God We Trust,” and smile knowingly to herself, and perhaps rub it on her sleeves to brighten it up a bit. Carfare Connie hadn’t had any trouble

on automobile rides—much—but she believed in being prepared. Every Saturday night she put on a big floppy white picture hat which was nothing but wire and gauze and wended her merry way to the Rainbow, greeting all passers-by en route. She was very fond of Wally Walters. He and she would invent dance steps together.

"Look, cake, how about this one? I thought it up on my way to work this morning."

"Show us it."

"Tum tum, te ta ta," said Carfare Connie with great gusto.

"Yeah," he said, "I see what you're driving at. Only look—tum tum, te ta ta—doesn't that work out better?" Giving his version of it.

"Yeah, you've got it ezactly; that's ezactly what I meant." And a girl has to care a good deal for someone before she'll let him change her pet ideas to suit himself.

Now there were six Lucilles all in a row until one was sent out on the road and there were only five. Lucille was one of those musical comedy heroines who have to wear gingham and tickle dust-mops and scrub floors in the first act, but then in the second act they bob up all covered with sequins and grab the nearest millionaire's son and sing a song all about a platinum lining. And everybody goes home happy.

In this case everyone went home happy except poor Lucille herself. Lucille hated being sent on the road. It put her in bad humor for weeks and weeks at a time. She missed her gorgeous roof bungalow with its mirrored bath, she missed her Hispano-Fiat with its little green baize card table. She missed her borzoi with its concave stomach. Lucille in this instance was Mimi Travers of New York and Philadelphia, but decidedly not of points west. The whole trouble was the producers seemed to think otherwise. All day long on the train she said things about them not meant for little children to hear; and when night came she sat in her dressing-room with shoes scattered all about her and delayed getting dressed for the performance until the

curtain of that particular theater was three quarters of an hour late and the stage manager threatened to wire New York. Then she slapped on a make-up helter skelter at the last possible moment and made them omit the “Primrose Path” number from the second act, saying she was fed up on it and didn’t give a damn.

And it was this same evening that Wally Walters came north along River Street looking like a million dollars going somewhere to get itself squandered. A brand new electric sign caught his eye and he paused to reflect upon it, giving the dimes, quarters, and halves in his pocket a vigorous shaking up.

LUCILLE
The Hit Of Hits
One Solid Year in New York

The lights went on and off, on and off. There was something fascinating in the arrangement of the letters. Lucille, the Hit of Hits. Lucille. What a pretty name. He stood in line to buy a ticket, the six brass buttons on his powder-blue Norfolk gleaming in the light of the lobby—that powder-blue Norfolk that was the pride of his silly, disordered life, that he always wore to the Rainbow on Saturday nights and to the chop suey palaces. And though he wasn’t exactly thinking about her just then, there was always this girl in a castle of dreams and bubbles in his heart—which was a good heart as hearts go but all smothered with confetti.

He walked down the aisle to his seat just as the overture was getting under way. A girl in an upper box smiled when she caught sight of him and made some comment to an older woman beside her. He imagined she wanted to flirt with him, so he treated her to one of his studied gazes of approval and smiled wickedly out of the corners of his mouth. For a few seconds she returned his look with

impudent disdain; then she and the older woman both laughed in his face. The lights went out like a whip and he sat down, wondering what had been the matter with those two.

The curtain went up on a sea of legs—the musical comedy had begun. Five minutes, ten minutes, twelve minutes passed. It progressed well beyond the first half of the first act with still no sign of Lucille. Who was she anyway, Wally wondered. What was she waiting for, what was it all about?

Up on the stage a garden party was in progress. A bevy of girls with parasols and aigrets and lorgnettes and feather fans made shadows play up and down their legs. They stood in battalions and fluttered their fingers from their feet up over their heads. Then all at once he saw her.

She was in the midst of them. The spotlight picked her out. She was like a guinea-pig among peacocks and flamingoes. Her hair was drawn back into a knot at the top of her head, the way they draw them in the comic strips, and there was a ridiculous little hat perched on top, stabbed with a long pin. Her stockings were red and white wool, striped like sticks of peppermint candy. She had on impossible shoes that buttoned half way up her calves—yellow shoes. She had a little old Irish terrier under her arm; it had been trained to try and get away from her and she had to struggle with it to hold it. The people screamed with laughter. The auditorium fairly rocked with it. It dashed itself against the footlights like spray, wave after wave of it. In the balconies people were standing up to get a better view of her.

But Wally Walters never cracked a smile. He sat there staring out at Lucille’s pitiful talcumed face, her clownish face with its blued-in eyes and its blacked lips. The stage beauties circled about her, gorgeous with Titian hair and peach bloom make-up. They studied her through lorgnettes and flicked her with their fans and turned their shoulders on her in contempt. They drew back, leaving her standing

alone. Even the little terrier had abandoned her at the first opportunity. There was a hush. A thick shaft of very white light fell on her, powdering her ridiculous padded leg-of-mutton shoulders. She began to sing. She sang about a castle of dreams and how it had come tumbling down. And there was nothing left, she said, nothing; she spread her hands and let them fall sidewise with a slap and sobbed drily deep down in her throat. Then she went shuffling off in her absurd shoes and striped stockings, and on her way out she pretended to trip over something. That brought the entire house down again.

But Wally couldn't laugh, somehow. He knew how it felt; you bet he knew how it felt. His eyes were stinging him. He pulled his hat from beneath the seat and went trudging up the aisle. People wondered why he was leaving so early. Once he looked back over his shoulder. She hadn't come out again. They were doing a Charleston to the little tune she had sung so wistfully; they were clodhopping among the ruins of her dream castle. It didn't matter to him that she was to come back later with a diadem in her hair and paradise tufts on her shoes. He knew how it was when you felt that way. Who would know better than he, always hungering for something out of reach—and not cake either. He stood out in front of the theater, looking aimlessly up the street without seeing anything. He lit a cigaret and tried to pretend that it was the smoke getting in his throat that made it so dry.

He went home to his room—the "budwa" he called it—and lay on the bed, shoes and all. It was a true image of his life, that small room. Disarranged, meaningless, pitiful, choked with trifles, trying hard to be gay but sad at heart. There was a picture of a motion picture actress, Clara Bow, clipped from a magazine and pasted to the wall. There was a tambourine hanging on a nail and a gilt false-face hanging from its elastic on another. There were girls' telephone numbers scribbled everywhere although the landlady was

furious about it. On the dresser there was a ten cent store doll with blue cotton batting for hair; someone had penciled a mustache along its upper lip. There was in addition a nickel-plated pocket flask lying on its side, a feathered bamboo tickler from one of the Chinese restaurants, several menus, a bottle with a little hair grease turned rancid in the bottom of it, and the remains of a package of cigarets. Also a copper ash-tray with chewing gum stuck to it, and one of orange clay with collar buttons and a toothbrush in it.

Somebody was knocking on his door. He bobbed up. “Who is it?” he demanded. He scratched the back of his head.

“You’re wanted on the telefoam,” cried the lady of the house through the panel. He heard her go away again.

He unlocked the door and went down to the foot of the staircase. The receiver was hanging on its cord, so low that it almost touched the floor. He had to stoop to pick it up.

“Yeah?” he said constrainedly.

“Oh, hello!” said a girl’s voice. “This is Connie. Connie speaking.”

“I know,” he remarked dispiritedly, fishing the while through several pockets in the effort to locate a cigaret. When he had found one he held it between his lips without lighting it—a dry smoke—and it bobbed up and down each time he had anything to say.

“I’m up at the Rainbow,” she said. “Why didn’t you show up tonight? Anything wrong?”

“Na,” he said, closing his eyes for a brief moment. He felt he couldn’t stomach Connie this evening, nor any of the others either. The sound of a band, infinitely small and far away and blurred with other noises, came through the receiver.

“Hear that?” said Connie. “Doesn’t it make you itchy?”

“Hm?” he said, not caring much.

“I’ll keep my eye open for you,” she went on. “How long will it take you to get here, cake?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not coming. No, not for tonight. I’m all fagged out.”

“Why, what’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” she demanded in surprise. “Are you trying to kid me? You know yourself you couldn’t keep away from here even if you wanted to.”

“That’s what you say.”

He shut his eyes and pressed his forehead against the wall.

“They’re going to have a Charleston contest and everything,” Connie was saying. “I entered your name for you. You better see that you get here. The leading lady from ‘Lucille’ is coming up after the show to award the prizes—”

“Hell she is!” he burst out.

“What’s the matter,” protested Connie angrily, “are you trying to crack my eardrum?”

“Wait for me,” he cried. “I’ll be over in a jiffy. Meet you in the foyer—” and hung up.

“Men sure are changeable,” sighed Carfare Connie, powdering her nose with a puff the size of a postage stamp.

Meanwhile in Wally’s room a toilette was in full swing. He crowded his number eight feet into number seven dancing shoes, with spats to cap the climax; he soaked his hair with glycerin—oh, there’s no use denying Wally tossed a mean toilette once he got going. And as he went out, carelessly banging the door shut after him, the draft brought the movie star’s picture fluttering down from the wall.

There was a taxi standing in front of the Rainbow with its engine going, waiting for someone. It was unusual for a taxi to be here at that hour. Most patrons of the place arrived on foot, or if they rode at all it was in trolley cars and the front seats of moving vans. Wally knew who had hired it without being told. He bought his ticket of admission at the box office and went in. At the inner door he was frisked for possible concealed liquor and brushed by them impatiently. He checked his coat and hat and bought twenty-five cents’

worth of blue dance tickets at a nickel a dance. The lights were all swathed in yellow and orange gauze, and from each corner of the gallery a colored lens was directed against the dancers below. Connie was sitting waiting for him at a tiny table which held her elbows, an imitation rhinestone purse, a limeade with two straws, and a zigzag of undetached blue tickets. She waved and he went over to her.

"Hello, cake. How are you, honey?"

"'Lo."

She looked at him happily. "I saved all my tickets until you got here."

"Thanks," he said. "I bought some."

"You didn't need to, honey. That's what I kep' these for."

His glance wandered all around the place. "Did that girl from the show get here yet?" he wanted to know confidentially.

"Yeah," said Connie. "The manager took her over to introduce her to the leader. She's going to award the prizes."

Wally looked down at his feet.

"You'll make it," nodded Connie, reading his thoughts. "You have it cinched."

"What is it, a singles or a doubles?"

"Singles. That's why I stayed out of it. I didn't want to go against you."

He pressed her hand under the table. "Good kid," he said, which was as close as he ever got to tenderness with her.

Connie felt herself tingle with loyalty. She offered him a straw.

"Let's finish this drink together," she said.

They bent down over the glass, their faces close together. Connie's eyelids fluttered with the nearness of it but she didn't dare look up. They made a slight gurgling sound. "You take the cherry," said Wally generously.

There was a crash of cymbals from the gallery upstairs. Connie and Wally raised their heads. The orchestra leader was holding a megaphone to his mouth. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he boomed, “the Charleston contest will now begin. Entries are by name only. Each contestant will be limited to a five-minute performance. Miss Mimi Travers of the ‘Lucille’ company has consented to act in the capacity of judge of this contest. The winner will be awarded a silver loving cup, donated through the courtesy of the United Barber Shops’ Association.” He held the cup up by one handle and a round of applause followed.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” beamed Connie, craning her neck. She put her arm around Wally’s shoulder. “It’ll be pie for you, honey. They might as well hand it over to you right now.”

He smiled—but the smile wasn’t meant for her. It was for Mimi, standing beside the orchestra leader. Mimi was beautiful—she was almost too beautiful to live.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Mimi Travers.” She and the orchestra leader took a bow apiece. With an almost imperceptible movement Wally freed himself of Connie’s encouraging arm. He was clapping his hands vigorously. “Yea, Mimi!” he shouted.

The contest began. Rose and Myrtle and Lily took turns twisting their legs into unbelievable positions while the band played on.

“Faster and funnier,” called the onlookers. “Spread yourself. Do that thing!”

Rose and Myrtle and Lily spread themselves. They did that thing. They did a lot of other things with it. They skipped like devils. Mimi Travers had come out on the floor to get a better look at them. She was sitting gazing over the back of a chair with her chin resting on her arms. There was a gold bracelet around one of her ankles. Rose and Myrtle and Lily were through now. They were panting like grasshoppers. Also they were considerably disheveled.

“Mr. Wallace Walters,” shouted the orchestra leader. The music began again.

“Oh boy, Wally,” Connie was saying excitedly, “go out there and tear that floor to splinters.” She gave him a push between the shoulders as he got up.

Wally was out there now and the whole hall was spinning around him like a merry-go-round. He could hear them chanting:

I wonder does my baby do that
Charle-stun! Charle-stun!

Wally saw red. He’d show them whether their baby did that Charleston! Mimi was beating time with her hands. Clap-clap, clap-clap. “I never saw anyone like him,” she turned and said to somebody. “Where did he get that from?”

Wally began to skate as though he were on a pond. A tinkle of small sleigh-bells immediately followed from the musicians.

Connie was almost following him around the floor. “Come on, cake! Eat it up, eat it up!”

“Give him room!” they cried.

“Get that girl out of the way,” ordered Mimi imperiously. “What does she think she is, the tail of his shirt?”

Wally was hopping around like some funny little three-legged animal. He went down gradually like a corkscrew going into the neck of a bottle. Then he straightened up and the music stopped sharply.

Connie was waiting right beside him. She threw both her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“Bless your little soul!” she cried ecstatically.

“Bless both my little soles,” he panted.

Mimi Travers was talking very animatedly to the orchestra leader. Everyone was watching her curiously.

“Hurry up, make up your mind,” growled Connie under her breath.

Finally Mimi stood up and took the leader by the arm as though they were going to head a cotillion together. “Miss Travers wishes me to announce,” intoned that individual, “that the prize goes to Mr. Wallace Walters as winner of this contest. Will Mr. Walters kindly step this way?”

“Boy, oh bay-bee!” hissed Connie, and she pinched him on the arm. “Do you get that?”

There was an explosion of handclapping. Wally made his way across the floor from group to group, showered with complimentary remarks. Rose and Myrtle and Lily came over to congratulate him—not that they were any the less envious.

“I liked it!” said Rose.

It was a cake eater’s triumph. But Wally, who had had many such moments in the course of his career, was thinking of Mimi and her castle of dreams. They were standing face to face now. He could see a golden flame quivering in the depths of her heliotrope eyes. She handed him the ice-cold silver cup and for a moment their warm fingertips touched over its frosty surface.

“Good luck,” she said. “You did beautifully.”

“Thank you,” he answered. “Glad you liked it.” He bowed from the hips.

“Hold it up so everyone can see it,” she said, taking in the entire assemblage at a glance.

When it was all over, he found himself seated with Mimi at one of the little tables, somehow. And on the table there was an empty glass with two broken straws in it, and someone’s rhinestone purse, and a string of blue tickets. Mimi extracted a perfumed cigaret from a small tortoise-shell case and moistened it with her lips. Now almost anyone at all could have told Mimi that smoking was against the rule, but it so happened that the unpleasant task fell upon Wally.

“I don’t think they let you do that here,” he mentioned as casually as he was able.

Mimi didn’t like being told what not to do. “Let you do what—smoke?” she demanded coldly.

He nodded dolefully and made an unpleasant face.

“Oh, yes they do!” she assured him. “They do me at any rate.”

He looked rather doubtful and shrugged his shoulders, having had more than one fair companion separated from her nicotine just when she was beginning to enjoy it. “Well,” he said, “if you think so, go ahead—”

”I don’t think so. I know so,” remarked the fiery Mimi. “I’ll tell you what; call the proprietor and we’ll see.”

He tried to grin his way out of it but this time Mimi was out for blood—that and publicity. “Very well,” she said, “then I will!” She stood up and beckoned. “Call Mr. Nathan,” she told one of the hostesses.

“Good evening,” said Mr. Nathan a moment later. “Anything I can do for you?”

“Yes,” said Mimi in a clear voice. “I’d like to smoke this cigaret. Have you a light by any chance?” She stared at him defiantly.

Mr. Nathan saw a neat little sign tacked against a post. It read “Absolutely No Smoking.” But “Certainly, certainly,” said Mr. Nathan, and dug a little gold lighter out of his pocket. When he tried to light it, though, it shed sparks all over the place.

“Be careful of my dress,” cautioned Mimi sharply. Wally, sensing his opportunity, whipped out an everyday case of matches and accomplished the thing in no time at all.

“Thanks,” she said, with a sullen look at the proprietor.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with it,” he apologized. “It never stalled like this before.”

“No,” she agreed cynically, “never.”

“Something must be wrong with the tinder,” he mumbled to himself as he moved off with his neck bent over it. Wally

and Mimi looked at one another and smiled pityingly.

“Isn’t he the wet one!” said Wally. “He’s dripping,” she agreed.

At this juncture Connie appeared before them with a decided pout on her face.

“I’m ready to go now, cake,” she announced, pulling the rhinestone bag from underneath Mimi’s nose.

“Well,” he said ungraciously, “and what am I supposed to do—break out in a rash?” And Mimi, guessing that the dance tickets were also Connie’s property, pushed them angrily off the table with her elbow. They fell to the floor.

“Say, look out what you’re doing,” snapped Connie, bending over to pick them up.

“I beg your pardon?” said Mimi haughtily.

“You certainly should,” Connie told her. She turned to Wally. “Well, make up your mind,” she advised him.

“What’s all the rush about?” he remarked. “What do you think you are, my time-table? Wise up to yourself.”

“All right, cake,” she said easily, almost tenderly. “You’ll get over it in time.”

She turned her back on the two of them. At the door Mimi saw her crumple the tickets in her fist and throw them away from her. But Wally only had eyes for his Mimi. She was the same and yet she was not the same. The clown make-up was gone. She was neat and restful to the eyes. She had lavender silk stockings; she had a gold ring around her ankle; she had a bang slicked down to the bridge of her nose. But he couldn’t forget how she had looked with the little terrier clasped in her arms. He couldn’t forget that she had stood there on the stage and everyone had laughed at her while her heart was slowly breaking. He kept telling himself that her castle of dreams had come tumbling down just as his had, over and over again. Therefore they were brother and sister under the skin.

“Don’t take it so hard,” laughed Mimi, thinking he was worried about Connie. “She’ll come back; they all do.” She

stood up, and she was very tall and slim. “Afraid I’ll have to go now.”

“Can I see you to the door?” he asked.

“Only to the door?” she said, and her eyelashes swept him good-naturedly up and down.

“I meant to your door.”

And as they went out, he could hear the band playing softly and sweetly:

It must be love, it must be love,
That makes me feel this way.

The following evening the fun-loving Mimi Travers, of New York and Philly but still not of points west, was the center of interest of a very lively group of friends who had gathered in her dressing room before the beginning of the show.

“He thinks,” she was telling them, “I’m really the way I’m supposed to be when I sing that song. Sort of dumb and weepy, know what I mean?”

“He must be goofy,” they chorused. “What a sap. What a bone.”

“He is,” Mimi assured them. “Probably he likes them that way. So when I found that out, I started right in to emote. Last night when we were coming out of the dance hall a stray cat came along and began rubbing itself against me so I broke down and cried for his benefit—”

Screams of laughter drowned her voice. The idea of Mimi crying about anything seemed to strike them as being extremely funny.

“You should have heard me,” she protested. “All I kept repeating was ‘What’s the use, what’s the use, ’s a cruel world,’ and he dried my eyes and called me his Cinderella. How’s that for a riot?”

“Horses!” they gasped hysterically, burying their faces on one another’s shoulders. “Oh, you Red Riding Hood! Little Eva!”

There was a warning knock on the door. “Curtain goes up in five more minutes.” Mimi quickly wheeled round and began rouging her cheeks with a rabbit’s paw. But she was still smiling at the huge joke.

At the end of the one week stand Wally was walking on air and living up in the clouds. But Mimi was all packed and ready to leave with the rest of the company. He was sitting out front again the night of the farewell performance—he had seen the show every night that week—and as the house lights went on, he edged his way out through a side door and around to the stage entrance. Backstage everything was in an uproar: sets being taken down and moved about, people getting in each other’s way, stagehands in overalls rubbing shoulders with girls in gorgeous evening gowns. He found Mimi’s door and knocked.

“Hello?” she called out. “What do you want?”

“It’s me, Mimi.”

There was a slight hesitation in her voice as she answered. “I’m busy right now. Can you wait?”

He noticed the drop in her voice. He opened the door and went ahead in.

She was in a tailored traveling suit with a red patent leather belt which made her look about fifteen. Her baggage was piled in a heap in the center of the room, and she was sweeping things from the dressing table into the last open suitcase.

“Didn’t you hear me tell you I was busy?” she said angrily. “What’s the grand idea? What do you take this place for, a corner drug store?”

“I’ve got to talk to you,” he said.

“Haven’t got time to talk.”

“I thought you were coming up to the Rainbow with me. It’s Saturday night.”

“I wouldn’t care if it was Christmas Eve. I’ve got to make that train.” She saw the look on his face and it softened her for a moment. “What’s the matter with you, cakie? You knew this was a one-week stand all along. We’re due to open Monday night–” And now the castle of dreams really came tumbling down, with a terrible crash that no one could hear but himself. He stood there dazed while a couple of stagehands came in and carried her baggage outside for her.

“Get a taxi if you want to take me to the train,” she said shortly. Her one moment of sentiment was over and gone.

They got into the taxi and drove to the railroad station. He looked out of one window and she looked out of the other. Neither of them spoke. When she was comfortably installed in the Pullman, she took off her hat and straightened her hair without paying any attention to him.

“Stay over just one more day—” he pleaded.

“My reservation’s paid for.”

“I haven’t told you, but can’t you guess why—why I hate to see you go?” he faltered.

“Sure I can guess,” she said confidently. “You’re keen on me, is that it?”

“That doesn’t begin to describe it. All my life I . . . waited . . . wanted . . . dreamed . . . about someone . . . like you are . . . Oh, if you’d only let yourself be the way you seemed to be the first night I saw you!”

“That’s sweet and pretty,” she told him, “but what good does it do to think about things like that? Castles in the air never did anybody any good—not so you could notice it.” She patted his hand. “There goes the whistle, sugar. The best thing for you to do is go back and dance it off.”

Outside on the platform the conductor was swinging a green lantern back and forth. “All aboard!” he wailed dolefully. “All aboard!”

“Kiss me good-bye,” exclaimed Mimi, “and forget all about me.”

Their lips met for the first and last time. The cars started to move. “I’ll go with you!” he cried, swept by a wild momentary impulse.

“What? And me lose my job?” answered the prevaricating Mimi. “I should say not. Jump or you’ll never make it!”

He ran to the lower end of the car and swung clear of the steps. The sound of his voice came trailing back to her: “’Bye, Mimi.” She pressed her face against the window pane, but it was too dark outside to make out anything. She gave a little sigh.

He picked himself up and watched the red tail-light on the rear car grow smaller and smaller until finally it disappeared altogether. Mimi was gone and he would never see her again. He dusted himself off and went back to his room.

But when he opened the door to the “budwa,” he found Connie sitting there reading a magazine.

“How did you get in here?” he asked listlessly.

She looked up. “Did you see your friend off?” she wanted to know innocently.

“Yes,” he said, “she’s gone away. Let her go.”

“I been waiting for you to come back,” Connie said. “There’s going to be a big masquerade at the Rainbow next Sa’ddy night. They’re going to give prizes for the best costume. How about us going?”

He didn’t answer. For a long time he stood looking down at her as if there were something about her he’d never realized before.

“Cake,” she said, “are you angry at me?”

“No,” he said. “Something’s just come over me. I didn’t see how I was going to stand it . . . I thought it was going to be lonely . . . I thought it would kill me.”

“Sure, honey,” she said gently. “I know how those things are. I have it myself—”

Suddenly he sank down alongside her and buried his head in her arms. “But it was you all the time, Connie. It was you all the time.”

She caressed his hair with the tips of her fingers.

“Cake,” she murmured.

“Connie,” he said softly. “Dreams do come true . . . sometimes.”

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

In the days when the two-step was tottering upon its throne and weird mulatto dances were creeping out of the Brazils to replace it, she and her partner had won fame as ballroom artists. London knew them, and Paris, and the old lobster belt, reaching in those days to Churchill's at Forty-ninth. She was a child of seventeen then, very tall, a little too thin, wore low-heeled shoes and short skirts before their time. He was a man in his middle forties, much divorced, a little made up around the eyes. Together they rose like rockets and went out in mid-air. Paris and London had stopped dancing; they had no time any more.

Georgia, her career cut short, had turned around and married, married well. She had literally made herself a bed of golden dollars and intended to abide by it. The man of her choice was Jordan, who had made a fortune out of peanut brittle simply by removing the shells from the peanuts before they went into the brittle. What he did with the shells after they were removed was never made clear. Georgia used to say he stuffed mattresses with them.

She let her hair grow and amazed the world that had copied her dancing by having a little girl. Going over to add to her collection of chiffon stockings and perfumery, the ship was torpedoed a little after daybreak one morning, and Georgia woke up to find a thin layer of water spread over the carpet of her stateroom. She quickly drew on a *crepe de chine* negligee, then changed it for a black dinner dress,

determined to look her best. The skirt of this was too long, though, and she finally discarded it in favor of an orange tailor-made suit, just the thing for shipwrecks. Then she called the maid, who slept in the next room, and they hobbled out on deck like frightened deer. The moment they were in the open a whole assortment of the ship's officers lifted Georgia bodily in their arms and put her into a lifeboat. The maid was doing her best to climb in after her when Georgia tearfully commanded: "Go back and wake my husband, Marie." Then she added in an undertone, "And for heaven's sake, see if you can't get hold of some face powder for me. It's sinful, with all these people around."

Marie began to weep and said she wasn't going back to be drowned like a rat.

"You're not, eh?" said Georgia, narrowing her eyes. "You're discharged. Get out of this boat."

By three the following afternoon Georgia had found out she was a widow. She took it greatly to heart. "Poor Jordan!" she said. "What will become of the peanut industry now?"

The peanut industry, however, did very nicely. In fact it flourished exceedingly, so that by the time Jicky was ready to come out into the world she needed a rake in each hand to tidy up the dollars that came fluttering down about her like green and yellow leaves.

Jicky was the daughter. Homely mothers frequently have beautiful children, but it also works the other way around. Georgia's mother before her had been undoubtedly attractive, even with all the obstacles of apparel that had to be overcome in her day. But when it came to Jicky, the beauty in the family seemed to have run out. Georgia had eyes that were mixed with star dust. Jicky wore convex lenses in front of hers. Georgia could make her hands talk. Jicky could make hers drop things at critical moments. Georgia could wear a twenty-dollar gown and make it look mysterious. Jicky could wear a two-hundred dollar one and

make it look terrible. Georgia could make the traffic part in the middle to let her through, like the Red Sea. Whereas taxi drivers had been known to foist their cabs upon the sidewalk in their efforts to run Jicky down. Georgia walked like a dream, like a lotus borne upon a sacred pool. Jicky walked into things.

Everything Georgia did was done right. If she stroked a dog, the dog stayed stroked for the rest of the day. No one else could do it as gracefully, as full of charming little nuances. If she poured coffee, you asked for a second cup just to see her pour it over again. If she played cards, you forgot your game, so absorbed were you in the delicate shivery way she shuffled.

Jicky? Jicky spilled them all over the floor and dealt them face up. And once, mind you, once, Jicky had been known to trump her partner's ace. She tried to explain later that was all she held in her hand. It was no use though; appearances were against her, and the legend went all over the country club.

Now at about this time there appeared on the scene Scotty Tryon, about twenty-nine or thirty and untroubled as yet by poor digestion or feminine attachment. Jicky met him out at the club one day when a long distance telephone call had broken up a game of doubles. When first seen he was wearing a gray flannel shirt with a package of cigarettes squaring the pocket and a web belt that went up on one side and down on the other. The web belt decided her. A man who didn't worry about the hang of his trousers ought to play a good game. She pressed him into service.

If there was one thing Jicky was good at, it was tennis. I mean, she had nothing to lose by acting in front of the net like a dervish out on a spree. Perspiration or rumpled hair didn't count with her. And when you have nothing to lose, why hold back? She didn't. Consequently, when she smacked the ball, it took your mind off a great many things at once. She looked better in flat shoes than she did on high

heels anyway, and the green shade over her eyes did a lot for her face.

Her game took his breath away. Later he asked someone who she was.

“That? Oh, that was Jicky Jordan. Her pillow’s stuffed with goldbacks at night. She’s supposed to be a man hater. It oughtn’t to be hard with a face like hers.”

“I wouldn’t say things like that if I were you,” Scotty remonstrated, creasing his forehead. “Isn’t called for, you know.” Thinking how she played, for a girl.

They had an appointment to play again the next day, and the next after that, and so on through the weeks. They were really the best foils for each other either one had yet encountered, and in athletics admiration is the closest thing there is to love. Then too, they had begun on a rock-bottom basis. She had never seen him when his shirt wasn’t plastered to his back, and he had never seen her when her hair wasn’t flying in all directions and her toes curved out. She became vain of her very untidiness, clung to it as a token of her sexlessness. She would run her fingers through her hair and purposely tousle it before coming out of the locker room to meet him in the mornings. She could no more picture him with a collar and tie on than he could imagine her with lipstick and face powder. This was ideal but it couldn’t go on forever, naturally.

She had him up to the house one day to show him her collection of rackets, which they handled and discussed avidly over two tall glasses of iced tea out on the veranda.

“Coming out to the club dance tomorrow night?” he asked offhand.

“I believe I’d like to,” she said without a moment’s hesitation.

He bit his lip and looked off in another direction. “Suppose I call for you at nine,” he said, seeing there was no help for it.

“Fine,” she answered, and turned around and ran into the house as though she were afraid he’d change his mind if she stayed out there too long with him.

There was a noticeably dejected air about him as he got back into his car and slumped down until his chin met the wheel.

The girl who is sure of herself is always late. The girl who isn’t gets ready too soon. Jicky was ready to go to the dance from eight-thirty on and knew every square inch of the mirror by heart. Six hundred dollars wouldn’t have bought the silver slip she had on with a solitary orange poppy over one hip. And she never wore the same dress twice. Her stockings were so spidery you had to look again to be sure she had any on. But she wore her glasses.

When she came downstairs at two minutes past nine without having been called, she found him standing there talking to someone. He had come without a hat apparently, but he had the collar of his coat turned back in the approved manner. She passed him her shawl and he draped it lightly around her.

“Don’t catch cold, dear,” her aunt said. “Be sure to put your shawl over you if you go outside between times.”

Jicky smiled ruefully. A wallflower formerly had been a girl who couldn’t get partners to dance with. Nowadays the wallflower was the girl who danced every dance and was never coaxed outside for a while in the moonlight.

The club, seen through the trees, was like a grotto of fireflies, and long rows of cars were drawn up outside. The moon was the color of champagne and from the gauzy clubhouse came music of *Show Boat* and *Good News* like the patter of furtive raindrops on a sheet of tin.

Inside they separated, she to seclude herself in a room already sugary with cologne and sachet odors. Other girls were there, reddening their lips, fumbling with the hems of

their skirts. When they saw the silver lace on Jicky, they sighed enviously and gave one another looks. She took her glasses off and wrapped them in her shawl although everything looked blurred to her. She knew she was taking a chance. She might go up to the wrong starched shirt outside the door. That was what reading hundreds of books in sunlight and firelight and lamplight when you were twelve and thirteen did for you. As she stepped outside into the glare and excitement, she had a feeling she was dowdy, even though she knew her dress to be an original and her heels were as tall as an infanta's. Some girls could take a piano cover and a rhinestone shoe buckle and get better results.

Not knowing her and not knowing the club, one might have mistaken Jicky for someone immensely popular, the way the young men gathered around her. True, she knew everyone. But it was only a synthetic popularity as far as Jicky was concerned, and no one realized it better than she herself. They knew they would have to dance with her sooner or later in the course of the evening, and the trick lay in getting it over with as soon as possible. Afterwards, when the center of gravity shifted to the cars outside, she would be left high and dry on the dance floor. She could distinctly recall having been left behind in places where the only other living beings were the musicians and possibly the caterers.

"Let's go outside," Scotty suggested at eleven-thirty.

Nights of unforgivable neglect had taught Jicky nothing, however.

"I don't think I should," she said coyly.

He took her at her word.

There was a telegram waiting for her when she got back. She crossed the corridor with it and knocked on the door. "Aunt Pauline," she said, "are you up yet? We'd better pack. We're to go back to New York in the morning. Mother's coming in Wednesday on the Aquitania."

They had been back about six weeks when the telephone interrupted their breakfast one morning. Georgia, who had an extension beside her bed, immediately got on. A moment later she called Jicky into the room. There was a note of surprise in her voice. “Oh, I’m sorry. It was meant for you, dear.” This was something new to her.

Jicky arranged herself on a chaise longue, giving a very inept imitation of the way Georgia did it so often herself.

“Ye-es?” Her voice rose, musically tremulous. She tried to prop a cushion over her shoulder and the receiver fell into her lap.

Georgia bit her lip to cover a smile. “Relax, dear, relax,” she suggested.

“Been meaning to call you,” Scotty was saying in Jicky’s tingling ear.

“Oh, dear, how nice,” she said inanely.

Georgia curtained herself behind a sheer of cigarette smoke, doing her conscientious best not to be present. She felt too deliciously lazy to get up, and there was a cup of coffee-and-chocolate on her knee to be considered.

Jicky hung up and kept the telephone in her lap as though she couldn’t bear to part with it.

“It was Scotty,” she said. “The one I told you about. Wait. I think I have his picture inside.”

“Oh, is that the kind he is?” remarked Georgia facetiously.

“No, no,” Jicky hastened to assure her. “I cut it out of a sporting magazine. He does a lot of tennis. And what do you suppose he does with the cups?” Her eyes grew enormous. “He uses them to put his old razor blades in.”

“How extraordinary of him,” breathed the satirical Georgia.

“He’s coming up Friday to dinner. I want you to meet him,” Jicky exclaimed vibrantly. “Oh, he’s simply dandy.”

Friday at half past eight she made her entrance by stumbling over and lifting the edge of the jade-blue rug. “Mother, this is Mr. Tryon,” she heard herself saying a trifle nervously.

Georgia, in the decorous instep skirts of the second empire, was trying her best to be motherly, was ready to forego all restful crossing of the knees that evening for Jicky’s sake. She held herself demurely in the background, doing things with a little jet fan she had brought out with her and eyeing the cigarette dish longingly from time to time.

Jicky was frozen with shyness and shrilly voluble by turns. No one had ever had an effect like this on her before. During dinner she upset her wineglass and the stem snapped. She sighed gloomily. Georgia and Scotty were too deeply engrossed by this time to have noticed anything. Every other word of his was addressed to Georgia and every other word of Georgia’s was directed toward Jicky in what began to look like a desperate attempt at keeping the balance of conversation even.

Georgia excused herself at ten, and a half hour later Jicky found her in her room nestling in chiffon and devouring cigarettes.

“Why didn’t you come back? I’m sure he thought it was strange. He asked what had become of you once or twice.”

“Wouldn’t have intruded for anything,” murmured Georgia, going ahead with the book she was reading.

“Now I’ve told you you weren’t; why do you keep saying that?” said Jicky. “How did he strike you?”

Georgia, feeling that some comment was expected of her, did her conscientious best. “Oh, rather nice.” She had a vacant air about her, as though she were not paying strict attention to what she was saying.

Jicky gazed upward through her glasses in rapture. “I think so too,” she remarked. “I think he’s just dandy.”

He asked them to the theater shortly after, binding Georgia's attendance by the announcement that it was to be a party of four. The friend, Russell Bain, was so patently cut out for Jicky by years if not by inclination that it seemed only natural for Georgia and Scotty to gravitate toward each other. Afterwards, at the supper club, Scotty danced the first number with Jicky, during which she got spells of rigidity and it became next to impossible to budge her, and all the rest with Georgia, who tried to minimize her performance by saying something to the effect that she had once had to earn a living at it.

It was with quivering eyelashes that Jicky that same night said the orchestra had been simply awful and she would have preferred remaining at home.

"So would I," agreed Georgia with the sigh of a martyr.

The Bain boy, pursuing Jicky with phone calls and engagements in the weeks that followed, managed to get himself a little mistrusted by her. A suspicion came over her at times that perhaps he had been coached beforehand in the part he was to play, as far as tying her hands most effectually was concerned. Here was admiration and she didn't want it; here was tenderness and it bored her. She was seeing very little of Scotty these days, and yet he was continually stopping in for a cocktail. It was all very puzzling, and then after a while it was not nearly so puzzling any more. She began to see things in their proper light.

"What do you think of Mother?" she asked him once.

"Remarkable looking, isn't she?"

"Isn't she, though! Everyone has always thought so—" All at once she stopped, as though someone had bored a little

hole in her and let all her enthusiasm out. They never discussed Georgia between them after that.

And then one afternoon she wandered into the topaz-lighted room at the Madrid, and there was Georgia sitting over on the other side next to the wall. Jicky started across toward her, and just as she got about halfway, the waiter who had been arranging the tea things at Georgia's table stepped to one side and revealed Scotty, all smiles as he leaned forward to say something more or less pleasant. Jicky stood still for a frozen half moment; then she turned around to walk out as though she had forgotten something. Georgia looked up just at the wrong moment. She came hurrying after her and stopped her just over the threshold.

"Jicky! Didn't you see me sitting there?"

"Of course I did," said Jicky, "but I thought—"

"What silly notions you get," Georgia exclaimed. "Don't make a scene like this. We've ordered another pot of tea for you."

Scotty half rose and bowed her into her seat. "Marvelous to run into you like this."

"Isn't it, though," she replied uncordially.

"We called up to have you join us but you had gone out," Georgia said.

"No doubt," answered Jicky with cryptic intent.

Georgia, seizing her opportunity, gathered up her purse and gloves. "Mind if I run along now? Some things I must do."

Jicky, her teacup still filled, was held trapped. She stared resentfully as she saw Georgia go out the door.

"We happened into each other quite accidentally," Scotty related, "so I suggested coming here."

"Rather nice to meet you both." This latter word sticking its head up like a thorn. She said very little else during the course of the next ten minutes. Her napkin reappeared above the table. "I'll say goodbye. I have a headache."

"If you must go," he said.

She did a lot of thinking when she got back that afternoon. It is safe to assume she had never concentrated quite so wholeheartedly and painfully on any one thing in her entire life before. When Scotty called that evening, Georgia was not in. Neither was Jicky, sitting alone in the living room swinging her foot and humming in a carefully guarded voice. The sequence in which he had asked for them had nothing to do with it, she assured herself.

They sat facing each other at luncheon a day or two later, and Georgia unaccountably dropped her hand to her lap. Not quickly enough, however. “A new ring, isn’t it?” Jicky observed. She extended her hand and Georgia, disengaging hers, reluctantly submitted the tips of her fingers for examination.

“Isn’t it darling,” said Jicky in a hoarse voice.

Georgia laughed embarrassedly. “I hardly know what to say,” she admitted. “In fact I—I’m not free to say anything just now.”

In her own room a few moments later, Jicky took her glasses off for the last time. As a matter of fact, she threw them on the floor and dug her heel through them. She had a hairdresser and his assistants up and spent her afternoon undergoing elaborate rites of beautification that left her looking at least ten years older. Then when Russell Bain called up, she accepted the inevitable with what amounted to stoic philosophy.

As she crossed the foyer on her way out, she came face to face with Scotty, handing his hat to the maid. He took in the mandarin coat and rhinestone vanity case at a glance.

“Good evening,” she said briefly. “And by the way, allow me to congratulate you.”

He stared at her blankly. “What for?”

“Announce the gentleman to my mother, Leila,” she said, and closed the door on him. She went down in the elevator with the feeling that somehow her evening was definitely spoiled even before it had got under way. She caught the

gleam of something liquid on her lashes in the beveled mirror facing her.

"Where to?" asked Russell, sitting waiting for her in the car with his stick between his legs.

"Don't give me a minute's time to think tonight," she warned him, "or I'll fold up on you and die."

Two days later the count appeared. Georgia's room meanwhile had become a bower of flowers overnight. "Count Riano," she explained, weaving a pattern in the air with her atomizer. "A dear friend of mine from Paris. Won't you come out and say how do?"

Jicky groped to straighten her glasses. Then she remembered that they were gone.

He was sitting in the half light of several lamps, slowly turning the leaves of a book without attempting to look at it. He laid the book aside and stood up, his shoulders orange in the evening light.

"My daughter, Jocelyn," said Georgia.

"But how charming," said the count.

When Georgia came in that night, there was a droop to her; she was crestfallen as Jicky had never seen her crestfallen before.

Jicky patted her on the shoulder.

"Did he dance terribly, shake like a leaf and all that? Did he spill things when he ate? Something went wrong, I can feel it. Won't you tell me, dearest?"

"Oh, no," Georgia answered simply. "He carries himself like a twenty-year-old with the antics left out. It's myself. I never realized it until tonight. It's—it's over eight months since we've seen each other, you know."

"You mean he found a change in you?"

“‘How fresh and youthful all your American women are,’ he said, and then he looked at me. ‘My dear,’ he said, ‘I don’t believe New York agrees with you. You were not so pale last year in Paris. You have a harried look—”

“Oh, well,” said Jicky bitterly, “if he insists on throwing a roomful of debutantes in your teeth, let it go at that. I think the average person seeing you out together would take him to be your father.”

“No,” said Georgia pensively, “you’re very good to me, but something’s got to be done. It’s for my own satisfaction, you understand. There is this new treatment everyone is beginning to talk about,” she said. “I wonder—Sondra Clark was telling me about it only yesterday. Some kind of heliotrope rays—I don’t know what they’re called—that vitalize the muscles of the face. It’s really an electric bath.”

“Things like that can be dangerous,” said Jicky. “Please don’t.”

“How absurd,” said Georgia. “This is 1928. Things are perfected beyond the point where any risk enters into them. Didn’t that dancer do it when she wanted to acquire a tropical sunburn?”

A week later she was beginning the experiment. Brimful of enthusiasm, she could talk of nothing else. “But I do look better, don’t I?” she would ask Jicky half a dozen times in the course of a day. Jicky was undecided whether it was the process itself or her enormous faith in it that gave her an undeniably quickened reaction these days. The treatments were rather early. As a rule Georgia was gone before anyone was up.

One morning the count put in an appearance just as Jicky had finished breakfast. She recoiled in synthetic modesty, but he seemed not to see her. Obviously pale and shaken, he went directly to the wall cabinet and poured himself a

small glass of cordial with a wrist that trembled so exaggeratedly it almost suggested a stage effect.

"*Vite.* Get yourself dressed," he said hoarsely.

"What's happened?" she said. "Where's Mother?"

"I beg of you get yourself dressed," he said. "The vibrator have been accident."

She had no sooner left the room than she was back with a coat thrown over her, tears beginning to form in her eyes. They hurried out together, leaving the door open behind them.

Georgia was already under ether in one of the emergency wards. She lay coifed in gauze like a nun. The count led Jicky from the room after a while, and all afternoon long she paced back and forth in the little waiting room outside. Toward four o'clock they held a consultation over her and announced there was no immediate danger. Skin grafting would be undertaken, they gave Jicky to understand.

"There will be marks, unavoidably, but we will do everything in our power."

The count shook his head morosely as they seated themselves in the car and started back.

"The marriage will have to be postpone."

"Marriage?" echoed Jicky.

"She no have told you of our engagement, then? *Mon dieu,* since last year in Paris already."

"I've seen the ring, I think," said Jicky.

"Ah, yes, the ring," he agreed indifferently.

At her door he handed her out of the car with elaborate politeness. Something told Jicky, as she watched him resume his seat and carefully button one chamois glove, that that was the last they would see of him.

Six weeks later, in her own home, the shades drawn and the light carefully tempered, the bandages were finally

removed from Georgia's face and throat. Jicky had taken refuge in the hallway outside that significantly closed door, her chilled wrists in Scotty's keeping. There was an air of fatality about the apartment. A sickening stillness that gave pause to some ominous thing about to happen. In the other room the light footstep of a nurse was heard, the doctor's voice in a guarded murmur, and then a silence, utter and obliterating, that lasted hours, it seemed.

A scream, short and swift as a knife thrust, rang out behind Georgia's door. It held an element of surprise, of a sharp indignity thrust upon one. It could have been the death cry of a woman's vanity.

Jicky was in Scotty's arms now, trembling, her face buried on his shoulder.

"My dear, my dear," she choked, "I can't bear the thought of it."

"Go in to her," he urged. "You'll have to, you know. You've got to see her through it."

She left him and went toward the door, conscious of a bitter resentment against herself. "You won't have to be envious of her now, you rotter."

There was a slight tinge of drugs in the air and the nurse stood unobtrusively over in a corner. There was no one else in the room but Georgia, a pathetic Georgia, her hands lying limply beside her on the covers, palms up.

"Mother!" said Jicky.

"Is it true, Jicky?" she said. "Is it true—I have to be this way from now on?"

"Mother, Scotty's here with me. You want to see him, don't you?"

"How can I? Oh, no, how can I?"

"Dearest, Scotty's your friend—"

This was the test, to try not to gloat when Scotty saw what had happened to Georgia's looks, to try to feel sorry for him and sorry for her, sorry that the thing he had valued

above everything else was gone, sorry that the thing she had been was blighted.

The door opened and he came in.

He gave one swift look as though the bottom had dropped out of something, and Jicky's heart died within her. He must have cared then, to look that way about it.

Georgia's voice from the bed, trying to be gay, pleading desperately, then all at once breaking off.

"Is—is anything noticeable? They told me it was the shadow in the glass. Oh, Scotty, I'm so afraid—"

He was standing beside her looking down at her.

"You know better than that," he said softly. He reached over and put one finger to her brow as if in whimsical camaraderie.

"You're—you're marvelous. What did you expect? How could you be otherwise? You think just a little gauze and cotton is going to change you?"

He turned to look at Jicky and there was some kind of detached wistfulness in his eyes she could not fathom. And as they stole out of the room together, Georgia turned her face on the pillow trustfully up to the nurse. "He would tell me, wouldn't he?" she murmured.

Jicky stood with her back to the closed door. "You're a brick," she faltered gratefully. "Poor Mother."

"A woman will believe what she wants to believe," he answered.

In the weeks that followed and the months they totaled, he never ceased importuning her to go out with him and she hardly ever went. There was always the shadow of this thing between them. The count had gone back to France, alleging pressing business matters, and was one man very different from another when it came to things like these, Jicky asked herself? Scotty might besiege her with telephone calls and drop in at every turn, but would he

have turned to her if what had happened hadn't—come between? She crushed the thought to her like ground glass and bled herself sick over it.

It was only the two of them now. The dreaded confirmation of her worst fears to be met with in keen strange feminine eyes would still be spared Georgia for a while. Her pleading had to be met too as well as Scotty's on these occasions.

"Please, dear. Won't you go with him for my sake, just this once?"

"But there's nothing I'm fit to be seen in."

"Wear one of mine then."

"Oh, what's the difference? I'll look like a pig anyway."

And then Jicky, unhappy to the core, going in to vent her dissatisfaction on him with the particularly ungracious comment: "Mother wants me to, so I'll go with you."

At the Lido one night in an atmosphere of cigarettes, aigrettes, and Lehar waltzes, he told her how much he cared for her and she began to cry, blindly furious at herself, without letting him see it, somehow. She would have killed him if he had noticed it. Her chin almost touching her chest, she studied the finely spun web of brilliants that constituted the upper part of her dress, a surface that at close range dislocated the rays of vision and went slightly out of focus, coruscating like some dazzling boiling substance.

This crowd of pretty things around him, such pretty things they were, and he could sit there looking at her guiltily sparkling lashes and talk this way to her? Every jeweled heel that touched the floor spurted its ice-like reflection downward into the heart of the glassy paneling. And women over their partners' shoulders breathed not air but blue notes that stung their nostrils to a rhythmic frenzy. It was such a good looking crowd, such a good looking

crowd. A bandeau of rhinestones and aquamarines fronted Jicky's brow and behind it a strange swift prayer began to surge.

"Oh, God, make me beautiful in his eyes. Beautiful. In his eyes. In his alone." And the ultimate admission, wrenched from her with a suffocating sense of humiliation. "Make him love me as I love him." After which there was nothing more to be prayed for.

"I want you to say that you'll marry me," he said. "A man wants all the beauty he can get into his life and so—I want you."

So he wanted beauty too. But he was not like her, not selfish; he wanted it from outside of himself. The thought of those long-forgotten mornings on the tennis courts came back to her, with her hair wind-blown and just a woolly white sweater on her. So he really found her beautiful after all. In that case, why, she must be, in some hidden way overlooked by everyone else until now. Perhaps in that tennis court sort of way, and without all these brilliants and this paint. It was up to her then. She would have to forget about being beautiful and just be beautiful. For beauty, she had heard, was in the eye of the beholder.

Jicky raised her head and looked at him and at everyone else as though she saw them for the first time. She forgave him everything she had ever done—her doubts and her jealousy and her humiliations. She could have forgiven him anything, for they were both alike in this: they were both beauty-mad.

Georgia was sitting up, the exquisite light from a cluster of electric grapes at the head of the bed tinseling her shoulders, when Jicky stopped in the doorway. This was a new Jicky. She held her head high; she was vibrant with courage and a new sort of vindication that still left her puzzled but was more welcome than she could ever know.

The bandeau sparkled but under it you noticed the more lasting sparkle of her eyes. The fringe at her shawl dropped to the floor about her in a sort of gentle silver rain. She stepped into the room, carrying her youth like a chip on the shoulder. She took an amber-backed object from the table and put it in the drawer and shut it from sight.

"For us there'll be no more mirrors. Mirrors lie."

"Mirrors lie," agreed Georgia. "They've lied to me all my life."

Jicky turned around to look at her and the shawl dropped to her feet in a foamy pool.

"Mother, I'm beautiful, and I'm going to marry Scotty. Beautiful—"

She stood gloriously erect for a moment, then crumpled over across Georgia's knees. Suddenly she burst out crying.

"He thinks I am, so I am. Oh, Mother, help me believe it; help me believe it! There's beauty in me now, real beauty, where there was only wretchedness."

They lay with their arms around each other, their cheeks pressed together like two children, staring over at a far corner of the room as though they could see themselves there as they believed themselves to be.

"I don't blame him. Who could help loving you? Oh, if you could only see yourself as I see you."

"And you, my dearest, you," purred Jicky, "you're beautiful. The most beautiful mother in the world."

Said Scotty, a woman will believe what she wants to believe.

GAY MUSIC

When he was eighteen, Gerald Jones found out things about himself. A gypsy woman told him, a gypsy woman with gold coins in her ears and cigarette-stained teeth and a cerise petticoat and an apple-green scarf about her head. He came across two of them trudging along by the roadside one day, and had pocket money with him, and noticed that they were noticing him.

“You a very good looking boy,” one of them remarked.

“Oh, sure,” he scoffed, but it didn’t make him angry nevertheless.

The one that had spoken to him squatted down until she was no higher than his knee. Her gaudy petticoat settled itself around her in a splashy circle like red ink soaking through the macadamized road. She produced a pack of cards and began to tell them out before her on the ground in a double row.

She said: “I read your fute.”

“Read my foot?” he asked in astonishment. These foreigners could get so embarrassing.

“Fooch,” she said.

“Oh, future, you mean.”

She squinted up at him. “You got money?” she wanted to know.

He became cautious at once. “Uh-huh.”

She had all the cards face downward on the ground and began to turn them over here and there as though at

random. A number of twos and threes made their appearance.

“You gonna not be very rich,” she said.

“Aw,” he sighed, “and I wanted a yacht with a little brass gun on the deck of it.”

Two queens came up, one of hearts and one of diamonds. “Two lady,” said the gypsy woman, “gonna loave you.”

“Both at one time?” he gasped. “What’ll I do?”

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

In college he was called Jonesy. Everybody knew Jonesy. One of those sporty snap brim hats always pushed back on his head, always going somewhere, always just back from somewhere else, always a wee wisp of something on the breath, always chewing cloves. Everybody liked Jonesy. The night of the prom a girl named Jemima Marsh, Jimmie for short, was his room guest. They had danced themselves almost to death. Toward three in the morning they went down to the gymnasium for a breathless leave-taking. It was pitch dark, and not exactly deserted either. They found a bench with the aid of a match.

“Jonesy,” said Jemima with a mouth full of kisses, “I think you’re awfully mean.”

“Wuff, wuff,” said Jonesy.

“Only don’t muss my hair,” said Jemima. “It took me all afternoon to get it brilliantined.”

“Oh, if that’s the way you feel about it—” Jonesy turned his back to her and stuck his hands in his pockets and sulked exquisitely. “Conceited,” he remarked over his shoulder.

“Thanks!” said Jemima angrily.

There was quite a silence between them. Jonesy tapped his foot and Jemima tapped hers and they both sighed and

they both went ahead tapping and they were both very angry at each other.

All at once Jonesy felt a smooth fairylike little hand, smelling of dew and rosewater, travel down one side of his face and up the other in a scary, tentative sort of way. It was her way of telling him she was sorry. He pulled her down to him and kissed her with great enthusiasm and very little technique. Somehow she seemed a little different from what she had been before. It seemed she had lost weight, and he couldn't quite recall the perfume she had on. There was a different aura about her. The kissing went on just the same, however. He heard someone say "Ooh, the nerve of you!" right close beside her ear, and then he got a terrible slap over one eye.

Suddenly Jemima's voice rang out. "Wha'd she do, slap you? Here, don't you slap him—he's with me."

"Then he shouldn't grab hold of me like that," said the other one.

"Well, go 'way from us," answered Jemima.

There was a sudden loud splash directly in front of them, so that they were both bedewed.

"Oh, Lord, she's in the pool!" cried Jonesy excitedly.

"I know," answered Jemima calmly. "I pushed her. What she really needs is to cool off a little."

He started throwing off his coat and the sleeves got caught. "Take it easy," advised Jemima. "She probably can swim a lot better than you can."

"Just the same," said a muffled voice from below, "I didn't come down here to swim. You'll pay for my dress."

"See my lawyers," said Jemima disdainfully.

The girl in the pool began to cry and the low ceiling for the place made it echo and reecho so that she really managed to make some noise what with splashing around and sobbing out loud and saying things to them. Jonesy got down on his hands and knees and reached out for her.

“No,” she said. “You’ll say you saved me and you didn’t even jump in after me.”

“What are you doing out there?”

“I’m treading water.”

“Well, why don’t you come on in?”

“Well, where are the lights?” she wanted to know.

“They were disconnected on purpose at the beginning of the evening,” he admitted.

He caught her by the wrists and drew her slowly out like a captured mermaid. She was slim and supple. She kneeled on the edge of the pool and wrung out her dress behind her; then she got to her feet.

“Very fine thing you just did,” she remarked in the general direction of the red dot made by Jemima’s cigarette. “What do you think you are—a traffic cop?”

“You’re all wet, lovey,” was the only answer Jemima deigned to give.

“Better take my coat,” offered Jonesy.

She did take it but not the way he wanted her to. She took it and flung it into the water, where it did a Sir Walter Raleigh.

“There!” she said. “Now I feel better.”

“But I didn’t do anything to you,” he pleaded.

“I don’t care,” she said. “You didn’t jump in after me, did you? You’re a total loss.”

“You’re nothing to rave about yourself,” observed Jemima.

“Who was with you?” Jonesy asked.

“Nobody was with me. I was trying to get away from somebody. That’s how I came in here.”

Someone lit a cigarette lighter. Then a moment later the lights went on all over the place. The gymnasium was full of people, of the indoor sport variety. A young couple standing under a dry shower fixture jumped guiltily. In the center of everything the water, cause of all the disturbance, was heaving rebelliously under a surface unbroken as oil. It was

acid green, and deep down in it swam the quicksilver reflection of the arc lights overhead. The coat had gone to the bottom but a white carnation had disengaged itself and remained afloat like a lotus on the infinite placidity of some Nirvana.

They saw each other for the first time. Beads of water clung to her lashes and her dress was like a huge cabbage. Her short hair was down over her eyes in a jet black bang that gave the look of a Japanese billiken. The pink on her cheeks had run a little bit. In fact her whole make-up had slid down toward her throat; it was lengthened out of all proportion. She looked funny. She looked cute. She looked adorable. She seemed to be about seventeen, but in all probability she was twenty. Her name was Sharlee. “Sharlee,” someone said, “what happened to you!” That’s how he knew her name was Sharlee. It was honey to the palate to say that name.

Sharlee sighed. “Keep away from me, McLaughlin, for the rest of the evening. My nerves are all woozy.” She shrugged her wet shoulders in horror and antipathy that seemed exaggerated, but most likely she was sincere.

Gossip was leaping up on all sides like wildfire. She wouldn’t have done it if she hadn’t been tight in the first place. My dear, certainly she had been tight, what then? She had said this and she had said that earlier in the evening. Dearie, she only did it because she thought her form showed up better under a wet frock. Kitty, kitty, nice kitty.

At length Sharlee covered her ears with her hands, walked backward and forward a couple of times, and cried out: “I’ll jump in it a second time if you don’t all clear out of here.”

The music started in to play again upstairs. They slowly faced around, two or three at a time, and turned toward the door. Their pocket flasks and Yale haircuts, their arched backs and panniers and flounces, their calves and jeweled

heels, their perfumes and their whisperings, went up the stairs that youths in bathrobes and in running trunks were accustomed to use.

“I’m Gerald Jones.”

“Go away.”

“I’m Gerald Jones.”

“Go on away, I tell you.”

“But you’ll catch cold.”

Jemima came back. Jemima felt sorry. “I got this shawl for her,” she said. “I don’t know whose it is, but I got it anyway.”

Jonesy took it and put it around the unresistant and slightly shivering form that stood looking down into the depths of the water, brooding over the carnation that was slowly disintegrating petal by petal.

“Thanks, Jimmie, old top,” he said.

“You better give her some of our private stuff,” said Jemima. “I’m going back up and dance. See you later.”

Nothing was said for several moments.

“It isn’t bad,” Sharlee remarked, handing him back the flask. She went out on the diving board and sat down, swinging her feet above the water. “Gerald Jones, I like you. You’re a nice person.”

He crept out beside her. “Where’re you from?” he said.

“New York.”

“That’s funny. I’m from New York too.”

Sharlee didn’t say anything. She looked down into the water, and her eyes swam with the reflection of it.

“I’m s’posed to go back there too,” he added ruefully.

“I hate it here. I wish I hadn’t come,” said Sharlee. Her lip doubled over into an ugly pout.

“I’ll take you back with me.”

When he said that, she turned around and looked at him. A swarm of honeybees winged their way from her eyes and hovered about his head. He almost fell into the water.

“But I can’t walk a step,” said Sharlee. “I lost one of my slippers in the pool.”

“I’ll carry you to the train,” said he.

Upstairs there was no one on the floor any more. They were out in the moonlight doing a snake dance, hands on shoulders. Their legs rose and fell like pistons; they resembled figures from an Egyptian bas-relief. Jonesy with sleepy Sharlee in his arms tried to break through. Sharlee began half to laugh, half to whimper. They held their heads close together while jeering faces went around and around them in maddening succession.

“Nice Gerald Jones,” said Sharlee dreamily.

In New York Gerry went to see Angel Face, his mother. She lived in an apartment house that contained forty-two dogs and three monkeys but would not admit children under fifteen years of age.

“I’m Gerald Jones,” he told the maid at the door.

“Step in a minute,” said the maid. “She usually doesn’t see people at this hour of the day.”

“But I’ve come all the way from upstate.”

The maid came back and said: “She’s getting up,” and she gave him a look as of one who had seen a miracle performed. “It’ll take her a little while. She said for you to amuse yourself until she’s ready. You can turn on the radio or do anything you please.”

Gerry didn’t need the radio; there was music enough in his veins. He jumped onto a big divan with both knees and buried his face in the cushions. Through all the doors and all the windows Sharlee came in until the room was full of her and his heart was full of her too.

Then he saw that Angel Face was standing there looking at him curiously, with a blue and silver cap on her head and ribbons under her chin. “I’ve been standing here at least

ten full minutes watching you," she said. "And you never even saw me. It's discouraging to think one is that thin."

"Dearest!"

"Ger-ruld." She deepened her voice purposely. Eyes blue as the skies of Paestum at high noon, blue as the fabled moon that is said to come once in a while.

"Sit down on my knee?" he wanted to know.

"I should say not."

"Cigarette?"

"Never before noon."

"Want me to go 'way again?"

"You can stay until half past ten," she said. "A car is coming to call for me at eleven. You can stay all day for that matter," she added, "only there won't be a soul here." She sat down to breakfast and immediately pushed her orange aside. "How was the prom?" she wanted to know. "Soaking wet, I suppose."

"I have some news for you. I got married last night. Or rather early this morning."

"What for?"

He looked at her for a long time, a long, long time, to gauge precisely what she had in mind. Then he said: "What does anyone marry for?"

"We won't discuss that now. Who is she?"

"Sharlee."

"Sharlee." She seemed to be tasting it on the tip of her tongue. "Do I know her?"

"No."

"When did you meet her?"

"Last night."

"And when did you marry her?"

"Last night."

She stood up and went to the window. "What are you anyway," she said, "one of these minute men?" She walked back to the table and rested her hands upon it, leaning forward. "Where have you left her?"

“At the Plaza.”

“On what?” Her voice rose incredulously.

The crisis. “That,” he said, “is what I’ve come to talk to you about.”

She smiled. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m not in a position to —” She held her peach-colored nails close to her face and studied them. “You see, you never came to me for advice.”

“Oh, I understand,” he said politely.

“Won’t you have more breakfast?” she urged. “I love to watch young men eat; they do it with such native enjoyment.”

“Thank you, no,” he admitted. “You’ve taken my appetite away.”

“Naturally you won’t go back to college?”

“Hardly, under the circumstances.”

“Well, is there anything you can do? Anything you think you can do?”

“Last summer I organized a jazz band among some of the fellows and we got a season’s engagement at an amusement park. We made out very nicely—”

“Would you be willing to go ahead with that sort of thing?”

“Why not?”

“I may be able to help you,” she said. “I had a letter from a friend of mine in Florida—”

Each afternoon at cocktail time Mrs. Harry Werner sighed a sigh, batted an eye at the gaslight-blue Florida seas, and got up from her beach chair.

“Time to get dressed,” said Mrs. Harry Werner, emptying her cheeks of smoke.

A colored man, whose people had been in the country two hundred odd years before Mrs. Werner’s, folded her

peppermint-striped umbrella for her and picked up the book she had recklessly thrown away.

"Never mind," said Mrs. Werner. "It has no pictures."

"Yes'm," said the colored man, showing his teeth delightedly. Most of them were porcelain but some were gold. All were horrible.

Mrs. Harry Werner moved toward her hotel with great deliberation, sowing seeds of envy as she progressed. Her Lido pajamas fluttered about her like tattered rags, which was precisely what they were meant to do. As she walked along with the colored man at her heels, the Albuquerque Playa loomed in sight like a cliff of sandstone. It had six hundred and twenty-five windows overlooking the sea and a fountain with goldfish in the patio. Mrs. Harry Werner was not interested in goldfish, though. Neither was she interested in the sea. The sea was no affair of hers, she felt. It could take care of itself as far as she was concerned. Indeed there was only one thing that mattered very greatly to Mrs. H.W. and that was herself.

As the tea hour lengthened to a close, she made her appearance in the pavilion, escorted by two chevaliers of the five to seven. She, as the wife of a very wealthy man, felt herself to be above suspicion. Consequently she courted it at almost every turn. Playing with fire was one of her chief characteristics, and Phoenix-like she rose from the ashes of each disappointment with renewed confidence in her own loyalty. Mrs. Harry Werner, choosing a table close beside the dancing space, put out the coral taffeta light and said "Bitters." By way of afterthought she added "Orange bitters." She put a finger to the end of each eye. "I am so tired," she said. Then she said: "I wonder what makes me so tired." She waited a little while and observed, "Oh, it's you, you people make me tired!", at which they both laughed engagingly like sleek tomcats with collars around their necks.

The sea was deserted. From blue it had become green and from green grayish-yellow. In a short while it would turn purple and then black. But no one was at all interested. They were not down here to study nature. Instead they were studying Mrs. Harry Werner a considerable part of the time.

Mrs. Werner got up to dance with one of her friends. “I see they have a new orchestra down here this year.”

“They’ve been here ever since the holidays,” he informed her.

“I don’t think much of their playing, do you?”

Now anyone who knew anything at all about Mrs. Harry Werner would have known that to run anything down in an effort to distract her attention was the most fatal thing imaginable. Mrs. Harry Werner was stubborn and used to having her own way too much for that sort of thing to be at all successful.

“Why, I don’t see how you can say such a thing!” she exclaimed at once. “I like their playing very well.”

“Everyone’s taste is different,” murmured her partner.

“In that case you have a great deal to account for,” said she. When they sat down, she looked out at the obscured sea for a long while and her well-etched brown eyes seemed a thousand miles off. Then all at once she came to life again, borrowed a pencil from the waiter, and wrote a few words on the back of a card. This she wrapped in something crisp and yellow below the level of the table and passed it to the waiter, folding her small hand over his.

“A new leader,” she murmured into her cigarette. “How challenging!”

Presently she got up to dance once more with her friend. A tender sobbing filtered through her consciousness.

“Do you recognize that?” she said. “It’s the Meditation from *Thais.*” And she added with a touch of bravado: “They’re playing it for me.”

“What a heavy title,” observed her partner. “You’d think they’d call it the Deep Thinkin’ Blues or something like that.”

As they passed Jones, baton in hand, he caught their eyes.

“Thanks,” smiled Mrs. Harry Werner cordially.

“Thank you,” he answered with a slight bow.

Every afternoon Zoe Werner stopped for luncheon at the Casa Madrid. The sands of the Albuquerque Playa knew her no more. Each day she drove nine miles to and fro for the cold asparagus tips and convent-like gloom of the Madrid. Is it reasonable to suppose she knew her own mind? Leaving her car, she entered and looked about her, accustoming her eyes to the cool shadowiness that pervaded the place. The floor was of pinkish sandstone and the patio partly open to the sky. There were plants and vines and Moorish water jars. Zoe Werner sat down at a nearby table at which Jones had been seated for some time past. They shook hands above the sapphire glassware.

“Wasn’t the water chilly this morning?” she remarked casually. “Have you had your dip yet?”

“She comes here every day at this time,” a Dillingham chorus girl confided to her chum. “He’s the orchestra leader at the Albuquerque Playa.”

“The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker,” observed the chum philosophically.

“I wish you wouldn’t insist on this place,” Jones was saying. “It’s frightfully expensive.”

“Don’t let that trouble your little heart.”

His eyes followed a mountain of cotton batting drifting painlessly over the sky in the direction of the West Indies. She had a flair for romance. She went over his face inch by inch like a surveyor.

After a while they renewed a discussion that had been going on between them for several days in succession.

“Then you want me to believe you are married?” she smiled.

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“Oh, it wouldn’t be right somehow,” she cried impatiently.

“Haven’t I a right to be married as well as the next fellow?” he said dryly.

She smiled into the corrugated blue glass. “You can’t convince me.”

“I can’t, eh?”

They laughed foolishly into each other’s faces.

“Not even if I were to tell you my wife’s right down here with me?”

Zoe Werner choked with mirth. “Absurd!” she cried. In the emotional intensity of the effort to convince her, he took one of her hands. Neither of them appeared to notice.

“She has charge of the perfumery counter at the Albuquerque.”

Her fire-red lips were ever so slightly ajar. She seemed puzzled. She drew her hand away. “I think I know who you mean. That baby-faced thing with the boy haircut.”

“She wears a ring around her throat, an alabaster ring I gave her.”

Zoe Werner made a little fist. “I’m going to ask her,” she cried rapturously.

He meanwhile was fumbling with the inside pocket of his coat and growing red in the face. She watched him with an expression that seemed to say “Yes, I know.”

“Try one of the side pockets,” she suggested, looking down shyly.

He put his hand in and felt a small envelope that had been left open.

Mrs. Harry Werner had sent down to say that she wanted to make a selection of toiletries. Sharlee was shown into her suite at ten the next day, carrying a tray loaded with flasks and vials strapped over her shoulders.

"Send her in here to me," directed Mrs. Werner from an inner room. She was on the bed but not in it, her ankles crossed on the coverlet. She wore her hair in a Grecian knot at the back of her neck.

She looked Sharlee over. "What have you got there?" she asked indifferently.

"Coty, Caron, Bourjois—"

"I, ah, was speaking to your husband yesterday evening," proceeded Mrs. Werner without stopping to listen.

Sharlee nodded obediently. "He leads the orchestra."

"You both of you seem so well bred," observed Mrs. Werner. "I can't quite grasp the situation."

"I came down here to be near him. Everyone has to make a living, you know."

"Yes, we lunch together quite often," mused Mrs. Werner dreamily.

"I know," said Sharlee spiritedly. "Mr. Jones tells me everything."

Mrs. Werner treated her to an indulgent smile. "Not quite everything, my dear."

Sharlee looked at her as though a rattlesnake had just bitten her. She could hardly wait until she got away.

"Will that be all?"

"Yes, that will be all."

That evening Gerry stood with his back to the dance floor, shaking spasmodically first one leg then the other, resting the baton against his waistcoat, leading his saxophones like whimpering panthers. And all about him danced Zoe Werner, a thing possessed, devils in her eyes, a bacchante

brave with silver and with jet. They played *Poor little rich girl, Poor little rich girl, Better take care.* Diluted breezes came in under the scalloped awnings. This pitiful music drowned out the sound of the sea for a little while only, but the sound of the sea would last forever.

"Look, Gerry, how's this for real dancing?" Her hair began uncoiling and then all at once tumbled headlong down her back. She gave a hilarious scream of dismay and ran out of the room.

A little while after that there was an intermission, and Sharlee met Gerry on his way out through the lobby for a breath of air.

"Gerry, I haven't seen you all day."

He murmured something about being called back.

"There's loads of time," she said. "You won't have to play again for another half hour."

He lit a cigarette with a trembling hand, but she could see that he wasn't even thinking of her; he was all keyed up to the intrigue set for him, looking over her shoulder toward the elevators all the time.

"What?" he said absently.

"Gerry Jones," she lamented in a peculiar sing-song, "you're the talk of the season, you two. I've stood all I can. You're the laughing-stock of this place—"

"What are you doing—trying to start a scene with me here?" he demanded angrily. "You couldn't pick a better spot, could you?"

"I'm not trying to start any scene," she repeated in a trance-like calm. "I've got my ticket to go back to New York."

He woke up to what she was saying then.

"That night we met," she went on very earnestly, "must have been a mistake. I've thought it over." And going over to the perfume case she switched off all the lights.

At this point Mrs. Werner, her hair freshly done up, stepped out of one of the elevators, a black velvet cape

gathered jealously about her. Her eyes were particularly Venetian this evening.

Poor Gerry Jones, trying to unravel his destiny in a few broken whispers. “You make me feel like two cents, sweetheart—”

“Say it with your music,” said Sharlee. “You’re so weak you’re not worth saving.” And she walked off.

Zoe Werner’s candle-like fingers closed on Gerry’s arm.

“What’s all the shooting for?”

“Sharlee just told me she’s going back to New York.”

“Oh, you silly children. You sil-lee, sil-lee children.”

“Dear lady,” he told her, “we are children. Why did you ever meddle with us?”

She regarded him gloomily. “The good die young,” she said with a touch of sarcasm.

Gerry went back to his music. People wanted to dance; they wanted gay music to shut out the sound the sea was making. Gerry stood up in his place and trembled spasmodically, shifting his weight first to one leg then to the other, and swung the baton dreamily before his chest. Before him swam the image of a beautiful woman in beautiful clothes. A vain selfish woman, the sort of woman Zoe Werner was.

And at first he thought she was more beautiful than an artery of mauve lightning in an angry sky. Every day for days and days of her life she had rubbed creams of almond blossom and of orange blossom, essences of honey and heliotrope dew gently, ever so gently, into her skin. Every day for days and days of her life she had bathed her shoulders in steam and jasmine, pressed a sponge choked with ice cold water to her heart, touched a glass rod with a drop of liquid violets and French chemistry to her lashes and the lobes of her ears. She had protected herself against drafts with spun silk and with lace of Ireland and of Flanders. She had protected herself against cold with the skins of leopards and of seals, with shawls of Persia and

Seville. She had protected herself from darkness with electricity in rose and pearl and amber globes, and when the globes burst, it was seen that there was no light to be had from them at all, only an illusion.

And all at once he looked closer and saw that there was no face there at all, only grinning decaying teeth and eyeless sockets and the worm-eaten bridge of a nose. It was a death's head. The mouth was painted and the cheeks, and the ears were colored shell pink. She even had a gardenia in her hair. And with it all she was a ghastly looking thing. The gay music wavered, then broke, and the bottom fell out of it. The dancing outlasted it only a matter of a second or two. People came to a halt and looked at one another uncertainly, not knowing what to make of it.

"Water!" said a voice at the far end of the room. "He's fainted. Take him outside."

Sharlee was upstairs, getting ready to go away. She took time off from her packing to bury her head in the pillows and sob. Then there were voices outside and someone knocked on the door.

"Yes?" said Sharlee, jumping up and dabbing at her eyes.

The door opened without waiting for her, and she saw a corridor full of people, all staring at her. They brought Gerry in, very pale, with his eyes closed, and put him down on the bed.

"My honeyboy!" Sharlee gave an agonized little whimper, and all thought of New York vanished completely as she bent over him and kissed him. She got everyone out of the room and closed the door on them, but her back was no sooner turned than the door opened again and a voice said: "Mayn't I help? I've brought my spirits of ammonia in case —"

The Venetian-eyed Zoe Werner had insinuated herself into the room.

“If I thought I could trust you to take the right care of him,” said Sharlee bitterly, “I wouldn’t spend another night in this hotel.”

“He’s overworked,” Zoe murmured, not noticing. “The hours here are too long.”

Sharlee snatched up her valise and took long hysterical strides to the door. “Stay here if you want,” she said, half strangled with sobs. “I’m going to New York.”

“You needn’t go,” said Zoe gently. “I’m leaving in the early morning for Jacksonville.” She passed her, and on the way out said softly, “Tell him goodbye for me.”

The sea was blue as only the Florida seas can be: acetylene blue. It reminded Gerry of the eyes of Angel Face, his mother. A dripping mermaid came splashing out of the surf to greet him.

“I saw you leave the hotel,” said Sharlee, “and I was afraid you might want to try the water. I don’t think it would be good for you just yet.”

They sat down on a little hillock of sand, and their arms went around each other.

“We will go away from Florida,” said Gerry.

“We can’t,” said Sharlee, grinning up at the sky. “I wired Angel Face and she’s on the way down. She says she wants to dance to your music. Go in and dress, and I’ll sit out here listening, and when you play, I’ll know it’s all for me.”

CINDERELLA MAGIC

Sometimes it all seemed like a dream, one of those things that happens in books and talking pictures, but not to her, Patty Moran, of Sixty-Eighth Street and Ninth Avenue. Ninth Avenue, where the “El” trains rumbled by in front of the parlor and people ate corned beef and cabbage and had worries. Maybe it happened because she was eighteen. When you’re eighteen, dreams have a way of coming true.

First there were just the two of them, Laurence and Patty. No one ever knew where he ever got that name. Spelt with a U in the middle, too. He hated it. If you wanted to be his friend, you had to call him Larry, if you knew him well enough like Patty did. Or else just plain Mr. Cogan.

Patty was the one who could call him Laurence (with a U in the middle) and not risk getting a punch in the nose. Sometimes she did it when she wanted to tease him. He’d look at her and smile. After a while she found out he liked it. He’d call her up on the telephone and say, “This is Laurence with a U in the middle.” They’d been going together steadily for quite some time, nearly a year. And they knew they’d have to keep on going for another year, or maybe two, before there would be enough money to—if you know what I mean. But they didn’t mind that.

For all they knew, they were the only two in the whole wide world. Of course there were mothers and sisters and brothers and people like that—but they didn’t make Pat’s

heart beat any quicker, the way it was doing right then, for instance, at the telephone.

"And what's on your mind, Laurence with a U in the middle?" Pat said, pretending to be very matter-of-fact. "Admitting that you have one."

"It's about that dance, sweet Patty Moran," he said. "They couldn't get Killarney Hall for tonight, so they're giving it downtown instead, at an armory on Park Avenue. I'll wait for you at the door. Are you ready to leave soon?"

"No," she said. "I'll have to change my dress first. I forgot I was seeing you tonight."

"Shame on you!" her mother laughed. "Standing there in your silver shoes and all, telling him that." And she tried to take the phone away from Pat and say, "Don't believe a word of it, Larry!"

Pat climbed up on a chair, phone and all, and winked at her. "How will I know this armory?" she said to Larry.

"It's as big as a castle," he said, "with a great wide awning over the door. Will you remember the number?" And he gave it to her. Pat called it out so her mother could write it down on a piece of paper for her. "I'll be seeing you then," she said, and ran inside just to take one more look at herself in the glass. But when she asked her mother for the number, Pat found she hadn't written it down at all.

"I didn't have any pencil," her mother said, "but I kept it in my head for you. It's 240."

"I think he said 420."

"If it isn't one, it's the other," her mother said. "That's easy enough."

"Sure it is," Pat said sarcastically. Her mother didn't know very much about taxi fares. And Pat was going to take one because this was one night she was dressed the way she would have liked to go looking all through life, even if the total outlay was only about $18.50. She borrowed half a dollar from her mother and a dollar and a half from her big

brother (who told her not to buy a Packard with it), bringing the total expense up to $20.

“Stop at 420 if it has an awning over it,” Pat told the driver. “If it hasn’t, go right on to 240.”

He looked at her to see if she really meant it, but she said, “You may proceed!” in her haughtiest manner, which took him so much by surprise, coming from anyone at 68th Street and Ninth Avenue, that he didn’t dare say another word.

When they got to 420, it had an awning over it, sure enough, and there were people going in dressed in furs and velvet.

“How do those girls do that on twenty a week?” Pat wondered. “Well, some of them may be making twenty-five; that explains it all. Stop here; this is the place,” she said to the driver, and saw by the meter that her money wouldn’t have lasted until the next address anyhow. And when an individual with gold buttons and braid all over him held the door open for her, she knew it was the armory, because she remembered that armories have something to do with men in uniform.

She didn’t see Larry standing anywhere so she went on in to look for him. And first there was a big glass spinning-door, with someone to turn it for you, and then there was a flight of marble steps to be climbed, and after that came miles of velvet carpet with palms growing along the side. But no Larry anywhere. Pat was afraid she couldn’t find her way back to the street by now anyway so she just kept on walking. Until a velvet rope stopped her. And still no sign of Larry.

Then a young man wearing a flower in his buttonhole stepped up to her and said, “Your invitation, please?”

Pat didn’t at all like his speaking to her without a proper introduction, so she decided to become very haughty once more. “My invitation was by wire,” she said. “Laurence asked me down.” Before she had time to give him Larry’s

last name, he had let down the rope and passed her on to a lady wearing black beads and eyeglasses.

"A friend of Laurence's," the young man said. "Invitation by telegram."

Pat hadn't meant telegram at all, she had meant telephone, but the lady said, "Oh, of course. Come with me, my dear. I'll show you where Laurence is," and took her to a room full of mirrors and girls powdering their noses. Pat looked at each one in turn, but their gold and silver and crystal dresses didn't seem to matter so much after all because none of them were eighteen any more and the only way to look eighteen is to be it. So Pat decided all she must do was not to stand too near a very bright light in her organdy dress.

When she had left her wrap behind, the lady with the eyeglasses said: "Now I will bring you over to Laurence, and then I must hurry back on the receiving line. There he is, over there."

Pat didn't see him, but she followed her across a room nearly as big as the Roxy where dancing was going on, and suddenly she was standing in front of someone Pat had never seen before in her life and saying: "This is a good friend of yours, Laurence. See that she has a good time." And without even waiting to be introduced, the lady walked off and left them. And the band played "Here we are, you and I, Let the world hurry by."

For a minute he was as surprised as she was. "It isn't Florence, is it?" he said. "No, she was blonde. It can't be Bernice—she was shorter than you are. Or are you the girl I taught to dive at Miami last winter?" He was young and nice, but his eyes were a little sad as if he always expected to be disappointed and always got what he expected.

Pat stamped her foot decisively. "It's me, that's who!" she told him. "And where's Larry?"

"I'm Larry."

"You are not! Don't try to fib!" she cried.

“Yes I am,” he said. “Laurence Pierce.”

Pat nearly fainted. “Why, I must be in the wrong place,” she said. “Isn’t this an armory?”

He seemed to think that was very funny. He could hardly stop laughing. “I must tell that to mother,” he said. “It ought to hold her for a while.”

“Do you mean to say you live here?” Pat gasped.

“Yes,” he said apologetically. “Just forty rooms but it’s home.” And he seemed kind of unhappy about it.

“I didn’t know,” Pat said. “Excuse me! I wouldn’t have walked in here like this for the world.” And she turned around to go, but he followed her and took her by the arm.

“Can’t we pretend just for a little while that this really is the place you were going to—and I really did invite you?”

“No,” said Pat firmly.

And she walked away a few steps farther, and again he came after her.

“Won’t you stay if I invite you here and now? I’m afraid I’ve been rude to you. Won’t you stay and let me make up for it?”

“Oh, I couldn’t—” Pat started to say. But she was already standing still and not moving any nearer the door.

“There’s something so real about you. Most of these girls here are just like dolls.” He looked down at the floor and said in a low voice: “No one that was real ever came near me before. And then you walked in the door.”

“The wrong door!” she said.

She should have gone while she still wanted to. But she didn’t want to very much any more. She thought of Larry Cogan waiting for her at the armory. But he could wait a little longer. His eyes had never looked as sad as this, so he could wait just a little longer for her tonight. He’d see her every other night in the year.

“Please stay,” he said. And he looked at her and she knew she would.

He called the orchestra leader over to them and he said: “Lower the lights and let’s have a waltz.” Then he looked at Pat’s dress that wasn’t gold or silver or crystal at all and added: “Play Alice Blue Gown.”

And then they were dancing and it all seemed a dream.

At eleven he said: “You haven’t told me who you are yet.”

Pat said: “I’m Patty Moran of 68th Street and Ninth Avenue.”

“I’m going to like 68th Street and Ninth Avenue,” was all he said to that.

At twelve she said: “I’ll have to go now.”

At one she was still saying she’d have to go. Finally at two she went.

He went with her as far as the spinning glass door, and she saw a big car waiting outside.

“I can’t go with you,” he said, “because it’s my sister Agatha’s coming-out party and she’ll scratch and bite. But Bob will see that you get home safe.”

“Goodnight, Law.”

“Goodnight, Pat.”

That was all they said. They didn’t have to say much. Pat lifted up the speaking tube and said, “Sixty-eighth Street and Ninth Avenue,” and she took a rosebud from the crystal holder and held it in her fingers and looked at it for a long time. “Little flower,” she said finally, “what am I going to do about this?” But the flower didn’t answer.

Her mother was sitting by the open window fanning herself with her apron when Pat got in.

“Look at me!” she groaned. “You see me in the condition I’m in, all weak and warped, from answering that blessed telephone the livelong night. If Larry Cogan’s suicide is announced in the papers tomorrow morning, you’ll have yourself to thank for it. Your brother Tom counted the calls and he says there were twenty-eight of them. Myself, I think there were one hundred and twenty-eight.”

Pat threw her arms around her and hugged her. “Bless you for getting that address wrong.”

“I’m not asking you what happened,” her mother said, pretending to be very much offended, “because Mrs. Moran’s daughter is above rayproach, but I am asking you, daughter or no daughter, the next time you decide to break an appointment, see that your poor old mother doesn’t have to make all the excuses for you.”

“Mother,” Pat asked her, sitting on her lap, “can a girl love two people at the same time, both in a different way?”

“If she does,” her mother answered, “one of them gets left in the end.”

Pat thought a good deal about that before she went to sleep.

The next day two things happened. The first was Larry’s (her Larry’s) phone call before she was even awake.

“What did you do that to me for last night?” he demanded. This went on for quite some time. Pat’s mother even brought the coffee out to the telephone so she could drink it while they were arguing and not lose any time.

“You must have money to burn,” Pat said among other things, “throwing nickels away like you did, just to keep my mother awake half the night.”

He went on and on. “You ought to know by now without being told,” Pat said. “Well, if I have to say it, all right then —I love you. And don’t think for a minute that means you can boss me as much as you please.”

“For the like of those three words,” he said, “I’d gladly live the night over again, worried and jealous and all, glad of the chance.”

“Well,” said Pat, “no one’s asking you to.”

And that night at supper-time the doorbell rang. Tom went to answer it, and when he came back to the table, he said to Pat: “There’s a chauffeur out in the hall with a message for you.” She jumped up and when she got there found Laurence’s chauffeur standing in the door.

“Mr. Pierce sent some flowers over with his regards,” he said, touching his cap. “Can I have them brought up?” And without waiting for her answer, he went out to the head of the stairs and called down: “All right.”

On second thought Pat wasn’t at all sure she liked the idea. Presents the first thing when they had only met the night before for the first time. If he had been poor, it wouldn’t have mattered, but he was rich and it didn’t look right. She knew her mother wouldn’t say anything, but she didn’t want to give the neighbors a chance to talk. In fact she was just about to ask him not to bring them upstairs when in they came, a whole heap of them, and behind them Laurence himself, looking pleased and just a little embarrassed as though he didn’t know whether she’d be glad to see him or not.

“I had to,” he remarked, throwing the flowers in a corner without even giving them to her. “Been thinking about you the live-long day, ever since I first woke up.”

So had Pat but she didn’t say so.

“Are you angry because I came here without being asked?”

“I did the same thing at your house last night,” Pat laughed. “But you didn’t have to bring a whole florist shop with you just to come and see me.”

He was still out of breath from coming up those stairs of hers, and he was just like a little boy with his eyes so eager and all. “I’d like awfully to have you ask me to dinner,” he said.

And they walked in together and Pat said, “Mother, I have company for you. This is Laurence Pierce of 420 Park Avenue, and he’s staying to supper.”

And Laurence sat right down in the first empty chair and tucked a napkin in his collar the way Tom had his.

Pat's mother fussed with her hair and looked nerved for a minute, but Laurence said, "My, that stew smells good," and she looked pleased and proud and helped him to some of it.

Then afterwards, while they were all sitting in the front room and Tom was pumping a music-roll through the pianola, in walked Larry Cogan.

"I dropped in to take you to a movie," he said to Pat matter-of-factly.

"I can't tonight, Larry," she said. "We have company. This is Mr. Pierce—Mr. Cogan."

Larry hardly shook hands with him at all. He had understood even quicker than Pat thought he would. She could tell he didn't want to stay, but he was awkward and didn't know how to get out of the room now that he was in it. So he sat around and tried to ignore Laurence.

Pat's mother asked her to come out in the kitchen and help her serve some cakes and homemade wine. Pat didn't think it would be a very good idea to leave the two of them alone like that. "If they fight in my sittin' room, I'll throw them both out with my own hands," her mother observed.

But when Pat hurried back to them, she found them standing around the pianola singing, or at least trying to, while Tom pedaled. That showed her what kind of a person Laurence was, that when he wanted to make people like him, they liked him in spite of themselves.

Larry left soon after and she went out into the hall with him. "Do you like Laurence a little better now that you know him?" she asked anxiously.

"I'd like him a whole lot better than that even," he admitted, "if it wasn't for his coming between you and me."

"Don't say that, Larry," Pat begged. "He hasn't."

"Maybe you don't know it yet," he said, "but he has. Anyway, think it over good and carefully first."

“Larry—!” she called after him, but he had already gone down the stairs.

Pat had known Laurence about a week when he started to bring up the subject of marriage. Their marriage. Pat laughed it off mostly, with her heart doing all sorts of queer tricks inside her. One time she simply remarked, “Don’t let’s build castles in the air.”

He had lots of answers to make to that, oh lots of them. He made them, all right. Pat saw that it was up to her to bring him back to earth again.

“Did you ever stop to think what your family might have to say?” she suggested.

“It doesn’t matter what they say.”

“It matters a great deal to me,” she told him.

“Why should it?” he asked curiously. “You don’t even know them.”

“But don’t you know what they’d say—what everybody would say—if you married me?”

“That I was the luckiest boy alive, if they knew you as I do.”

Pat turned her head away. “No. They’d say I married you for—for your money. Oh, I wouldn’t blame them,” she said quickly. “I’d think that too if I heard it about some other girl.”

“Maybe it would be true about some other girl,” he answered, “but it isn’t true about you.”

“When Ninth Avenue marries Park Avenue,” she said, “no good comes of it.”

“We’ll see about that!” he said determinedly. “We’ll show them they’re wrong for once.”

The very next day he said to her over the phone, “Don’t make any engagements for Thursday night. You’re having dinner at my home—I want you to meet my family.”

As she hung up, Pat said to herself, “Here is where I lose him.”

And she couldn’t tell if she was sorry or if she was glad. Dreams shouldn’t come true; you lose them that way.

Thursday morning a box came. When she opened it, there was a dress inside, of apricot velvet with a silver orchid on one shoulder. And a card—“Miss Agatha Pierce.” Pat knew that he had sent it and used his sister’s card so she wouldn’t feel hurt. She sent it back. “I’m going to be fair to myself and fair to him,” she told her mother. “His family will see me as I am, in my little blue dress from Lerner’s. The rest is up to them.”

And that’s the way she went there, in an outfit costing $18.50. He sent the car for her, of course. Pat met his mother and his sister and her fiancé. There were just the five of them. And they were going to be very nice to her, Pat could tell. They were going to be very nice to her and show Laurence how unsuitable she was for him. So she played up to them and helped them along, and she even said and did things that she knew were wrong. She said hello to the butler, and she pushed her spoon toward her instead of away from her when they served the soup. But they didn’t seem to notice anything, and after a while she forgot to pretend any more and just became her natural self. And before she knew it, dinner was over and she was alone with Laurence’s mother and sister. His mother put her arm around Pat and said, “You’re a lovable child. What I like about you is that you’re so natural. I can understand how Laurence feels.”

And his sister said, “You were right not to wear that gaudy dress he sent you. You don’t need it. You look too sweet this way.”

“All we want is to see Laurence happy,” his mother said. “And if you really care for him—”

Pat knew what she was going to say. She had seen it in the pictures a great many times before. It was always: “You will give him up if you really love him.”

But his mother went on: “When I was your age, I was selling flowers in a restaurant. I don’t see what right anyone has to stand in your way if you love each other.”

Pat didn’t wait to hear any more. She began to cry.

“Oh, I can’t pretend any more!” she sobbed. “I don’t need to tell you how much I love him. But what am I going to do? You know what people will say.”

“About his money?” Mrs. Pierce said. “Well, let them! You’re one girl in a thousand and Laurence believes in you. Isn’t that enough?” And she gave her a little kiss. “I’ll see you and Laurence through this,” she said.

And the next day there was a diamond on Pat’s finger that hadn’t been there before, and Pat kept looking intently at it.

All it seemed to do was bring the tears to her eyes. “My darling Larry!” she said to her mother. “How can I give him up? Oh, it’s tough sometimes to be a girl.”

“Well, it’s either one or the other of them,” her mother said, “or else it’s bigamy.”

And Larry himself wouldn’t listen to anything Pat tried to say. “Did you think I’d stand in your way?” And when he smiled at her that way, she could almost hear her own heart breaking inside her piece by piece. “Wouldn’t I be the man to do that! He’s got a combination hard to beat—love and money. Don’t throw yourself away on Mrs. Cogan’s little boy.”

And he took her in his arms and kissed her, the first time he’d ever done that in all the time they’d known each other. Greetings and farewell!

“Say the word,” Pat sobbed, “and nothing matters but you.”

“Good-bye’s the word,” he murmured.

Sometimes a little thing makes up your mind for you. Molly Reardon, who lived on the floor below, walked in one night about two weeks before the wedding. Pat had never liked her much anyway.

“What’s all this going on around here?” she said to Pat’s mother. “A snappy car parked in front of the flat every night and reporters snooping around trying to find out who the lucky girl is. I hear Pat has caught a swell. Pretty soft for her. How’d she do it?”

Pat was in the other room drying the supper dishes when she heard her say that. She dried her hands and went in to them then. And a minute later Pat’s mother had to call out at the top of her voice, “Tom! Tom! Come in here quick before that sister of yours breaks all my best plates!”

Molly Reardon ducked once to the right and once to the left, and then she managed to escape into the hall in a big hurry, followed by a salad-bowl.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Pat sobbed when they had calmed her down. “That’s what they’ll all be thinking. Caught a swell, have I? Just because he’s rich and I’m poor. And maybe some day he’ll begin to think so too. That’s what I’m afraid of. Some day he’ll forget and think it was the money.”

“Not if he loves you he won’t,” her mother assured her.

“I want to keep this dream,” Pat told her. “It may be the only one I’ll ever have. I want to keep him forever, just like he was this one month I’ve known him.”

And she called up Laurence’s house, but she asked for his mother, not him.

“You said you used to work for your living when you were my age,” she said, “so you ought to understand. Make him understand too.”

And when she was all through, Mrs. Pierce just said, “Poor Laurence” and hung up.

Then Pat rang a certain other number. Corned beef and cabbage for the rest of her life.

“Larry,” she said, “I’m to be married, and I want you there.”

“You know I’d do anything for you,” he said, “even this. Where is it, 420 Park Avenue?”

“No,” Pat said, “68th Street and Ninth Avenue. And don’t keep me waiting because you’re to be the groom.”

THE GIRL IN THE MOON

A big round moon leaped up, quivered a little, and then steadied itself, half of it bent flat on the boards, the other half upright against the backdrop. It glowed rose, tinted with yellow, perfect as a hot-house peach but more ideally round than any peach could ever have been. A girl came through the curtain.

It is impossible to characterize Zelda. To everyone in turn she represented something different. To that comfortable woman with the pearls in her ears sitting in the second row on the aisle, she was one of the lucky ones who weighed one hundred pounds and could climb stairs without seeing black spots in front of her eyes. To the woman’s husband she brought to mind that summer of 1923 when his wife had been away in Maine. He would have liked to meet her. He would also have liked to have his hair back and be President of the United States. To the wise gum-chewers up on the shelf, she was simply a good act, nothing more. To which their flour-faced friends retorted, not without acidity, that they had seen better. To the orchestra leader, she was someone who flew into rages at Monday morning rehearsals and who darted deadly looks at him under her long lashes if he began vamping an encore when she wasn’t in the mood for one. To the man in the wings, she symbolized drudgery, painting itself in bright colors and fooling the world for fifteen minutes each night but not fooling him.

Her method was not subtle. She had to score and score quickly, and she knew it. She began to sing something popular. She had all the mannerisms that went with it. Palms out in the direction of the audience as though pushing it away from her. She gave a sly little turn of the wrist, pointing with one finger, and the moon that had been following her about like a big cartwheel rolled glibly off the stage and perched obediently on one of the upper boxes.

There was only one person in the box. She had chosen it so there would be no division of interest on the part of the audience. He seemed turned to stone. In all that glare he never batted an eyelash. After a moment he let his chin sink forward until his jaw rested more comfortably on the back of his arm. He gave the absurd impression of taking the whole proceeding seriously. The audience by now was convinced he had been planted there for her act. They expected witty repartee, and when it failed to come, they could not understand why it was being withheld.

To cap the climax, when she remarked in a wheedling voice, “Darling, you do love me, don’t you?” (as part of the patter chorus) he nodded his head affirmatively, and the girl on the stage, more disconcerted than anyone guessed, almost forgot to gesture for a moment. She had expected almost anything but not this. Instead of wriggling adolescents stumbling over each other in a mad rush to get out of the light, or some jeering salesman sitting through it with an air of assumed bravado, she had unearthed an enigma.

She could efface him swiftly and at once. Lift her little finger and the moon would come floating back to her. But she didn’t. It wasn’t businesslike of her in the least. She knew that. She needed all the moon she could get in the short time she was out front, and yet she let it stay up there on him. Her nerves were crying for a well rounded performance, and she couldn’t get it. As intended comic relief he was no help at all, had simply ruined the number. A

professional plant at least would have had a line of back talk ready to throw at her.

She began to work harder than ever, angrily determined. “Look at his eyes, folks. Aren’t they beautiful? Do you blame me, girls?”

She had to give in at last. With a limp gesture of farewell she finally called the moon off him and took her bows. It had gone over immensely if the smacking was any criterion, but she had that empty, that “all gone” feeling she had known she was going to get. She glared daggers at the leader and frightened him out of an encore. As it was, she had to feed them something about her gratitude.

She brushed by Jack in the wings on the way to the dressing-room. “Some fool up in one of the cages rattled me.”

“Maybe you’d like a screen around you,” he suggested uncharitably.

The next show she received a note in her dressing-room. This was no novelty, certainly. She put down the grease stick to look at it. Miss Zelda Grayson, care of Bandbox Theater. She opened it with a pair of manicure scissors.

“Sweet peas,” said Jack, sticking his head in at the door. “Going to open an undertaking parlor with them?”

“Yes,” she said crushingly. “Send your head around some time for embalming.”

After the show she thought it out. She would be very hard-boiled about this. That was the thing to do. And though she hated to admit it, she knew she wasn’t at all hard-boiled underneath and never would be. But she had acquired the manner to perfection and that helped some. She knew all the mean little stencils that could take the warmth and kindness out of things instantly like the cut of a whip.

She was smiling rather venomously as she bound a towel about her hair and put on a street make-up. Tamper with her act, would he? She'd see about that. Not that there had been anything disrespectful in the note or the gift of flowers (sweet peas, she admitted to herself, were not expensive enough to be very insinuating); it was simply that she intended to repay him in kind. Especially since he laid himself open this way. It was too good to miss.

Dressed and ready to leave, she selected two or three of the flowers and pinned them to her coat. She emerged into the obscurity of the alley backstage, with its single light in a wire basket throwing a pool of light downward over the cement, and reached the street at the end of it without meeting a soul. It was a little too early yet for them to be coming out.

There were not more than four people waiting in the lobby when she got around to the front of the house. Two of them were women and one was a colored man with a mop and pail, which made the task of identifying him much simpler. He was, if anyone, the individual peering through the oval panes at the end-numbers of the show. He turned around just then and she lowered her head to smell the flowers on her coat. He caught the signal they had agreed upon and came over to her at once. They studied each other for a split-second like a pair of prizefighters measuring distances at the stroke of the bell.

"Good evening," he said.

"What makes you think you have the right to speak to me?" she asked, detachedly curious.

"I haven't the right, only the wish."

"Well, your wish has been granted." She pretended to move away. "Good night," she said. That, she knew, would bring him after her. It did.

"Wait!" he said. "You're not going so soon?"

"Why not?" she answered. "Do you think I came out front here on purpose to meet you?"

“Yes,” he said gravely. “You’re wearing the flowers to identify yourself.”

She unpinned them and threw them away. He picked them up and put them in his wallet.

“I suppose now you’ll carry them around with you for the rest of your life,” she said mockingly. “Until you fall for somebody else.”

“I’m not that kind,” he said.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“When your partner goes in to buy a shirt,” he said, “why, I wait on him.”

“No, you don’t,” she corrected. “He’s only got one and the last time he changed it was when the boys came back from overseas. The other night the collar-band dropped off and started to walk away of its own accord—he just stepped on it in the nick of time.”

He laughed appreciatively.

She was finding it harder to dislike him as the minutes wore on. He made a good listener at any rate. The show was out now and the lobby was filling with people.

“It’s warm,” she said. “I’d like a Coca-Cola.”

They went to get one.

“Listen,” she said, “why did you crab my act last night? Don’t you know that wasn’t regular? You should have played up to me.”

“I wasn’t thinking of the act, I was thinking of you.”

“Now really,” she said, “isn’t that going a little too fast?”

“The first night I came, I bought one of your records in the lobby to take home with me. And when I put it on, it wasn’t you at all; it was someone else singing it.”

“Were you disappointed?”

“I never got to the end. I broke it right then and there.”

Who wouldn’t have been very gentle with him after hearing a thing like that? And she was not so hard-boiled inside herself after all. She knew that now. Through barely parted lips he heard her murmur, “Almost thou persuadest

me.” As they walked out of the drugstore together, she was certain of only one thing—she would not do what she had planned to do to him. She stopped him at the door with a little gesture.

“You stay here, and don’t look which way I go. Tomorrow night if I am thirsty, I may drop by here for another Coca-Cola.”

Tomorrow night she was thirsty.

She did not have to pin flowers to her coat now, or identify him by eliminating everyone else nearby. In the taxi driving to the theater she had said to herself, “What is the matter with me?” and could find no explanation. She made one last feeble attempt to fight off this thing that she had sung about so often from the boards and was now meeting for the first time. “If you’re a dreamer,” she said, “you’d better get someone else for your dreams. I can’t see you any more.”

The next night she found that she needed a new lipstick and she stepped in to buy it. All he said was, “How lucky for me you needed that lipstick.” She refused to admit even to herself that she had just thrown a brand new one away in the alley in back of the theater. They were Marty and Zelda to each other now. And Coca-Cola no longer seemed a very commonplace drink.

At times she still stopped a moment and tried to understand what it was that had happened to her. “It seems that this is love,” she said. She wasn’t laughing at this the way she would have a little while ago.

A week from the night they had first met, they were married. They had their whole future planned in the fifteen

minutes it took to drive to the theater, holding hands in a black-and-white cab.

"But you want me to, don't you?"

The old story: "I want you all to myself. But are you sure you won't regret it later?"

"I'm never sorry for what I've done," she said. "I'm a good sport."

She gave the stage manager notice. And then she had to tell Jack. She stopped him in the wings. Distant hand-clapping filled the air like hundreds of little firecrackers all going off at the same time.

"Listen!" he said. "Is that for you?"

"I suppose so," she answered absent-mindedly.

"You've got them eating out of your hand!" he cried joyously. "Go on out there!"

"No," she said. "This is my last show. I was married this afternoon."

In the dim light his face was a cipher to her. "Now? You're going to quit now? After all I've done for you? I didn't think it was in you to act like this!"

She kissed him lightly on the cheek. "It's love, Jack, love! Do you want to know why I went over so immense just now? He was out front. I wasn't acting, I was living my number."

"I give you a year of that," he called after her. "They all come back."

"Good night, Miss Grayson," the doorman said.

She smiled and opened her purse. "It's Mrs. Martin now, Dave, and it's good-by."

He watched her step out into the alley under the dim light and walk away on her husband's arm.

The flat (Brooklyn because "Where else could you get it for fifty-five?") had a shining white refrigerator that purred like a kitten and made little frozen dice in a pan. It had a radio

that hissed and spit if anyone crossed the floor in front of it but at other times poured forth the sweetest music mortal ears had ever heard. Furthermore, it had a dumbwaiter that miraculously disgorged itself of cans of peaches and cartons of cigarettes while a voice hidden somewhere in the bowels of the earth called up “Four seventy-five, please!” Zelda, used to hotel rooms all her life, brought no caustic comment to bear on ten cent cups and saucers and a sofa secured by a five dollar deposit; found in them the essence of the ideal, and crowed delightedly at the implication of personal ownership in all this. The lily needed no gilding, but for ornament there were her own striking wrappers and the Chinese lanterns she conscientiously fastened to all the lights.

The first weeks went by in a flurry of excitement. There were things to be bought. There were things to be done, things to be learned. How to make coffee, for instance. The only way she had known was to pick up a telephone and say “Room service.” And over and above all this there was love, breathless and absorbing. Until weeks grew into months and the excitement was less. Love did not grow less, but the excitement did.

Hers was to be no busman’s holiday. She stayed away from the places she had known. No more midnight lunches in restaurants filled with shop-talk. No more of friends who called her “honey” but would have cut her throat professionally. Once her costumer called her. “It’s all of silver fish-scales and just the thing for you. Lily de Vrie is wild about it, but I thought I’d give you first chance at it.”

“Let her have it,” Zelda said. “Haven’t you heard that I’ve quit?”

She didn’t want gold or silver or anything shining any more. Her eyes were a little tired of glitter. Diversion was to sit in a room, her very own room, with him there, with a lamp and a book and a cigarette there, and not have to sing for people, not have to smile. And if one stocking slowly

dropped below her knee, it was luxury; it was better than a diamond-studded garter. She took pride in demonstrating her newest accomplishment now, made a cup of coffee as a special treat just before they retired, while the announcer's voice was signing off to soft far-away music. If they had drained the pitcher of cream between them, she would scrawl a little note, "Borden: Leave us a bottle of cream tomorrow," and curl it up in the neck of a bottle outside the door.

A few of Marty's friends came out from time to time. She wanted to like them, tried to make them feel at home, but they invariably asked her to sing, entertain them in some way.

"I have a headache," she would say. "Not just tonight, some other time." They seemed to feel they had been snubbed.

"Don't let's have them any more," she pleaded. "They're always asking me to perform."

"I'm afraid you don't like my friends," he said.

"They keep an imaginary spotlight on me all the time. If I walk into the room to say hello to them, they make an 'entrance' out of it somehow. They stop being just callers and turn into an audience right away. They want a show."

"But I thought you liked the stage—"

"The stage is just a habit, and now I've broken the habit. Think what it means, to stay in one place all the time, to forget there are things like trunks and trains and eight o'clock shows." She raised her chin as though it hurt. "See these little lines here? I had them when I was seventeen. I'm not old, but I'm so tired—"

She was a little different now from what she had been when he first saw her. And soon she was a whole lot different. He couldn't understand what had happened. Every evening, rushing home under the East River in a crowded train, he thought of her as she had been, in the heart of that electric moon, a two-dimensional being, a

product of lights and music, a stage effect, but bringing beauty into his life and his heart, a warmth that would linger there for the rest of his days. And every evening, when he got there and opened the door, he saw her as she was. It was a little hard to fit the two together. He thought: “Did I marry this girl? What is this girl doing here?” He couldn’t think of her in a kimono, loose ends of hair straggling about her head, sitting, drinking coffee from a thick cup. Couldn’t think of her that way at all. And one Sunday morning, as though seeing her for the first time, he said: “Why, you’re no different from anyone else this way.”

She sighed and said: “Do I have to be different? Can’t you take me as I am?”

And at another, later time she said: “I know. You wouldn’t have married me if you had known I would turn into a washout like this.”

“It isn’t that—” he said. “It isn’t that—” She had no right to read his thoughts that way.

But it was that. He knew it and she knew it too.

She had a little plan then. She would look as he wanted her to. He would come home and find the glamorous thing he had married waiting for him. She spent the afternoon getting ready. Had a wave put in her hair. A little perfume but heavy enough to cut with a knife. New eyes, new lips, new lashes, out of little boxes. A baby chandelier dangling from each ear. She saw herself in the glass. “How cheap I look,” she said. Men were funny. Maybe she would have to do this once or twice a week. But after she had taken it all off again, there would always be the radio and coffee, each time.

She slipped her hand through one more sparkling paste bracelet for luck. Then the telephone rang. He wasn’t coming. They were taking an inventory of stock, get away as soon as he could. She sat down abruptly on a chair and laughed for a very long time. She sat there holding a hand to her head and laughing. They really did those things,

then, in everyday life. Rang up home and said they were detained by business when they wanted to take someone else out to dinner. She hadn't believed it until now, thought it just a married-life "gag." One of those funny-paper jokes. Now it seemed it wasn't. She understood, of course. She knew by his very voice. Probably one of the salesgirls. She shook her head tenderly, was not at all hard-boiled. "Poor Marty. Poor boy. Got to have someone to dream about."

And what about all this she had on? Simply because she felt unequal to the bother of taking it all off again so soon, she got up after a while and languidly called her old theater.

"How's the new show going these days, Jack? I have a hunch I'll drop around tonight. Leave a pass for me in the box-office." Then she boiled herself a cup of coffee and sighed lugubriously. Anyone that would want to leave a cozy flat like this even for an hour must be a fool.

"Dressed up, looking like a Christmas tree," she added aloud. She turned out the lights lingeringly, almost caressingly, and left. The last thing she heard through the door was the purr of the mechanical ice-box. "The darling!" she crooned, as though it were a child.

She got there late. The show had started. And when the house lights went up between the acts, there was Marty sitting precisely one row in front of her, with a friend. Not a woman, though. But even so, he had lied to her.

She left her seat hurriedly, furtively, trailing her wrap across people's knees after her. She wouldn't go back to it again when the audience settled itself for the second half. She was afraid he might turn around and see her. She felt guilty herself somehow—she couldn't quite understand why. Probably because she had caught him unaware. She had once said to him, "I'm a good sport."

Instead of going home at once, she went backstage to talk to Jack. "I don't think my husband cares about me any

more," she said, half laughing, half in earnest. "I saw him in the audience just now."

And when she left, Jack was saying, "That'll give you two weeks to rehearse. And the de Vrie woman leaves in ten days. They can put in an understudy till you're set. Now don't forget, tomorrow at eleven!"

"I'll be seeing you," she said wearily.

Marty of course was home before her and pretended to be absorbed in his newspaper. Finally though, because she was his wife and it was the least he could do in all decency, he put it down and looked at her. The way she was dressed and all. His expression never changed.

"What're you all dressed up about?" he asked indifferently.

"I'm going back in the show business," she said quietly. And wanted him to storm and forbid and shout "What, my wife? Never! You'll do nothing of the sort! Your place is home!"

"S'funny, I've been thinking about it too, lately," he drawled, "and wondering if you ever would or not."

Well, she had done all she could.

A big round moon flamed up against the curtain, wavered a bit, and then steadied itself. It glowed radiantly, too perfect to be anything but a stage moon out of an electrician's box of tricks. Whoever came under its rays bathed in the fountain of youth. The curtain lifted and a girl came through.

To everyone in turn she represented something different. To the man watching her from the wings, she symbolized drudgery, painting itself in bright colors but not fooling him and not fooling herself. To one alone in that entire house, she brought a gift of beauty and glamor.

She gave a little turn of the wrist, and again the moon flashed blindingly on one of the boxes. Marty was sitting in it. In all that glare he never once took his eyes off her. He gave the absurd impression of taking the whole proceeding seriously. “Sweetheart,” she sang, “do you love me? Do you want me? Am I in all your dreams?” as part of the patter chorus. And he nodded his head and sat there mutely adoring. The audience by now was convinced—well, you know the rest.

And every night after the show he was waiting for her to take her home, and there was an air about him of one who sees his dream come alive and walk about before his very eyes.

BETWEEN THE ACTS

Russell Barker stood waiting in the crowded lobby of the theater. Half-past eight sharp Stella promised to be there, but she was almost always late. He'd been going out with her for nearly a year now, and she had never yet been on time for an appointment with him. Even though she knew darned well how little he could afford the price of theater tickets these days. Twenty to nine. He put his watch away and started to walk back and forth, looking at the framed photographs of well-known players that decorated the walls.

Stella was a puzzle to him. Did she really care for him or didn't she? Sometimes he wondered if she wasn't just using him as a space-filler until someone more worthwhile—financially, of course—came along. And for that matter did he really care about her either? He couldn't tell. He wasn't as sure as he had once been about—Oh, well, why bring that up now? It was over and done with long ago.

Outside on the wet, gleaming sidewalk in front of the theater, the uniformed doorman was being kept busy as car after car drew up at the entrance to disgorge its smartly-gowned women and stiff-shirted men and then rolled smoothly away to give place to the next. Russell watched them as they sauntered in, these well-to-do occupants of boxes and of first-row orchestra seats, laughing and chattering gaily. They seemed not to have a care in the world. Stella should have been here in time for all this, he

realized; she would have enjoyed looking at the women's clothes. She loved clothes so, sables and evening gowns and things like that; she was always talking about them, wishing she owned them. He looked at his watch once more. Quarter to nine. If she didn't hurry, they were going to miss part of the show. Most of the people in the lobby were beginning to filter inside now, and snatches of the overture could be plainly heard each time the inner doors were opened.

Then Stella appeared at last, hurrying toward him, and just as she came in, the biggest limousine of all drew up outside at the curb. Two people got out of it.

Stella greeted Russell in her usual peevish way. "What a night to ask me to come out! If I had known it was going to be like this—!" She cut her complaint short to turn and take in the beauty of an ermine wrap that had just come sailing in, muffling its wearer to the ears. Just behind her came a rather paunchy gentleman.

The wearer of the wrap suddenly stopped short, turned aside, and came over to the wall as though the pictures on it interested her. She stopped just a foot away from Russell. He saw her face and his own paled a little. But Stella only had eyes for the wrap, envious, longing eyes. "Louise!" the paunchy gentleman remonstrated impatiently. "Come on, we'll miss the show."

"Just a minute," she answered indifferently. "I want to see whose picture this is they have up here." And she raised her finger to her lips as though she were studying the picture critically—but it might have meant simply: "Keep still; don't speak to me—now." And did Russell imagine it, or had a whisper floated toward his ear? "Meet me here between the acts." Suddenly she was gone, had gone in with the paunchy gentleman. Had he really seen her, he wondered, or was it just a ghost—a ghost from out of the past?

Stella brought him to. "Well, come on!" she remarked sulkily. "What are we standing here for?"

As they climbed the two long flights of stairs to the second balcony, she had further fault to find. “I’d like to go to a show just once in my life with you,” she said, “and not have to sit way up on the roof !”

Russell didn’t answer.

Just before the first act was over, Stella prodded him with her elbow and pointed. “There’s that ermine down there, in a box. It’s the best-looking thing I’ve ever seen.”

But he had seen it long ago, from the moment he first sat down. The curtain came down for the end of the act. The girl in the box stood up and went outside; the ermine wrap remained behind upon the chair. Stella kept eyeing it hungrily. “That man with her,” she commented, “has fallen asleep.” Then she added: “I bet he bought it for her. Some women have all the luck!”

“I’m going downstairs and smoke a cigarette,” Russell said, standing up. “Wait here, will you?”

He came out into the lobby a minute later, and they stood face to face, the two of them, the girl who had worn the ermine wrap and he.

“Well, Russell,” she said, “let’s shake hands anyway. It’s been a long time now—”

Their hands met. “Over two years, Louise,” he nodded, and asked: “Who’s that with you?”

“Oh, someone,” she sighed, and explained. “He wants me to marry him—when I get my final decree.” Then she smiled and asked, “And who’s that with you, Russell?”

“Oh, another someone,” he said. “I’ve thought at times I’d ask her to marry me—when you do get your decree.” Abruptly he said: “He’s too old for you, Louise.”

“She’ll nag you to death, Russell,” she answered. “I could tell that by one look at her face.”

They seemed to find it difficult to continue the conversation for a moment. “You came out without your wrap,” Russell observed lamely.

“I hate the thing,” she said, and added in a low voice: “Like everything else I once thought I wanted so badly!”

Inside, the overture for the beginning of the second act started up with a crash. They grew strangely silent while the lobby around them slowly emptied of people.

“It’s funny,” Russell mused. “I can remember every little thing we ever said or did—except what caused the final break. What was it? Can you tell me, Louise?”

They both laughed a little and then grew sober. They kept staring into one another’s faces as though longing to say something and yet afraid to.

“You used to make such vile coffee—” Russell blurted out longingly.

“You were always such a poor wage-earner—” she sighed wistfully.

“How happy we were!” they both said together.

He felt for her hand and gripped it convulsively without saying anything. She seemed to understand what it meant. “Oh, Russell!” she sobbed all at once, raising her head and looking at him pitifully.

“Louise!” he cried.

All through the second act a chair in the lower right-hand box where a gentleman dozed and a seat in the second balcony beside which a cross-looking young woman sat frowning remained unoccupied. And when the stage had finally darkened and the house emptied, these two still lingered on in the lobby, he with an ermine wrap slung uselessly over his arm and she with a man’s fedora held uselessly in her hand. “And are you positive,” said the paunchy gentleman, peering into the box-office for the

ninth or tenth time, “that no message was left here for me? Goyter is my name.”

“Or for me?” asked the young woman. “Haggerty is mine.”

For answer the shutter was slammed down in their faces.

They turned and looked at each other. She glanced thoughtfully from the ermine wrap to the limousine standing waiting outside the door.

“Pardon me—er—may I drop you anywhere?” the paunchy gentleman volunteered.

“That’s very sweet of you,” she smiled.

“It’s a pleasure,” he replied, holding the wrap open and folding it gallantly, consolingly about her shoulders.

DEATH SITS IN THE DENTIST'S CHAIR

I

There was another patient ahead of me in the waiting room. He was sitting there quietly, humbly, with all the terrible resignation of the very poor. He wasn't all jittery and alert like I was, but just sat there ready to take anything that came, head bowed a little as though he had found life just a succession of hard knocks. His gaze met mine and I suppose he could tell how uncomfortable I was by the look on my face, but instead of grinning about it or cracking wise he put himself out to encourage me, cheer me up. When I thought of this afterward it did something to me.

"He not hurt you," he murmured across to me confidentially. "Odder dantist say he very good, you no feel notting at all when he drill."

I showed my gratitude by offering him a cigarette. Misery loves company.

With that, Steve Standish came in from the back, buttoning his white jacket. The moment he saw me professional etiquette was thrown to the winds. "Well, well, Rodge, so it's finally come to this, has it? I knew I'd get you sooner or later!" And so on and so on.

I gave a weak grin and tried to act nonchalant. Finally he said in oh, the most casual manner, "Come on in, Rodge,

and let's have a look at you."

I suddenly discovered myself to be far more considerate of others than I had hitherto suspected. "This—er, man was here ahead of me, Steve." Anything to gain five minutes' time.

He glanced at his other patient, carelessly but by no means unkindly or disdainfully. "Yes, but you've got to get down to your office—he probably has the day off. You in a hurry?" he asked.

"Thass all right, I no mine, I got no work," the man answered affably.

"No, Steve, I insist," I said.

"Okay, if that's the way you feel about it," he answered genially. "Be right with you." And he ushered the other patient inside ahead of him. I saw him wink at the man as he did so, but at the moment I didn't much care what he thought of my courage. No man is a hero to his dentist.

And not long afterwards I was to wonder if that little attack of "cold feet" hadn't been the luckiest thing that ever happened to me.

Steve closed his office door after him, but the partition between the two rooms had evidently been put in long after everything else in the place. It was paper-thin and only reached three-quarters of the way up; every sound that came from the other side was perfectly audible to me where I sat, fidgeting and straining my ears for indications of anguish. But first of all there was a little matter of routine to be gone through. "I guess I'll have to take your name and pedigree myself," Steve's voice boomed out jovially. "It's my assistant's day off."

"Amato Saltone, plizz."

"And where do you live, Amato?" Steve had a way with these people. Not patronizing, just forthright and friendly.

"Two twanny Thirr Avenue. If you plizz, mista."

There was a slight pause. I pictured Steve jotting down the information on a card and filing it away. Then he got

down to business. “Now what seems to be the trouble?”

The man had evidently adjusted himself in the chair, meanwhile. Presumably he simply held his mouth open and let Steve find out for himself, because it was again Steve who spoke: “This one?” I visualized him plying his mirror now and maybe playing around with one of those sharp little things that look like crocheting needles. All at once his voice had become impatient, indignant even. “What do you call that thing you’ve got in there? I never saw a filling like it in my life. Looks like the Boulder Dam! Who put it in for you—some bricklayer?”

“Docata Jones, Feefatty-nine Stree,” the man said.

“Never heard of him. He send you here to me?” Steve asked sharply. “You’d think he’d have decency enough to clean up his own messes! I suppose there wasn’t enough in it for him. Well, that headstone you’ve got in there is going to come out first of all, and you just pay me whatever you can afford as we go along. I’d be ashamed to let a man walk out of my office with a botched-up job like that in his mouth!” He sounded bitter about it.

The next thing that came to my ears was the faint whirring of the electric drill, sounding not much louder than if there had been a fly buzzing around the room over my head.

I heard Steve speak just once more, and what he said was the immemorial question of the dentist, “Hurting you much?” The man groaned in answer, but it was a most peculiar groan. Even at the instant of hearing it it struck me that there was something different about it. It sounded so hollow and faraway, as though it had come from the very depths of his being, and broke off so suddenly at the end.

He didn’t make another sound after that. But whatever it was it had taken more than a mere twinge of pain to make him groan like that. Or was it just my own overwrought nerves that made me imagine it?

An instant later I knew I had been right. Steve's voice told me that something out of the ordinary had happened just then. "Here, hold your head up so I can get at you," he said. At first jokingly, and then—"Here! Here! What's the matter with you?" Alarm crept in. "Wake up, will you? Wake up!" Alarm turned into panic. "Rodge!" he called out to me.

But I was on my feet already and half across the waiting room, my own trivial fears a thing of the past. He threw the door open before I got to it and looked out at me. His face was white. "This fellow—something's happened to him, he's turning cold here in the chair and I can't bring him to!"

I brushed past him and bent over the figure huddled in the chair. Horrible to relate, his mouth was still wide open in the position Steve had had it just now. I touched his forehead; it was already cooler by far than the palm of my hand and clammy to the touch. I tried to rouse him by shaking him, no good, then felt for his heart. There was no heart any more. Steve was on the other side of him, holding his dental mirror before the open mouth. We both watched it fascinatedly; it stayed clear as crystal.

"He's gone," I muttered. "What do you make of it?"

"I'm going to try oxygen," Steve babbled. "It may have been his heart—" He was hauling down a big, clumsy looking cylinder from a shelf with jerky, spasmodic movements that showed how badly shaken he was. "You'd better send in a call for an ambulance."

The phone was outside in the waiting room; that didn't take any time at all. When I came back there was a mask over his face and a tube leading from his mouth to the cylinder. Steve was just standing there helplessly. Every few seconds he'd touch a little wheel-shaped valve on the cylinder, but the indicator showed that it was already as wide open as it could go. "Keep your hand on his heart," he said to me hoarsely.

It was no use. By the time the ambulance doctor and a policeman got there (with a deafening crashing of the

rigged-up doorbell apparatus) Steve had taken the tube out of his mouth and turned off the flow of oxygen from the cylinder.

“Gave him nearly the whole tank,” I remember his saying to me.

The ambulance doctor took one look at him as he came in and then told us what we already knew. “All up, eh?” he said. He then stretched him out on the floor, of all places, with the help of the cop, and began to examine him. I cleared out of the room at this point and sat down to wait outside—fully imagining I was being big-hearted and staying on of my own free will to brace Steve up instead of going somewhere more cheerful. It would all be over in another five or ten minutes, I thought unsuspectingly, and then maybe Steve and I better go and have a drink together some place and both of us take the rest of the day off.

The patrolman came out to me and asked if I’d been in there when it happened. I told him no, I’d been out here waiting my turn. I was about to add for no particular reason that I was a very good friend of Steve’s and not just a stray patient, when things began to happen rapidly.

So far everything had been just pure routine on their part. But now the ambulance doctor finished his examination and came out, kit in hand, Steve trailing after him. What he had to say was to the policeman though and not to Steve at all. “It wasn’t his heart,” he said. “Better phone Headquarters and tell the coroner to come up here. He might want to bring a couple of boys with him.”

“What’s up?” Steve tried to sound casual but he wasn’t very good at it. The cop was already at the phone.

“Not natural causes at all,” the doctor said grimly. He wouldn’t say anything more than that. The shrug he gave plainly meant, “It’s not my job.” I thought he looked at Steve a little peculiarly as he turned to go. The hideous bell had another spasm of its jangling and the door closed after him.

II

The cop became noticeably less friendly after that; he remained standing to one side of the door and had a watchful air about him. Once when Steve made a move to go back into the other room for something his upper lip lifted after the manner of a mastiff with a bone and he growled warningly, “Take it easy, fellow.” Nice boy he was—as long as you were on his side of the fence.

They didn’t take long to get there, the coroner and “a couple of the boys.” They looked more like high-powered real estate agents to me, but this was the first time I’d even been in the same room with a detective.

“What’s about it?” began one of them, lingering with us while the coroner and his pal went on inside and got busy.

Steve told him the little there was to tell; the man had climbed into his chair, Steve had started to drill, and the man had gone out like a light. No, he’d never treated him before, never even laid eyes on him until five minutes before he’d died.

That was all there was to this first session, a harmless little chat, you might call it. The cop went back to his beat, a stretcher arrived, and poor Amato Saltone departed, his troubles at an end. Steve’s, though, were just beginning—and possibly mine with them. The second detective came out with the coroner, and the atmosphere, which hadn’t been any too cordial, all at once became definitely hostile.

“Cyanide of potassium,” snapped the coroner. “Just enough to kill—not a grain more, not a grain less. I pumped his stomach, but the traces were all over the roof of his mouth and the lining of his throat anyway. I’ll hold him on the ice in case they want a more thorough going-over later.” And he too departed. That bell was driving me slowly insane.

The second detective held the inner door open and said, “Come inside, Dr. Standish.” It wasn’t said as politely as it reads in print.

I’ve already mentioned that every word spoken could be heard through or over the partition. But I was only allowed to hear the opening broadside—and that was ominous enough, Lord knows. “Where do you keep your cyanide, Dr. Standish?”

The detective who had remained with me, as soon as he realized what the acoustics of the place were, immediately suggested with heavy emphasis: “Let’s just step out in the hall.”

After we’d been standing out there smoking awhile Steve’s office phone rang. My guardian took it upon himself to answer it, making sure that I came with him, so I had a chance to overhear the wind-up of Steve’s quizzing. The call itself was simply from a patient, and the detective took pains to inform her that Dr. Standish had cancelled all appointments for the rest of that day.

I didn’t like the way that sounded; nor did I like the turn the questioning had taken.

“So a man that’s going to commit suicide goes to all the trouble of having a cavity filled in his mouth just before he does it, does he?” Steve’s interlocutor was saying as we came in. “What for—to make himself beautiful for St. Peter?”

Steve was plenty indignant by now. “You’ve got a nerve trying to tack anything on me! He may have eaten something deadly outside without knowing it and then only got the effects after he was in my chair.”

“Not cyanide, pal, it works instantly. And it isn’t given away for nothing either. A fellow of that type would have jumped off a subway platform, it’s cheaper. Where would he have the money or drag to buy cyanide? He probably couldn’t even pronounce the name. Now why don’t you

make it easy for yourself and admit that you had an accident?”

Steve’s voice broke. “Because I had nothing to do with it, accidentally or otherwise!”

“So you’re willing to have us think you did it purposely, eh? Keenan!” he called out.

We both went in there, Keenan just a step in back of me to guide me.

“There’s no trace of where he kept it hidden, but it’s all over his drill thick as jam,” Keenan’s teammate reported. He detached the apparatus from the tripod it swung on, carefully wrapped it in tissue paper, and put it in his pocket. He turned to Steve.

“I’m going to book you,” he said. “Come on, you’re coming down to Headquarters with me.”

Steve swayed a little, then got a grip on himself. “Am I under arrest?” he faltered.

“Well,” remarked the detective sarcastically, “this is no invitation to a Park Avenue ball.”

“What about this fellow?” Keenan indicated me. “Bring him along too?”

“He might be able to contribute a little something,” was the reply.

So down to Headquarters we went and I lost sight of Steve as soon as we got there. They kept me waiting around for awhile and then questioned me. But I could tell that I wasn’t being held as an accessory. I suppose my puffed-out cheek was more in my favor than everything else put together. Although why a man suffering from toothache would be less likely to be an accessory to murder than anyone else I fail to see. They didn’t even look to see if it was phony; for all they knew I could have had a wad of cotton stuffed in there.

I told them everything there was to tell (they asked me, you bet!)—not even omitting to mention the cigarette I had given the man when we were both sitting in the waiting

room. It was only after I'd said this that I realized how bad it sounded for me if they cared to look at it in that way. The cyanide could just as easily have been concealed in that cigarette. Luckily they'd already picked up and examined the butt (he hadn't had time to smoke more than half of it) and found it to be okay. Who says the innocent don't run as great a risk as the guilty?

I told them all I could about Steve and, as soon as I was cleared and told I could go home, I embarked on a lengthy plea in his defense, assuring them they were making the biggest mistake of their lives.

"What motive could he possibly have?" I declaimed. "Check up on him, you'll find he has a home in Forest Hills, a car, a walloping practice, goes to all the first nights at the theatre! What did that jobless Third Avenue slob have that he needed? Why I heard him with my own ears tell the guy not to be in a hurry about paying up! Where's your motive? They came from two different worlds!"

All I got was the remark, Why didn't I join the squad and get paid for my trouble, and the suggestion, Why didn't I go home now?

One of them, Keenan, who turned out to be a rather likable sort after all, took me aside (but toward the door) and explained very patiently as to a ten-year-old child: "There's only three possibilities in this case, see? Suicide, accidental poisoning, and poisoning on purpose. Now your own friend himself is the one that has blocked up the first two, not us. We were willing to give him every chance, in the beginning. But no, he insists the guy didn't once lift his hands from under that linen apron to give the stuff to himself—take it out of his pocket and pop it in his mouth, for instance. Standish claims he never even once turned his back on him while he was in the chair, and that the fellow's hands stayed folded in his lap under the bib the whole time. Says he noticed that because everyone else always grabs the arms of the chair and hangs on. So that's out.

“And secondly he swears he has never kept any such stuff around the place as cyanide, in any shape or form, so it couldn’t have gotten on the drill by accident. So that’s out too. What have you got left? Poisoning on purpose—which has a one-word name: murder. That’s all today—and be sure you don’t leave town until after the trial, you’ll be needed on the witness stand.”

But I turned and followed him back inside and started all over again. Finally when I saw that it was no use, I tried to go bail for Steve, but they told me I couldn’t spring him until after he’d been indicted.

I spent the rest of the night with a wet handkerchief pasted against my cheek, doing heavy thinking. Every word Steve and the victim had spoken behind the partition passed before me in review. “Where do you live, Amato? Two-twanny Thirr Avenue, mista.” I’d start in from there.

I took an interpreter down there with me, a fellow on my own office staff who knew a little of everything from Eskimo to Greek. I wasn’t taking any chances. Amato himself had been no Lowell Thomas, I could imagine what his family’s English would be like!

There seemed to be dozens of them; they lived in a cold-water flat on the third floor rear. The head of the clan was Amato’s rather stout wife. I concentrated on her; when a fellow has a toothache he’ll usually tell his wife all about it quicker than his aunts or nieces or nephews.

“Ask her where this Dr. Jones lived that sent him to Standish.”

She didn’t know, Amato hadn’t even told her what the man’s name was. Hadn’t they a bill from the man to show me? (I wanted to prove that Amato had been there.) No, no bill, but that didn’t matter because Amato couldn’t read anyway, and even if he had been able to, there was no money to pay it with.

If he couldn’t read, I persisted, how had he known where to find a dentist?

She shrugged. Maybe he was going by and saw the dentist at work through a window.

I went through the entire family, from first to last, and got nowhere. Amato had done plenty of howling and calling on the saints in the depths of the night, and even kept some of the younger children quiet at times by letting them look at his bad tooth, but as for telling them where, when, or by whom it had been treated, it never occurred to him.

So I was not only no further but I had even lost a good deal of confidence. “Docata Jones” began to look pretty much like a myth. Steve hadn’t known him, either. But the man had said Fifty-ninth Street. With all due respect for the dead, I didn’t think Amato had brains enough to make up even that little out of his head. I’d have to try that angle next, and unaided, since Amato’s family had turned out to be a flop.

I tackled the phone book first, hoping for a short cut. Plenty of Joneses, D.D.S., but no one on 59th. Nor even one on 57th, 58th, or 60th, in case Amato was stupid enough not even to know which street he’d been on. The good old-fashioned way was all that was left. At that, there have been dentists before now who couldn’t afford a telephone.

III

I swallowed a malted milk, tied a double knot in my shoelaces, and started out on foot, westward from the Queensboro Bridge. I went into every lobby, every hallway, every basement; I scanned every sign in every window, every card in every mail box. I consulted every superintendent in every walk-up, every starter in every elevator building, every landlady in every rooming house.

I followed the street west until it became fashionable Central Park South (I hadn't much hope there), then further still as it turned into darkest San Juan Hill, gave a lot of attention to the Vanderbilt Clinic at 10th Avenue, and finally came smack up against the speedway bordering the Hudson, with my feet burning me like blazes. No results. No Jones. It took me all of the first day and most of the second. At 2 p.m. Thursday I was back again at the Bridge (I'd taxied back, don't worry).

I got out and stood on the corner smoking a cigarette. I'd used the wrong method, that was all. I'd been rational about it, Amato had been instinctive. What had his wife said? He was going by and most likely saw some dentist working behind a window and that decided him. I'd been looking for a dentist, he hadn't—until he happened on one. I'd have to put myself in his place to get the right set-up.

I walked back two blocks to 3rd Avenue and started out afresh from that point on. He had lived on 3rd Avenue, so he had probably walked all the way up it looking for work until he got to 59th, and then turned either east or west. West there was a department store on one side, a five-and-ten and a furniture store on the other; they wouldn't interest him. East there were a whole line of mangy little shops and stalls; I turned east. I trudged along; I was Amato now, worrying about where my next half dollar was coming from, not thinking about my tooth at all—at least not just at that moment.

A shadow fell before me on the sidewalk. I looked up. A huge, swaying, papier-mach6 gold tooth was hanging out over the doorway. It was the size of a football at least. Even Amato would have known what it was there for. Maybe he'd gotten a bad twinge just then. The only trouble was—I'd seen it myself yesterday, it was almost the first thing that had caught my eye when I started out. I'd investigated, you may be sure. And the card on the window said "Dr. Carter" as big as life. That was out—or was it? Amato couldn't read;

“Carter” wouldn’t mean any more to him than “Jones.” But then where had he gotten “Jones” from? Familiar as it is, it would have been as foreign to him as his own name was to me.

No use going any further, though. If that gold tooth hadn’t made up Amato’s mind for him, nothing else the whole length of the street could have. I was on the point of going in anyway, just for a quick once over, but a hurried glance at my own appearance decided me not to. Serge business suit, good hat, dusty but well-heeled shoes. Whatever had happened to Amato, if he had gone in there, wasn’t likely to happen to anyone dressed like I was. If I was going to put myself in his place, I ought at least to try to look like him. And there were a few other things, too, still out of focus.

I jumped in a cab and chased down to Headquarters. I didn’t think they’d let me see Steve, but somehow I managed to wangle it out of them. I suppose Keenan had a hand in it. And then too, Steve hadn’t cracked yet, that may have had something to do with it.

“What enemies have you?” I shot out. There wasn’t much time. “None,” he said. “I never harmed anyone in my life.”

“Think hard,” I begged. “You’ve got to help me. Maybe way back, maybe some little thing.”

“Nope,” he insisted cynically, “my life’s been a bed of roses until day before yesterday.” He had a purple eye at the moment and a forty-eight-hour beard.

I turned cynical myself. “Let’s skip it then and look at it the other way around. Who are your best friends—outside of myself?”

He ran over a list of names as long as a timetable. He left out one, though. “And Dave Carter?” I supplied. “Know him?”

He nodded cheerfully. “Sure, but how did you know? We used to be pretty chummy. I haven’t seen him in years, though; we drifted apart. We started out together, both

working in the same office I have now. Then he moved out on me, thought he could do better by himself, I guess."

"And did he?"

"He hit the skids. All the patients kept on coming to me, for some reason, and he just sat there in his spick-and-span office twiddling his thumbs. Inside of six months the overhead was too much for him and here's the payoff: he ended up by having to move into a place ten times worse than the one he'd shared with me. What with one thing and another I lent him quite a bit of money which I never got back."

"And did he turn sour on you?"

"Not at all, that's the funny part of it. Last time I saw him he slapped me on the back and said, 'More power to you, Stevie, you're a better man than I am!"

"In your hat!" I thought skeptically. "When was the last time you saw him?" I asked.

"Years back. As a matter of fact, I clean forgot him until you—" I stood up to go without waiting for him to finish. "Excuse the rush, but I've got things to do."

"Dig me up a good lawyer, will you?" he called after me. "Price is no object. I'm getting sick of hitting these dicks in the fist with my eyes!"

"You don't need a lawyer," I shouted back. "All you need is a little dash of suspicion in your nature. Like me."

I got Keenan to take me in and introduce me to the chief while I was down there—after about an hour or so of pleading. The chief was regular, but a tough nut to crack. Still he must have been in good humor that day. If he reads this, no offense meant, but the cigars he smokes are fierce. I had a proposition to make to him, and two requests. One of them he gave in to almost at once—loving newspapermen the way he did. The other he said he'd think over. As for the proposition itself he said it wasn't so hot, but to go ahead and try it if I felt like it, only not to blame anyone but myself if I got into trouble.

From Headquarters I went straight to a pawnshop on 3rd Avenue. It was long after dark, but they stay open until nine. I bought a suit of clothes for three dollars. The first one the man showed me I handed back to him. “That’s the best I can give you—” he started in.

“I don’t want the best, I want the worst,” I said, much to his surprise. I got it all right.

From there I went to a second one and purchased what had once been an overcoat before the World War. Price, two fifty. The coat and suit were both ragged, patched and faded, but at least the pawnbrokers had kept them brushed off; I fixed that with the help of a barrel of ashes I passed a few doors away. I also traded hats with a panhandler who crossed my path, getting possession of a peculiar shapeless mound he had been wearing on his head. I was doing more than laying down my life for my friend; I was risking dandruff and Lord knows what else for his sake.

I trundled all this stuff home and managed to hide it from my wife in the broom closet. In the morning, though, when she saw me arrayed in it from head to foot she let out a yell and all but sank to the floor. “Now never mind the hysterics,” I reproved. “Papa knows just what he’s doing!”

“If this has anything to do with Steve, you’re a day late,” she told me when she was through giggling. “They’ve dismissed the case against him.” She held out the morning paper to me.

I didn’t bother looking at it; in the first place it was one of the two requests I’d made at Headquarters the night before; in the second place it wasn’t true anyway.

Keenan was waiting for me on the southwest comer of 59th and 2nd as per agreement. Anyone watching us would have thought our behavior peculiar, to say the least. I went up to him and opened my mouth as though I was Joe E. Brown making faces at him. “It’s that tooth up there, that molar on the right side. Take a good look at it.” He did. This was for purposes of evidence. “Got the picture?” He

nodded. “I’m going in now, where that gold tooth is, halfway down the block. Back in half an hour. Wait here for me and keep your fingers crossed.”

This statement wasn’t quite accurate, though. I was sure I was going in where the gold tooth was, but I wasn’t sure I was coming back in half an hour—I wasn’t sure I was coming back at all, any time.

I left him abruptly and went into the office of Dr. Dave Carter. I was cold and scared. The accent bothered me too. I decided a brogue would be the safest. No foreign langi ages for me. Carter was a short, dumpy little man, as good-natured and harmless looking as you’d want. Only his eyes gave him away. Slits they were, little malevolent pig eyes. The eyes had it; they told me I wasn’t wasting my time. The office was a filthy, rundown place. Instead of a partition, the dental chair was right in the room, with a screen around it. There was an odor of stale gas around.

My feet kept begging me to get up and run out of there while I still had the chance. I couldn’t, though; Keenan was waiting on the corner. I wanted to keep his respect.

Carter was standing over me; he didn’t believe in the daily bath, either. “Well, young fellow?” he said sleekly. I pointed sorrowfully at my cheek, which had been more or less inflated for the past three days. The pain had gone out of it long ago, however. Pain and swelling rarely go together, contrary to general belief.

“So I see,” he said, but made no move to do anything about it. “What brings you here to me?” he asked craftily.

“Sure ’tis the ellygant gold tooth ye have out, boss,” I answered shakily. Did that sound Irish enough? I wondered. Evidently it did.

“Irishman, eh?” he told me not very cleverly. “What’s your name?”

“McConnaughy.” I’d purposely picked a tongue-twister, to get the point across I was trying to make.

He bit. “How do you spell it?”

“Sure, I don’t know now,” I smiled wanly. “I nivver in me life learned to spell.” That was the point I was trying to make.

“Can’t read or write, eh?” He seemed pleased rather than disappointed. “Didn’t you ever go to school when you were a kid?”

“I minded the pigs and such,” I croaked forlornly.

He suddenly whipped out a newspaper he’d been holding behind his back and shoved it under my nose. “What d’you think of that?” It was upside down. He was trying to catch me off my guard, hoping I’d give myself away and turn it right side up without thinking. I kept my hands off it. “What do it say?” I queried helplessly.

He tossed it aside. “I guess you can’t read, at that,” he gloated. But the presence of the newspaper meant that he already knew Steve was back in circulation; the item had been in all of them that morning.

He motioned me to the chair. I climbed into it. I was too curious to see what would happen next to be really frightened. Otherwise how could I have sat in it at all? He took a cursory glance into my mouth. Almost an absent-minded glance, as though his thoughts were really elsewhere. “Can you pay me?” he said next, still very absent-minded and not looking at me at all.

“I’ll do my best, sorr. I have no job.”

“Tell you what I’ll do for you,” he said suddenly, his eyes dilating. “I’ll give you temporary relief, and then I’ll send you to someone who’ll finish the job for you. He won’t charge you anything, either. You just tell him Dr. Smith sent you.”

My heart started to go like a triphammer. So I was on the right track after all, was I? He’d picked a different name this time to cover up his traces, that was all. And as for the gold tooth outside the door betraying him, he was counting on something stopping me before I got around to mentioning that. I knew what that something was, too.

He got to work. He pulled open a drawer and I saw a number of fragile clay caps or crowns, hollow inside and thin as tissue paper. They were about the size and shape of thimbles. I could hardly breathe any more. Steve's voice came back to me, indignantly questioning Amato: "Looks like the Boulder Dam, some bricklayer put it in for you?"

He took one of these out and closed the drawer. Then he opened another drawer and took something else out. But this time I couldn't see what it was, because he carefully stood over it with his back to me. He glanced over his shoulder at me to see if I was watching him. I beat him to it and lowered my eyes to my lap. He closed the second drawer. But I knew which one it was; the lower right in a cabinet of six.

He came over to me. "Open," he commanded. My eyes rolled around in their sockets. I still had time to rear up out of the chair, push him back, and snatch the evidence out of his hand. But I wasn't sure yet whether it was evidence or not.

Those caps may have been perfectly legitimate, for all I knew; I was no dentist. So I sat quiet, paralyzed with fear, unable to move.

And the whole thing was over with almost before it had begun. He sprayed a little something on the tooth, waxed it with hot grease, and stuck the cap on over it. No drilling, no dredging, no cleansing whatsoever. "That's all," he said with an evil grin. "But remember, it's only temporary. By tomorrow at the latest you go to this other dentist and he'll finish the job for you."

I saw the point at once. He hadn't cleaned the tooth in the least; in an hour or two it would start aching worse than ever under the fake cap and I'd have to go to the other dentist. The same thing must have happened to Amato. I was in for it now! "Don't chew on that side," he warned me, "until you see him." He didn't want it to happen to me at

home or at some coffee counter, but in Steve's office, in Steve's chair!

Then he gave me the name and place I was to go to. "Standish, 28th and Lexington, second floor." Over and over again. "Will you remember that?" That was all I needed, I had the evidence against him now. But I didn't make a hostile move toward him, instead I stumbled out into the street and swayed toward the corner where Keenan was waiting for me. Let the cops go after him. I had myself to worry about now. I was carrying Death around in my mouth. Any minute, the slightest little jolt—

Keenan had been joined by a second detective. They both came toward me and held me up by the elbows. I managed to get my mouth open, and Keenan looked in. "Get the difference?" I gasped.

"It begins to look like you were right," he muttered.

He phoned the chief at Headquarters and then got me into a taxi with him. The second man was left there to keep an eye on Carter and tail him if he left his office.

"What're you holding your mouth open like that for?" he asked me in the cab.

"A sudden jolt of the taxi might knock my teeth together," I articulated. I had seen how thin those caps were.

We raced down Lexington and got out at Steve's office. Steve had been rushed up there from the detention pen in a police car along with the chief himself and two more detectives. He had to have facilities if he was going to save me from what had happened to Amato.

"He's got the evidence," Keenan informed them as he guided me past the jangling bell. I pointed to my mouth. "In there," I gasped, and my knees buckled up under me.

Steve got me into the chair. Sweat broke out on his face after he'd taken one look at Carter's work, but he tried to reassure me. "All right, all right now, boy," he said soothingly, "You know I won't go back on you, don't you?"

He looked around at them. The chief had his usual rank cigar in his mouth, which had gone out in the excitement. One of the others held a pipe between his clenched teeth.

“Where’s your tobacco pouch?” ordered Steve hoarsely. “Let me have it, I’ll get you a new one.”

The lining was thin rubber. He tore that out, scattered tobacco all over the floor. Then he held it up toward the light and stretched it to see if there were any holes or cracks. Then, with a tiny pair of curved scissors, he cut a small wedge-shaped hole in it. “Now hold your mouth open,” he said to me, “and whatever you do, don’t move!” He lined the inside of my mouth with the rubber, carefully working the tooth Carter had just treated through the hole he had cut, so that it was inside the pouch. The ends of the rubber sack he left protruding through my lips. I felt a little as though I were choking. “Can you breathe?” he said. I batted my eyes to show him he could go ahead.

He thrust wedges into my cheeks, so that I couldn’t close my jaws whether I wanted to or not. Then he came out with a tiny mallet and a little chisel, about the size of a nail. “I may be able to get it out whole,” he explained to the chief. “It’s been in less than half an hour. Drilling is too risky.”

His face, as he bent over me, was white as plaster. I shut my eyes and thought, “Well, here I go—or here I stay!” I felt a number of dull blows on my jawbone. Then suddenly something seemed to crumble and a puff of ice-cold air went way up inside my head. I lay there rigid and—nothing happened.

“Got it!” Steve breathed hotly into my face. He started to work the rubber lining carefully out past my lips and I felt a little sick. When it was clear he passed it over to the detectives without even a look at its contents, and kept his attention focused on me. “Now, watch yourself, don’t move yet!” he commanded nervously. He took a spray and rinsed out the inside of my mouth with water, every comer and crevice of it, about eighteen times. “Don’t swallow,” he kept

warning me. “Keep from swallowing!” Keenan, his chief, and the others had their heads together over the spread-out contents of the little rubber sack, meanwhile.

Steve turned off the water and took the pads away from my gums finally. He sat down with a groan; I sat up with a shudder. “I wouldn’t want to live the past five minutes over again for all the rice in China!” he admitted, mopping his brow. “Maybe I would!” I shivered.

“Packed with cyanide crystals,” the chief said, “enough to kill a horse! Go up there and make the pinch. Two counts, murder and attempted murder.” Two men started for the door.

“Top drawer left for the caps, bottom drawer right for the cy,” I called after them weakly and rather needlessly. They’d find it, all right.

But I was very weary all at once and very much disinterested. I stumbled out of the chair and slouched toward the door, muttering something about going home and resting up. Steve pulled himself together and motioned me back again.

“Don’t forget the nerve is still exposed in that tooth of yours. I’ll plug it for you right, this time.” I sat down again, too limp to resist. He attached a new drill to the pulley and started it whirring. As he brought it toward me I couldn’t help edging away from it. “Can you beat it?” He turned to Keenan, who had stayed behind to watch, and shook his head in hopeless amazement. “Takes his life in his hands for a friend, but when it comes to a little everyday drilling he can’t face it!”

WALLS THAT HEAR YOU

I

When the policeman came to the door and asked if Eddie Mason lived there I knew right away something had happened to him. They always break it to you that way.

"Yeah. I'm his brother."

"Better come down and see him," he said. I got my hat and went with him.

Eddie was in the emergency ward of the Mount Eden Hospital, he told me. He'd been found lying on his back on a lonely stretch of road out toward White Plains, slowly bleeding away.

"What is it, hit and run?" I cried, grabbing him by the sleeve.

He didn't want to tell me at first. Then, just before we got there he said, "Well, you may sis well know now as later, I guess." Eddie's tongue had been tom out by the roots and all ten of his fingers had been cut off at the base, leaving just the stumps of both hands.

I went all weak at the pit of my stomach when I heard it. And then when I got the full implication of the thing, it was even worse. That poor kid. Just turned twenty. Yesterday with his life all before him. And now he'd never be able to speak another word as long as he lived, never be able to

feed himself or dress himself or earn a decent living after this.

"He'd have been better off dead!" I groaned. "What did it?" I kept saying. "What was it?"

"I don't know," said the cop sadly. "I'm just a sidewalk-flattener with the pleasant job of breaking these things to people."

Eddie hadn't come to yet, so just standing there looking at him didn't do much good. It broke my heart, though. One of the doctors gave me a good stiff drink of whiskey and tried to be encouraging.

"He'll pull through," he said. "No doubt about it. We've made a preliminary examination, and I don't even think we'll have to resort to blood transfusion. What saved him more than anything else were the makeshift bandages that were found on him. If it hadn't been for them he'd have been a goner long before he was picked up."

This went over my head at the time. I didn't understand. I thought he meant their own bandages, the hospital's.

A couple of detectives had already been assigned to the case from the moment the cop who had found him had phoned in his report. Why wouldn't they be? No car has ever yet been designed so that it can rip the tongue out of a man's mouth without leaving a scratch on the rest of his face. Or deposit him neatly on the side of the road, with his feet close together and his hat resting on his stomach as if he were dozing. There wasn't a bruise on him except the mutilations. They were waiting in the other room to talk to me when I came out of the ward, looking like a ghost.

"You his brother?"

"Yes, damn it!" I burst out. "And all I want is to get my hands on whoever did this to him!"

"Funny," said a dick dryly, "but so do we."

I didn't like him much after that. Sarcasm is out of place when a man has just been brought face to face with personal tragedy.

First they told me what they already knew about Eddie, then they had me fill in the rest for them. There wasn't very much of either. I mean that had any bearing on this.

"He runs the elevator at the Hotel Lyons, works the late shift alone, from midnight to six in the morning," I explained.

"We checked down there already. He never showed up at all last night; they had to use the night watchman as a substitute on the car. What time did he leave your house to go to work last night?"

"Same time as always. Quarter to twelve."

"That don't give him much time, does it?" remarked my pet aversion irrelevantly.

My nerves were raw and I felt like snapping, "That's no reason why he should be half tom to pieces," but instead I said, "He only has two express stops to go, the hotel's on Seventy-second."

"How do you know he rode?"

"I can give you a lead on that," I offered. "The station agent down there knows him—by sight, anyway. Kelsey's his name. Ask him if he saw him come up last night at the usual time or not." He went out to find a phone. "He don't know his name," I called after him warningly, "so just say the young fellow from the Hotel Lyons he let pass through one time when he'd lost all his change through a hole in his pocket."

"Not bad," remarked his mate admiringly while we were waiting. "You've got a good head, Mason. What do you do?"

"Master electrician. I've got my own store on upper Amsterdam." The other one came back and said, "I had to wake him up at home, but he knew who I meant right away. Yeah, your brother came through the turnstile about five of twelve. Says he flipped his hand up and said, 'Hello, you bird in a gilded cage.' "

"Well," I said, and my voice broke, "then it's a cinch he still had—his voice and his—fingers when he got out of the

train. And it's another cinch it didn't happen to him between the station and the hotel. It's right on the comer, that hotel is, and it's one of the busiest comers on Broadway. Looks like the management gave you a bum steer and he did go to work after all."

"No, that was on the up-and-up. They were even sore about it at first, until we told them he was in the hospital."

"What were those sandwiches doing in his pocket?" the other one asked. "Looks like he stopped off somewhere first to buy food. They were still on him when he was found, one in each pocket."

"No, my wife fixed them for him to take with him and eat on the job," I said. "She did that every night." I looked the other way so they wouldn't see my eyes get cloudy. "I saw him shove them in his coat before he left the house. Now they'll be feeding him through a tube, most likely."

"Any way you look at it," said the first one, "it narrows down to about five minutes in time and twenty or thirty yards in distance. He was seen leaving the station. He never got to the hotel. With lights all around as bright as day. Why, he didn't even have to go all the way across the street—the station's on an island in the middle!"

"What's the good of all that?" said the one I didn't like. "We won't get anywhere until we find out from him himself. He knows better than anyone else what happened after he came out of the station. He's the only one can tell us; we'll just have to sit tight until he's able to—"

"Tell!" I exclaimed bitterly. "How is he going to tell anybody anything after this, with no voice left and without being able to hold a pencil to paper!"

"There are ways," he said. He flagged a nurse who had just stepped out of the ward. "When are you people going to let us at young Mason?"

"Right now, if you want to finish the job," she snapped back at him. "He's out of his head from shock and loss of blood. But go right in if you want to make it a murder case;

maybe you'd rather handle one of those. However, if you'll hold your horses and give us a chance to pull him through, maybe you can see him by tomorrow or the day after."

I saw the other one, Kane, grin behind his hand. She certainly had character, that person, whoever she was. He turned back to me again after that. "I don't want to make you feel bad, Mason, but we've had cases like this before. And the answer is always pretty much the same. Your brother probably got in with the wrong crowd and knew a little more than he should've. Who'd he run around with, any idea?"

"No one, good, bad or indifferent. If it's gangs you're thinking of you can drop that angle right now. He wasn't that kind; he didn't have the time. Know what that kid was doing? Working nights at the hotel, sleeping mornings, helping me out in the shop afternoons, and going to night school three times a week in the bargain! The couple of evenings he had left over he usually took his girl to the movies. He was no slouch, he wanted to get somewhere. And now look at him!" I turned away. "If they'd only broken his leg, or knocked out his teeth, or anything—anything but what they did do! I'm going home and drink myself to sleep, I can't stand thinking about it any more." Kane gave me a slap on the back in silent sympathy. Pain-in-the-face said, "We'll want you on hand tomorrow when we try to question him; you might be some help."

II

I was with him long before they were, from the minute they'd let me in until they told us we all had to go. About all the poor kid could talk with were his eyes, and he worked

them overtime. They seemed to burn out at me sometimes, and I figured I understood what he meant.

"We'll straighten it out, Eddie," I promised him grimly. "We'll get even on them—whoever they are. We'll see that they get what's coming to them!"

He nodded his head like wild and his eyes got wet, and the nurse gave me a dirty look for working him up.

Kane and his partner were only allowed fifteen minutes with him that first day, which was a hell of a long time at that, considering that the amputations had taken place less than forty-eight hours before. The questioning fell completely flat, just as I had expected it to. He was as completely shut off from all of us as though there was a wall built around him. The only kind of questions he could answer were those that took "yes" or "no" for an answer—by shaking his head up and down or from side to side—and that limited them to about one out of every ten that they wanted to put to him. I saw red when I saw how helpless he was. It was later that same afternoon that I dug up that permit I'd had ever since two years before when my shop was held up, and went out and bought a revolver with it. I didn't know what I was going to do with it, but I knew what I wanted to do with it—given the right person!

But to go back: "Did you see who did it to you?"

No, he shook.

"Well, have you any idea who it could be?"

No again.

"Been in any trouble with anyone?"

No.

"Well, where did it happen to you?"

He couldn't answer that, naturally, so they had to shape it up for him. But it wouldn't go over, no matter how they put it. He kept shrugging his shoulders, as if to say he didn't know himself. His face got all white with the effort he was making to express himself and when the nurse had examined him and found out that bleeding had set in again

inside his mouth, she lost her temper and told us to get out and please question somebody else if we had to ask questions. Eddie was in a faint on the pillows when she closed the door after us. That was when I went out and bought the gun, swearing under my breath.

Kane and Frozen-face showed up the next day with a couple of those charts that opticians use for testing the eyes, with capital letters all scrambled up, big at the top and getting smaller all the way down. Instead of questioning him directly any more, they had him spell out what he wanted to say letter by letter, Deadpan pointing them out on the chart and Kane jotting them down on a piece of paper—providing Eddie nodded yes—until he had complete words and sentences made up out of them. But it was as slow and tedious as teaching a cross-eyed mental defective the alphabet. The first two or three letters sometimes gave a clue to what word he had in mind: for instance, H, O meant that "hotel" was coming and they could save time and skip the T, E, L part. But others weren't as easy as all that to figure out, and then every once in awhile they would get one all wrong and have to go back and start it over.

Well, when they were all through—and it took three or four full half-hour sessions—they were practically back where they had started from. Eddie, it turned out, was as much in the dark as the rest of us were. He had been unconscious the whole time, from a minute after leaving the subway station that night until he came to in the hospital bed where he was now, the next morning.

This was his story. Just as he got past Kelsey's ticket window in the subway station the green lights flashed on and he had to stand there waiting before he could get across to the other side of the halfroadway. He wasn't a heavy smoker, but as he was standing there waiting for the traffic to let up he absent-mindedly lit a cigarette. Then, when he got over and was ready to go in the hotel, he

noticed what he'd done. The management was very strict about that; they didn't allow the employees to smoke, not even in the locker-room, on pain of dismissal. Being an economical kid he hated to throw it away right after he'd begun it. The big sidewalk clock that stood out in front of the hotel said seven to twelve—the clock must have been a couple of minutes slow—so he decided to take a turn around the block and finish the cigarette before he went in.

And another thing, he admitted—there was a laugh and a tear in this if you've ever been twenty—he didn't want to "spoil" the fellow he was relieving for the night by getting in too much ahead of time. So up the side-street he turned, killing time while he finished his cigarette.

It was dark and gloomy, after the glare of Broadway, and there wasn't anyone on it at that hour. But from one end to the other of it there was a long, unbroken line of cars parked up against the sidewalk. They seemed to be empty; in any case he didn't pay any attention to them. Halfway up the block he stopped for a moment to throw the cigarette away, and as he did so something soft was thrown up against his face from behind. It was like a hand holding a big, square folded handkerchief.

There hadn't been a sound behind him, not even a single footfall. It was done so easily, gently almost, that for a moment he wasn't even frightened but thought that it must be something like a rag or piece of goods that had fallen out of some window up above and blown up against his face. Then when he tried to raise his hand and brush it away, he felt something holding it. And he started to feel lazy and tired all over.

Then he felt himself being drawn backwards, like a swimmer caught in a current, but when he tried to pull away and fight off whatever it was that was happening to him, it was too late. Instead of being able to get any air in his lungs, all he kept breathing was something sweet and sickly, like suffocating flowers, and after that he didn't know

any more. When he woke up he was in agony in the hospital.

Kane got a little vial of chloroform from the nurse and wet the stopper and held it near Eddie's face.

"Was that it? Was that what it smelt like?"

He got wild right away and tried to back his head away and nodded yes like a house afire and made growling sounds deep in his throat that went through me like a knife.

III

The three of us went outside to talk it over.

"Mistaken identity," decided Kane. "Whoever was waiting in that car expected somebody else to go by and thought they had him when they jumped on the kid. That's all I can make of it. Either they never found out their mistake until it was too late, or else they did but went ahead and did it anyway, afraid he'd give way on them. It's not fool-proof, but it's the best I can do."

"It's as full of holes as a Swiss cheese," his partner told him disgustedly. "It's like I told you before. The kid knows and he's not telling. He talked too much, got a little present for it from somebody, and now he's learned his lesson and isn't making the same mistake twice." He took the penciled sheets from Kane and shuffled through them. "It don't hang together. Chloroform my eye! Husky twenty-year-olds don't stand still waiting to go bye-bye like that. It don't get them that quick; their wind's too good. He was politely invited to step into that car by someone he knew and he didn't dare refuse. What they did after proves it. Why the tongue and the fingers? For talking. You can't get around that."

I had stood all of that I could.

“Listen,” I flamed, “are you on a job to get whoever did it, or are you on a job to stand up for ’em and knock my brother?”

“Watch yourself,” he said. “I don’t like that.”

Kane came between us and gave me the wink with one eye. I suppose he gave his partner the wink with the other eye at the same time; peacemakers usually do.

Poison-mouth would have the last word, though. “If your brother would open up and give us a tip or two instead of holding out, we’d probably have the guy we want by this time.”

“And what if he’d been a stiff and couldn’t tip you off?” I squelched him. “Does that mean the guy would beat the rap altogether?”

It was probably this little set-to more than anything else that first put the idea in my mind of working on my own hook on Eddie’s behalf. Kane’s partner had him down for a gangster more or less. I knew that he wasn’t. I wanted to get even for him, more than I ever wanted anything before in my life.

Let them tackle it in their own way! I’d do a little work on the side. I didn’t have any idea of what I was going to do—then or for some time afterwards. All I knew was whoever did that to Eddie wasn’t going to get away with it—not if it took me the rest of my life to catch up with them.

They had left the charts behind while they were out rounding up small-time racketeers and poolroom-lizards that had never heard of Eddie, and I worked over them with him daily. We got so that we could handle them much faster than in the beginning.

And then one day, out of all the dozens, the hundreds of questions I kept throwing at him, the right one popped out. The minute I asked it, even before he gave me the answer, I knew I had hit something. I wondered why I hadn’t asked it long ago.

He had worked at another hotel called the San Pablo before going to the Lyons. But this had been quite awhile before.

“None of the guests from there ever turned up later at the Lyons while you were there, did they?” I asked.

Yes, one did, he spelled back. His name was Dr. Avalon. He’d left the San Pablo before Eddie himself did, and then when Eddie got the job at the Lyons he found he’d moved there ahead of him, that was all.

Maybe this was just a coincidence, but all the same I kept digging at it.

“Did he recognize you?”

He nodded.

“What did he say when he first saw you?”

He’d smiled jovially at Eddie and said, “Young fellow, are you following me around?” Then he’d given him a five-dollar tip.

“Pretty big tip, wasn’t it?”

Yes, but then at the San Pablo, Eddie recalled, he had once given him a ten-dollar one. This was getting interesting.

“Whew!” I said. “What for?”

Eddie smiled a little.

Something about a woman, as I might know.

“Better tell me about it,” I urged.

One night about one o’clock, his message ran, a young woman who acted kind of nervous had got on the car and asked Eddie which floor Dr. Avalon was on. So he took her to the door and showed her. But it was a long hallway and before he could get back to the cage again, Avalon had let her in and he heard him say in a loud voice: “You shouldn’t have come here! I don’t see anybody here! You should have seen me in my office tomorrow.”

And she had answered, “But I had to see you!”

Well, Eddie had thought it was the usual thing, some kind of a love affair going on. But about half an hour later he was

called back to the floor and when he got up there he found Avalon standing waiting for him, all excited, his face running with sweat, and he shoved a piece of paper with something written on it at him and told him to run out and find an all-night drugstore and bring back some medicine as quickly as he could.

"Hurry! Hurry!" he said. "Every minute counts!"

Eddie did, and when he got back with it he knocked on the door, but not very loudly because he didn't want to wake up people in the other rooms. The doctor must have been too excited to pay any attention because he didn't come to the door right away, so Eddie tried the knob, found that it had been left open, and walked in. He saw the doctor's visitor stretched out on a table with a very white light shining down on her and a sheet or something over her. Then the doctor came rushing over at him and for a minute he thought he was going to kill him, he looked so terrible.

"Get out of here, you!" he yelled at him. "What do you mean by coming in here?" and practically threw him out of the door.

About an hour later the young lady and the doctor showed up together and rode down in Eddie's car as cool and collected as if nothing had happened. The doctor showed her to a taxi at the door, and it was when he came in and rode upstairs again that he gave Eddie the ten dollars, saying he was sorry he had lost his head like that, but she had had a very bad heart attack and it was lucky he had pulled her through.

"Did he ask you not to say anything?"

Eddie nodded, and again smiled a little sheepishly. But I knew he didn't get the point at all. He thought it was just some love affair that the doctor wanted kept quiet. I knew better. The man was a shady doctor and ran the risk of imprisonment day and night.

"Then what happened?"

Eddie hadn’t opened his mouth at all to anyone, but not long after some men had come around and stopped at the desk and asked questions about the doctor, men wearing iron hats and chewing cigars in the corner of their mouths, and when they learned he wasn’t in they said they’d come back next day. But before they did the doctor had left, bag and baggage. Eddie said he never saw anyone leave in such a hurry. It was at five thirty in the morning and Eddie was still on duty.

“Did he say anything to you?”

No, he had just looked at him kind of funny, and Eddie hadn’t known what to make of it.

I did, though. I was beginning to see things clearer and clearer every moment. I was beginning to have a little trouble with my breathing, it kept coming faster all the time.

“Time’s up,” said the nurse from the doorway.

“Not yet it isn’t,” I told her. “I’m not going to have to do any questioning after today, so back out while I take a couple minutes more to wind it all up.” I turned to Eddie. “And when you ran into him again at the Lyons he said ‘Young fellow, are you following me around?’, did he? And smiled at you, did he? And gave you a tip for no reason at all, did he?”

Eddie nodded three times.

I clenched my teeth tight. I had everything I needed, knew all I wanted to, and yet—I couldn’t have made the slimmest charge stick and I knew it; I didn’t have any evidence. A ten-dollar tip, a hasty departure, an everyday wisecrack like “Are you following me around?”—you can’t bring charges against anyone on the strength of those alone.

“What’s he like?” I asked.

Short and dumpy, came the answer. He wore a black beard, not the bushy kind, but curly and trimmed close to his face.

“Did he always have it?”

Not at the San Pablo, no. He’d only had a mustache there, but he’d grown the beard after he moved to the Lyons.

Just in case, I thought, the cigar-chewing gentlemen with the iron hats showed up again. That wasn’t very clever. Something told me that this Dr. Avalon was not quite right in his head—which made the whole thing all the more gruesome. Frozen-face’s gangsters were angels of light and sweetness compared to a maniac like this.

“Did he ever act a little strangely, I mean different from other people, as far as you could notice?”

No, except that he seemed absent-minded and used to smile a lot about nothing at all.

I only asked Eddie one more question. “What was his room number at the Lyons?”

He didn’t know for sure, but he had always taken him up to the eighth floor.

I got up to go.

“I won’t be in to see you tomorrow,” I told him casually. “I’m going to drop by the hotel and collect the half week’s wages they still owe you.” But there was a far bigger debt than that I was going to collect for him. “In case I don’t get around for the next few days, I’ll have the wife stay with you to keep you company. Not a tumble to her or to those two flatfeet, either, the next time they come around on one of their semi-annual visits.”

I think he knew. He just looked at me and narrowed his eyes down, and we shook hands hard.

“Don’t worry, Eddie, everything’s under control—now.”

IV

When I got back to my own house I put the revolver in an empty suitcase and carried it out with me. From there I stopped off at the shop and put in several lengths of copper wire and an awl and a screwdriver and some metal disks and a little black soundbox with some batteries inside it, something on the order of a telephone baseboard. I also put in several other little tools and gadgets you'd have to be a master electrician to know anything about. I told my assistant to keep things running, that I was going out to wire a concert hall, and I rode down to the Hotel Lyons and checked in. I signed the register "T. Mallory, Buffalo," and told them I was very particular about where I slept. The seventh floor wasn't quite high enough, and the ninth floor was just a little too high. How about something on the eighth? So they gave me 802.1 didn't even know if he was still in the hotel at all, but it was taking too much of a chance to ask; he might have gotten wind of it. So I paid for three days in advance and said: "Don't be surprised if I ask you to change me in a day or two. I'm a very hard customer to please." Which was perfectly all right with them, they told me.

When I got up to the room I just put the valise down without unpacking it and killed a little time, and then I went downstairs with a newspaper in my pocket and grabbed a chair in the lobby that faced the entrance and sat there from then on. From six until eleven I sat there like that with the paper spread out in front of my face. I never turned a page of it because that would have covered over the two little eye-holes I'd made in it with the point of a pencil. At eleven-thirty they started to put the lights out around me and I couldn't stay there any longer without attracting attention. So I got up and went up to my room. He'd never shown up. For all I knew he'd beat it right after—what he did to Eddie; maybe he wasn't even living in the building any more. I had to find out and find out quick, otherwise I

was just wasting my time. But how, without asking openly? And I couldn't do that, it would give me away.

In the morning I thought of a way, and it worked. I remembered a song of years back that strangely enough had the same name as the man I was tracking down—Avalon. When the chambermaid came in to clean up the room I got busy and started singing it for all I was worth. I didn't know the words and I didn't know the music, so I faked it, but I put in plenty of Avalon. She was a friendly old soul and stood there grinning at me.

"Like it?" I said.

"What's it supposed to be?" she asked.

"It's called Avalon," I said. "Isn't that a funny name for a song?"

"It is," she admitted. "We got a doctor in this hotel by the same name."

I laughed as though I didn't believe her.

"What room is he in?" I asked skeptically.

"815," she said. "He's a permanent, that's how I know his name." I went down to the desk and said: "I didn't sleep a wink last night; you've got to give me something else."

The clerk unfolded a floor-plan and we began to consult it together. 815, I saw at a glance, was a suite of two-rooms-and-a-bath, at the end of the hallway. It sealed it up like the cross-bar of a T. All the others were singles, lying on each side of the hallway; only two of them, therefore, adjoined it.

I pointed to one. "That's a nice layout. 814. How about that?" They had someone in there.

"Or this?" I put my finger on 813.

No good either.

"What's it worth to you to put me in one of those two rooms?" I said abruptly. "I'll double the rate if you switch me in and move the other tenant elsewhere."

He gave me a funny look, as if to say, "What're you up to?" but I didn't care.

“I’m a crank,” I said. “At home I sleep on three mattresses.” I handed him a cigar wrapped in a five-spot and half an hour later I was in 814 and had the door locked.

I spent the next half hour after that sounding out the wall, the one between me and him, with my knuckles and my eardrum. I had to go easy, because I didn’t know whether he was in the room or not at the time and I didn’t want to arouse his suspicions.

Just when I was wondering whether I should take a chance or not and go ahead, I got a break. The telephone on the other side of the wall, his telephone, started to ring. All that came through to where I was was a faint, faraway tinkle. It kept on for awhile and then it quit of its own accord. But it told me two things that I wanted to know very badly. It told me he wasn’t there to answer it, and it gave me a very good idea of just how thick the wall was. It was too thick to hear anything through, it needed fixing. I opened my suitcase, got out my tools, and got busy drilling and boring. I kept my ears open the whole time because I knew I’d have to quit the minute I heard him open his door and come in. But he never did. He must have been out for the day.

I finished a little before four in the afternoon. Finished on my side of the wall, anyway. I had the tiny hole bored all the way through, the wiring strung through and the soundbox screwed in behind a radiator where it wasn’t noticeable. I swept up all the little specks of plaster in my handkerchief and dropped them out the window. You couldn’t notice anything unless you looked very closely. But I had to get in on the other side, his side of the wall, and hook up the little disk, the “mike,” before it would work. Without that it was dead, no good at all.

The set-up, I had better explain, was not a dictaphone. It didn’t record anything, all it did was amplify the sounds it picked up in his room and bring them through into mine, the way a loudspeaker would. In other words, it was no

good as evidence without a witness. But to hell with witnesses and all legal red tape! I was out to pay him back for Eddie and I figured he'd be too clever for me if it came to an open arraignment in a criminal court. I didn't have anything on him that a smart enough lawyer couldn't have blown away like a bunch of soap-bubbles, and yet I could have sworn on a stack of Bibles that he was the guy I was looking for.

The next step was to get in there. I examined the outside of my window, which faced the same way as his, but that was no good. Neither of them had a fire-escape or even a ledge to cross over by. It was also pretty late in the afternoon by now and he might be coming in any minute. Much as I hated to waste another night, I figured I would have to put it off until the morning. Of course, I was taking a chance on his noticing any small grains of mortar or plaster that might have fallen to the floor on his side. But that couldn't be helped. It wasn't very likely anyway, I consoled myself. It was one of those thousand-to-one shots that life is full of.

I didn't undress at all that night or go to bed. I kept pacing back and forth on the carpet, stopping every few minutes to listen at the door and at the wall. There wasn't a sound the whole night through. Nobody came and nobody went. 815 might have been vacant for all the signs of life it gave.

In the morning the same chambermaid as before came to make the room up. I mussed up the bed just before she came in so it looked as if it had been slept in. When she was through she went into 815 and left the door ajar after her. House-regulations, I suppose. It was a two-room suite, remember.

I gave her about five minutes to get through with one of the rooms—either one, it didn't matter—and then I stole out of my room, closed the door after me, and edged up to the door of 815 until I could look in. If anyone coming along the

corridor had seen me I was going to pretend she had forgotten to leave towels in my room and I was looking for her. She was in the living room. It was even easier than I had expected, because she was running a baby vacuum-cleaner across the floor and the buzz it made drowned out my footsteps.

I waited until she had her back to me and then I gave a quick jump in through the door and past her line of vision. The bed in the bedroom was made up, so I knew she was through in there and wouldn't come back again. I ducked down behind a big stuffed chair and waited. I had the copper disk, the rubber mat it went on, and the tools I needed in the side pocket of my coat.

I began to get cramped squatting down on my heels, but after awhile she got through and went out. I waited another minute or two after that, and then I got up, slipped into the living room and got to work. One good thing, there wasn't much noise to this part of the job, I had done all the drilling and pecking from my side. If he came in and caught me at it I was going to pretend I was the hotel electrician and had been ordered to put in a new outlet or something. The trouble was I wasn't dressed for the part, and being a permanent in the hotel he might know the real electrician by sight. It occurred to me, now that it was too late, that I should have had the revolver with me instead of leaving it behind in my own room like a fool.

But I was through in no time at all. All I had to do was get hold of the ends of the wire, draw them the rest of the way through the hole, hook them onto the disk, and screw the disk onto the baseboard of the wall. It was no bigger than a coffee saucer, still it was coppery and bright. But I fixed that by shifting a chair over in front of it. In five minutes I was through. It was still dead, but all it needed now was to be grounded on one of the light fixtures in my own room. I let myself out, went back there, and did it. Now I was all set.

V

I went out and got some food, and then when I was through eating I did a funny thing. I went into a butcher shop to buy some more. But I knew what I was doing.

"I want a lamb's tongue," I told him. "Look in your icebox and bring me out the smallest one you've got."

When he did it was still too big.

"Cut it down," I said. "Just the tip and not much more."

He looked at me as though I was crazy, but he went ahead and did it. Then he took a nice clean piece of waxpaper and started wrapping it up.

"No, not that," I told him. "Find a piece with a lot of blood on it, all smeary, and wrap it in that. Then put a clean piece around the outside of it."

I took it back with me in my pocket, and when I got up to my room I wrote "Dr. Avalon" in pencil on the outside of it. Then I put it down outside his door, as if a delivery boy had left it there, and went back into my room and waited.

Now I was going to know for sure. If he had nothing on his conscience and came home and found that there, he wouldn't think anything of it—he'd think it was either a practical joke or that somebody else's order had been left at his door by mistake. But if he had a guilty conscience this was going to catch him off his guard and make him give himself away; he wouldn't be able to help it. It wouldn't have been human not to—even if it was only for a minute or two. And if there was anyone else in on it with him—and I had a hunch there was—the first thing he'd think of would be to turn to them for help and advice in his panic and terror. So I waited, stretched out on my bed, with the revolver in my pocket and my head close to the wall apparatus.

He came in around six. I heard his door open and then close again, and I jumped off the bed and took a peek

through my own door. The package was gone, he'd taken it in with him. I went back and listened in. I could hear the paper crackling while he unwrapped it as clearly as if it had been in my own room. Then there was a gasp—the sound a man suffering from asthma makes trying to get his breath back. Then, plop! He had dropped it in his fright. The wiring was working without a hitch; I wasn't missing a thing.

After that I heard the clink of a glass. He was pouring himself a drink. It clinked again right after that, and then I heard him give sort of a moan. That was a dead giveaway; a man doesn't take two drinks to keep his courage up just because the butcher has left the wrong order at his door. He'd done that to my brother all right, he and nobody else. More rage and hate went through me than I ever thought I had in me. I could feel my lower jaw quivering as if I was a big dog getting ready to take a bite out of somebody. I had to hang on to the sides of the bed to stay where I was a little longer.

Then I heard his voice for the first time. The wiring played it up louder than it really was, like a projection machine. It sounded all hollow and choked. He was asking for a number at the phone. Regency, four-two-eight-one. I whipped a pencil out and scrawled it on my wall.

"Hello," he said huskily. "This is Avalon. Can you hear me? I don't want to talk very loud." His voice dropped to a mumble, but the wiring didn't let me down, it came in at ordinary conversational pitch and I could still follow it. "Somebody's on to us, and we better take a powder out while we still have the chance. I thought I'd let you know, that's all." Then he said, "No, no, no, not that at all. If that's all it was I could get around that with one hand tied behind my back. It's that other thing. You know, the night three of us went for an airing—and two of us came back. Don't ask me how I know! I can't tell you over this phone, there's someone at the switchboard downstairs. You hang up," he said, "and stand by. I'll call you right back. I'll use the direct

wire from the cigar store downstairs, just to be on the safe side."

He hung up and I heard him come out and go down the hallway past my door. He sounded in a hurry.

I didn't waste any time. I grabbed my own phone and got Headquarters. "Put Kane on quick, or that other guy working with him. Never mind, you'll do, whoever you are! It's on the Mason case and it's only good for five minutes, it's got to be worked fast. Trace Regency four-two-eight-one and get whoever you find at the other end; he's on the line right now getting a call. Get him first and then look up the cases afterwards if you have to. It opened May fifteenth. Never mind who I am or where I am; I'm too busy, got no time to tell you now." I hung up, opened the door, and went out into the hall.

I was going to wait for him outside his own door and corner him when he came back, but when I looked I saw that he'd forgotten to close it in his hurry. It stood open on a crack. So I pushed it open and went in, hoping I might find something in the way of evidence to lay my hands on before he had a chance to do away with it. I closed the door after me, so that he wouldn't notice anything from the other end of the hall and be able to turn back in time.

The place was just about as I remembered it from the last time I'd been in it. That was only the afternoon before, but it already seemed like a year ago. The liquor he'd braced himself with was standing in a decanter on the table. The bloody parcel from the butcher was lying on the carpet where he'd dropped it. There was a doctor's kit on the seat of a chair, with a lot of gleaming, sharp-edged little instruments in it. I figured he'd used one of these on Eddie, and all my rage came back. I heard him fitting his key into the outside door, and I jumped back into the bathroom and got behind the shower curtain. I wanted to see what he'd do first, before I nabbed him.

What gave me time enough to get out of sight was that he was so excited it took him nearly a whole minute to get his key fitted into the keyhole straight enough to get the door open. The bathroom door had a mirror on the outside of it, and I saw his face in that as he went by. It was evil, repulsive; you could tell by his face that his reason was slowly crumbling. He had his mouth open as if he was panting for air. The black beard, short as it was, made him look a little bit like an ape standing on its hind legs. He kept going back and forth, carrying clothes out of the closet. He was getting ready to make another get-away, like that time at the San Pablo. But this time it wasn't going to work.

I waited until I heard the latches on his suitcases click shut, and then I stepped softly over the rim of the tub and edged my way to the bathroom door. I got the gun out, flicked open the safety clip and held it in my hand. Then I lounged around the angle of the doorway into the living room, like a lazy corner loafer. He didn't see me at first. The valises were standing in the middle of the room ready to move out, and he had gone over to the window and was standing looking anxiously out with his back to me. Waiting for his accomplice to stop by with a car and get him, I suppose.

I was halfway across the room now.

"You've got a visitor, Dr. Avalon," I said grimly. "Turn around and say hello to Eddie Mason's brother."

I was right in back of him by that time. He twisted around as suddenly as when you crack a whip, and when he saw me his eyes got big. I was holding the gun pressed close up against my side, muzzle trained on him. He saw that too. His face turned gray and he made a strangling sound in his throat, too frightened even to yell. He took a deep breath and I could tell that he was trying to get a grip on himself and pull himself together. Finally he managed to get his voice back to work again. "Who are you? Who's Eddie Mason? I never—" Without taking my eyes off him I gave

the bloody package on the floor a shove forward with my foot. “Now do you know why I’m here?” He cringed and gibbered at me, more like an ape than ever. “I didn’t know what I was doing! I—I didn’t mean to go that far, something got the better of me. I just meant to frighten him.”

“Why I don’t let fly and put these six in you is more than I can understand,” I growled. “That’s what I came here for, and the quicker it’s over the better!”

“I didn’t kill him, though!” he protested. “I didn’t take his life away! You can’t do this to me—”

“Then you admit you did it, don’t you? That’s no news to me—but we’re not going to keep it a secret between you and me and Regency four-two-eight-one. Get a piece of paper and write down what I tell you to—and then after you’ve signed it, we’ll see. I’m giving you more of a break than you deserve; you ought to be stepped on like a toad and squashed!”

“Yes, yes, anything—I’ll do anything you say,” he murmured. He was drooling with relief. He gestured vaguely to the back of me. “There’s a pen and paper—on that desk right behind you, just hand them to me—”

I should have remembered that there wasn’t any; I’d come by there only a moment ago. I should have remembered there was a streak of insanity in him, and that always makes for greater cleverness when they’re cornered than a normal person shows. But he caught me off my guard, and I half-turned to reach behind me.

Instantly there was a blinding flash of light and something broke all over my head and shoulders. The decanter, I suppose, that had been standing on the table alongside of us. But he must have had it ready in his hand for several moments past without my realizing it, to be able to bring it down so quickly. And at the same time he gripped me by the wrist so suddenly with his other hand, and wrenched it around so violently, that there wasn’t even time to flex the trigger finger, and the gun went spinning loosely

out of my hand as though I had been twirling it around on one finger.

The last thing I was conscious of was a dull thud somewhere across the room as it landed harmlessly on the carpet. I went out like a light, with whiskey, or maybe it was blood, streaming down into my ears and eyes.

VI

When my head cleared and I came to, I was no longer flat on the floor, but upright in a chair. Each ankle was tied to a leg of it by long strips torn from a shirt or piece of underwear. I was sitting on my own hands and they were fastened to the seat of it in some ingenious way—I think by another long strip running around the whole chair and passing under my body.

The position was a torture to my bent wrists, especially the one he had sprained. What I mistook at first for a fuzzy taste in my mouth turned out to be a gag loosely stuffed into it. I could see the gun out of the comer of my eye, still lying where it had fallen. I was thankful for a minute that he hadn't picked it up and turned it on me. Then, as I concentrated my full attention on him, something told me I was wrong about that—it might have been better for me if he had.

He had his back to me and I didn't know what he was doing at first. Or rather, my mind didn't know yet, but my instincts seemed to, beforehand. The way animals know things. The short hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and my heart was icy. My breath was coming like a bellows. He had a bright white light on, some kind of an adjustable doctor's lamp, like the time Eddie had caught sight of him working over that woman. That didn't frighten me. He kept

making little clinking sounds, as if he was picking up and putting down metal instruments one by one. That didn't frighten me much either, although I began to have an inkling of what was up.

He wouldn't dare, I told myself. He wouldn't be crazy enough to! I wasn't Eddie, shanghaied off in the middle of the night without even a look at who had done it. We were in a hotel with hundreds of people all around us. We were in rooms he had been known to occupy for months past. Anything that happened here would point right at him. If he left me here his number was up, and on the other hand there was no way of getting me out of the place without being seen.

But when he turned around and looked at me, I knew he would dare. He'd dare anything. Not because he didn't know any better, but simply because he'd lost all caution. What the lamp and the metal instruments hadn't been able to do, one look at his sleepy eyes did.

Then I knew fear. I was in the presence of full-fledged insanity. Maybe it had always been there and he'd kept it covered up. Maybe the fright I'd given him before had brought it out in him at last. But there it was, staring me in the face and horrible to look at. Vacant eyes and an absent-minded smile that never changed. So peaceful, so gentle, like a kind-hearted old family doctor pottering around.

I sat there helpless, like a spectator at a show. And what a show! What frightened me more than anything else was to watch the deliberate, cold-blooded professional way he was saturating a number of pads with disinfectant. I would have given anything now if he had only used the gun on me. It would have been better than what was coming. I heard and whipped myself around and fell over sideways with the chair, giving myself another knock on the head. But I was too frightened to pass out any more. He came over and lifted me up and stood me straight again, chair and all, gently, almost soothingly, as if I was a kid with the colic.

“Don’t be impatient,” he said softly. “It will be over soon. I’m almost ready for you now.”

If it’s going to be like what happened to Eddie, I prayed desperately, let his hand slip and make it the throat instead!

He brought out a newspaper and spread it on the floor all around me.

“That will catch any drops that fall,” he purred. “I used one with your brother too. It’s the best absorbent there is.”

The sweat was running down my face in streams by this time. The whole thing was like a bad dream. He had a number of sharp little scalpels laid out in a row on the table and they gleamed under the light. He selected one, breathed lovingly on it, and then turned around and came back to me, smiling dreamily.

“I suppose it’s wrong of me not to use chloroform,” he said, “but that’s what you get for coming to me after office hours!” And then he suddenly broke out into an insane hysterical laugh that just about finished me. “Now, my friend,” he said, “here’s how we do it.” He reached down and daintily plucked at the gag until he had drawn it all out of my mouth.

I had been waiting for that, it was the only chance I had. I let out the loudest yell that that hotel room or any other had ever heard. Tied up as I was, it actually lifted me an inch or two above the chair, I put such volume into it. What it would have sounded like in my own room, had anyone been there to hear it, I can only imagine.

He gripped me cruelly by the lower jaw and pulled it down until I thought it would fracture, so that I couldn’t yell any more. Then with his other elbow he pressed my forehead and the upper part of my face back flat. I couldn’t close my mouth and my head was held in a vise. One whole arm was still free from the elbow down, remember, even if it didn’t have much room to swing in. And that was the one that held the scalpel. I saw the shiny thing flash before my face as he turned it to get a better leverage. I was pretty far

gone, but not far enough. I knew I was going to feel everything that was going to happen.

"What's going on in here?" a voice asked somewhere in back of me. Not a very excited voice either. He let go of me and straightened up.

"How dare you come in here without knocking while I am treating one of my patients?" I heard him say. My luck was that I hadn't passed out a minute ago, as frightened as I was. His voice carried so much conviction and dignity he might have gotten away with it, whether I was tied or not. I couldn't yell any more, I couldn't even talk, but I showed whoever it was in the only way I could. I tipped myself over and hit the floor once more, and threshed around there trying to free myself.

I stayed conscious but everything around me was a blur for several minutes. When it came back in focus again I was standing up and my bonds had been loosened. They were all standing around me, the manager, the hotel detective, the porter, and everyone else.

"Did you get that guy?" was the first thing I asked. They shook their heads. Someone motioned and I turned around and looked.

The window was wide open, and the curtains were hanging on the outside of the sill instead of on the inside, as though something heavy had dragged them across it. Down below on the street you could hear some woman screaming, and people were running up from all directions.

"Better so," I said as I turned back to them. "It's a good thing you came when you did," I told the hotel dick. "How did it happen?"

He looked embarrassed.

"Well, you see," he stammered, "we happened to be in your room at the time—er—investigating that hook-up of yours, which had been reported to us by the maid, and we heard something going on in here through the wall. But until you gave that loud yell we thought he was just treating

a patient. Even then we weren't sure, until I opened the door with a passkey and took a look."

"Well," I said, "outside of a sprained wrist, a stiff jaw and a bump on the head I feel a lot better than I would've if you hadn't showed up."

There was a commotion at the door and Kane's partner came hustling in, by himself. "We got that guy at Regency 428, and he broke like a toothpick! He's a hophead the doctor's been supplying and he drove the car that night—"

As I was leaving I stuck my tongue out at him, to everyone's surprise. "Just wanted to show you I've still got it," I said. I never liked that guy.

I stopped in at the hospital to see Eddie. He saw the plaster on my scalp and the gauze around my wrist and we just looked at each other quietly.

"It's all right, kid," I said after awhile. "Everything's all right—now."

It will be, too. They have artificial fingers these days that are as good as the real ones. And a man can become a good electrician without—having to talk very much.

PREVIEW OF DEATH

It was what somebody or other has called life's darkest moment. My forehead was dripping perspiration and I stared miserably down at the floor. "But, Chief," I said when he got all through thundering at me, "all I had was a couple of beers and besides I wasn't on duty at the time. And how was I to know that that wasn't the right way out of the place? I only found out it was a plate-glass window when I came through on the other side of it. And my gun didn't go off, you can look for yourself. It was some car out in the street that back-fired just then and made everybody clear out in such a hurry. You're not going to break me for that, are you?"

"No," he said, "but I'm going to give you a nice quiet assignment that'll keep you out of trouble for awhile. You're going to look after Martha Meadows from now on, she's been getting threatening letters and her studio just called and asked us to furnish her with protection. That's you until further orders."

"I resign," I said when I heard that.

He switched his cigar from the left-hand comer to the right-hand comer without putting a finger to it, leaned half-way across his desk at me, and went into another electrical storm. A lot of fist-pounding on the mahogany went with it. You couldn't hear yourself think, he was making that much noise. "Resign? You can't resign! Over my dead body you'll

resign! What d'ya think this squad is, a game of in-again out-again Finnigan?"

"But—but Chief," I pleaded, "bodyguard to a—a movie actress! All the rest of the boys will laugh at me, I'll never be able to live it down! And what'll the wife say? Dock me, break me—anything but that!"

He rattled some papers around and held them up in front of his face. Maybe to keep from weakening, I don't know. "Ahem—now not another word out of you, Galbraith. Off you go. Get right out there and don't let her out of your sight until further notice. Remember, your job isn't to trace these threats or track down whoever sent 'em, it's just to keep your eye on Martha Meadows and see that nothing happens to her. You're responsible for her safety."

"O.K., Chief," I sighed, "but I really should be wearing a dog collar."

No doubt about it, I was the unhappiest, most miserable detective that ever started out on an assignment as I walked out of headquarters that day and got in a taxi. The sooner I got busy on the job, I figured, the sooner the chief might relent and take me off it. The taxi, and everything else from now on, was at Miss Meadows' own personal expense, but that didn't make me like her any the better. Without actually wishing her any harm, I was far from being a fan of hers at the moment.

The studio, on Marathon Street, looked more like a library than anything else from the outside. The gateman picked up a phone, said: "From headquarters, to see Miss Meadows," and everything opened up high, wide and handsome. I passed from hand to hand like a volley-ball getting to her; and all of them, from the gateman right on up, seemed glad that I had been sent over to look after her. You could tell she was well liked.

She was in her bungalow dressing-room resting between scenes and having her lunch when they brought me in. Her lunch was a malted milk and a slice of sponge cake—not

enough to keep a canary alive. She had a thick make-up on, but even at that she still looked like somebody's twelve-year-old sister. You sort of wanted to protect her and be her big brother the minute you set eyes on her, even if you hadn't been sent there for just that purpose—the way I had. "I'm Jimmy Galbraith from headquarters, Miss Meadows," I said.

She gave me a friendly smile. "You don't look a bit like a detective," she answered, "you look like a college boy."

Just to put her in her place I said: "And you don't look a bit like a screen star, you look like a little girl in grade school, rigged up for the school play."

Just then a colored woman, her maid I guess, looked in and started to say, "Honey lamb, is you nearly—" Then when she saw me she changed to: "Look here, man, don't you bring that cig-ret in here, you want to burn that child up?" I didn't know what she meant for a minute, I wasn't anywhere near Meadows.

"Hush up, Nellie," Martha Meadows ordered with a smile. "She means this," Meadows explained, and pointed to her dress. "It has celluloid underneath, to stiffen it. If a spark gets on it—" She was dressed as a Civil War belle, with a wide hoopskirt the size of a balloon. I pinched the cigarette out between my fingers in a hurry.

"Just cause it ain't happen', don't mean it can't happen," snapped the ferocious Nellie, and went about her business muttering darkly to herself. The dressing-room telephone rang and Meadows said: "Alright, I'm ready whenever you are." She turned to me. "I have to go back on the set now. We're shooting the big scene this afternoon."

"Sorry," I said, "but I'll have to go with you, those are my orders."

"It's agreeable to me," she said, "but the director mayn't like outsiders watching him. He's very temperamental, you know."

I wasn’t even sure what the word meant, so I looked wise and said: “He’ll get over it.”

She started up and the three of us left the bungalow. I let the maid and her go in front and followed close behind them. They walked along a number of lanes between low one-story studio buildings and finally came to a big barn of a place that had sliding doors like a garage and a neat little sign up: Set VIII, Meadows, Civil War Picture. People were hanging around outside, some in costume and some not. They made way for her respectfully and she passed through them and went in. She bowed slightly to one or two and they nearly fell over themselves bowing back.

Inside, the place had a cement floor criss-crossed over with a lot of little steel rails like baby train tracks. They were for moving heavy camera trucks back and forth, and cables and ropes and wires and

pulleys galore were dangling from the rafters. Canvas back-drops were stacked, like cards, up against the walls. But it wasn’t out here they were going to shoot the scene at all. There was a sound-proof door with a red light over it leading in to the “stage” itself, where the action was to take place.

Before we got to it, though, a bald-headed man in a pullover sweater came up to Meadows. He was about five feet tall and with a beak like an eagle’s. A girl carrying a thick notebook, like a stenographer’s dictation pad, was following him around wherever he went. I had him spotted for the director as soon as I looked at him.

“Who is this man?” he asked—meaning me. Then, when she told him, he raised both hands to his head and would have tom out some hair, only, as I said before, he was bald. “No,” he said, “I cannot work! There are too many people hanging around the stage already! First it was your colored maid. Now a detective! Who will it be next?”

A big argument started in then and there about whether I was to go in or stay out, with Meadows taking my part and

the script-girl trying to calm the director down. “Now, Stormy,” she kept saying, “please don’t excite yourself, this isn’t good for you, remember how sensitive you are!” Finally I cut the whole thing short by saying I’d phone the chief and leave it up to him, as he was the one who had given me the assignment. But there was no telephone in the place and I had to go outside and call up headquarters from the studio cafeteria next door.

The chief went off like a firecracker. “What’s the matter with them anyway? First they ask me for a bodyguard for her, then they start shooing him away. You go in there, Gal, and if they try to keep you out, quit the case cold and report back here to me. I’ll wash my hands of all responsibility for her safety!” Which was music to my ears, as I hadn’t liked the job from the start.

Sure enough, when I got back, the sound-proof door was already closed, the red light was on above it to warn that “shooting” was going on, and they had all gone in without waiting. There was a guard stationed outside the door to keep people from opening it by accident.

“She left word for you to wait out here,” he told me. “Stormann bullied her into going in without you.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” I burned. “The little shrimp! Who does he think he is? He may be the whole limburger around here but he isn’t even a bad smell to us down at headquarters!” The chief had told me what to do, but Stormann’s opposition somehow got my goat so beautifully that instead of quitting I hung around, just for the pleasure of telling him a thing or two when he came out. To crash in now would have ruined the scene, cost the company thousands of dollars, and maybe gotten Meadows in bad with her bosses; so I didn’t have the heart to do it.

“They’ll be through about four,” the guard told me. It was now a little before two.

Whether I would have stuck it out for two whole hours, outside that door, just to bawl Stormann out—I don’t know. I

never will know. At 2:10 or thereabouts the door suddenly opened from the inside without any warning and through it came the horrible unearthly screams of the dying. Nothing could scream like that and live very long.

"Something's happened!" he blurted. "That's not in the scene! I know, because they were rehearsing it all morning —"

It was Meadows' maid. Only she was almost white now. Her voice was gone from fright. "Oh, somebody—quick, somebody!" she panted. "I've been hammering on this door —" But she wasn't the victim. The screaming went right on behind her.

I rushed in, the guard with me. The sight that met us was ghastly. Martha Meadows, with the cameras still playing on her, was burning to death there before everyone's eyes. She was a living torch, a funnel of fire from head to foot, and screaming her life away. She was running blindly here and there, like some kind of a horrible human pin wheel, and they were all trying to overtake her and catch her to throw something over her and put the flames out. But she was already out of her head, mad with agony, and kept eluding them, ducking and doubling back and forth with hellish agility. What kept her going like that, with her life going up in blazing yellow-white gushes, I don't understand. I'll see that scene for years to come.

But I didn't stand there watching. I flung myself at her bodily, head first right into the flames in a football tackle. With stinging hands I grasped something soft and quivering behind that glow that had once been cool, human flesh. The pillar of fire toppled over and lay horizontal along the ground, with the flames foreshortened now and just licking upward all around it like bright scallops. With that, a blanket or something was thrown over her, and partly over me, too. As it fell with a puff of horrid black smoke spurting out all around the edges, the last scream stopped and she was still.

I held my breath, so as not to inhale any of the damned stuff. I could feel rescuing hands beating all around the two of us through the blanket. After a minute I picked myself up. My hands were smarting, my shirt cuffs were scorched brown in places and peeling back, and sparks had eaten into the front of my suit. Otherwise I was alright. But what lay under the blanket didn't move. Five minutes ago one of the most beautiful girls in America, and now something it was better not to look at if you had a weak stomach.

As if in gruesome jest, the winking eyes of the cameras were still turned upon her and, in the deathly silence that had now fallen, you could hear the whirring noise that meant they were still grinding away. No one had thought of signalling them to stop.

The guard who had been outside the door, though, had had the presence of mind to send in a call for help even before the flames had been beaten out. The studio had a first-aid station of its own a door or two away, and two men arrived with a stretcher and carried her out with them, still under the blanket. Nellie went with them, bellowing like a wounded steer and calling: "Oh, Lawd, oh Lawd, don't do this to my lamb! Change yo' mind, change yo' mind!"

Stormann was shaking like a leaf and incoherent with shock, and had to be fed whiskey by one of the electricians. The girl with the notebook, the script-girl, was the only one there who seemed to have kept her head about her. I went up to her, dabbing some oil they'd given me onto the red patches on the back of my hands and wrists, and asked: "How'd it happen?"

It turned out she wasn't as bright as I thought she'd be. "It happened right here," she said. "I was following very closely, the way I'm supposed to—that's my job." I looked to find out where "here" was, but instead of pointing any place on the set, she was pointing at her book.

"See—where it says 'Oh won't he ever come?' That's her line. She's supposed to be waiting by the window for her

lover. Well, she spoke it alright, and then the next thing I knew, there was a funny flickering light on the pages of my book. When I looked up, I saw that it was coming from her. She had flames all over her. Well, just from force of habit, I quickly looked back at the book to find out whether or not this was part—”

I gave her up as a complete nut. Or at least a very efficient script-girl but a washout otherwise. I tackled Stormann next. He was on his third or fourth bracer by now and wringing his hands and moaning something about: “My picture, my beautiful picture—”

“Pull yourself together,” I snapped. “Isn’t there anyone around here who has a heart? She’s thinking about her book, you’re thinking about your picture. Well, I’m thinking about that poor miserable girl. Maybe you can tell me how it happened. You’re the director and you’re supposed to have been watching what went on!”

Probably no one had ever spoken to him that way in years. His mouth dropped open. I grabbed him by the shoulder, took his snifter away from him, and gave him a shake. “Let me have it, brother, before I go sour on you. I’m asking you for your testimony—as a witness. You can consider this a preliminary inquest.”

I hadn’t forgotten that it was his doing I’d been kept out of here earlier, either. Seeing that he wasn’t up against one of his usual yes-men, he changed his mind and gave until it hurt. “No one was near her at the time, I can’t understand what could have caused it. I was right here on the side-lines where I always sit, she was over there by that win—”

“Yeah, I know all that. Here’s what I’m asking you. Did you or did you not see what did it?” Not liking him, I got nasty with him and tapped him ten times on the chest with the point of my finger, once for each word, so it would sink in. The idea of anyone doing that to him was so new to him he didn’t dare let out a peep. “No,” he said, like a little kid in school.

“You didn’t. Well, was anyone smoking a cigarette in here?”

“Absolutely not!” he said. “No director allows it, except when the scene calls for it. The lenses would pick up the haze—”

“Did she touch any wires, maybe?”

“There aren’t any around, you can see for yourself. This whole thing’s supposed to be the inside of an old mansion.”

“What about this thing?” I picked up a lighted oil lamp that was standing on the fake window sill, but when I looked, I saw that it had an electric pocket-torch hidden in it. I put it down again. “Who was playing the scene with her? She wasn’t alone in it, was she?”

“Ruth Tobias. That girl crying over there.” I let him go back to his pain-killer and went over to tackle her. She was having grade-A hysterics across the back of a chair, but, as I might have known, on her own account, not poor Meadows’.

“Two whole years—” she gurgled, “two whole years to make a come back. I’ve waited—and now, look! They won’t hire me again. I’m getting older—”

“Alright sis, turn off the faucets,” I said. “Uncle wants to ask you something. What happened to her?”

She had on one of the same wide dresses as the kid had, but she was gotten up to look older—black gloves and a lorgnette with her hair in a cranky knot. At that, she wasn’t out of her twenties yet, but looked as though she’d been used as a filling-station for a bootlegger while she was out of work the last few years.

“I played her older sister,” she sniffled, “although they really had a nerve to cast me in an older part like that. I had to take anything I could get. I was in that rocker there on the set, facing her way. I’m supposed not to approve of the fellow she’s intending to run off with, but all I do to show it is to keep rocking back and forth. She had her back to me, over at the window—I tell you I was looking right at her and all of a sudden, ffft, she was on fire from head to foot! As

quickly as that, and for no earthly reason that I could make out! All I had time to do was jump back out of the way myself—”

“You would,” I thought, but without saying so.

She gave me a sort of a come-on smile and said: “You’re not a bad-looking guy at all for a detective.”

“That’s what my wife and eighteen kids tell me,” I squelched her.

“Hmph” she said, and went over to chisel a drink from Stormann.

Just then they sent word in that, impossible as it sounded, Meadows was still breathing. She was going fast, though—just a matter of minutes now. They’d given her morphine to kill the pain.

“Is she conscious or out?” I asked.

“Semi-conscious.”

“Quick then, let me have a look at her before she goes!”

It was a slim chance, but maybe she, herself, knew what or who had done it. Maybe she, alone, of all of them, had seen what caused it and hadn’t been able to prevent it in time to save herself.

On my way out, I collared the guard, who was back at the door again keeping out the crowd of extras and employees who had heard the news.

“Consider yourself a deputy,” I said to him in an undertone. “See that they all stay where they are until I get back. Whatever you do, see that nothing’s touched on that set—not even a match stick. Keep everything just the way it is—”

It was a monstrous thing they showed me in that bed, dark as the room was. Without eyes, without ears, without nose, without any human attribute. An oversized pumpkin-head, a Hallowe’en goblin, made of yards and yards of interlaced gauze bandaging. It stood out whitely in the greenish dimness cast by the lowered shades. A crevice between the bandages served as a mouth. Atop the sheets

were two bandaged paws. She was conscious, but partly delirious from the heat of the burns and “high” from the morphine that kept her from feeling the pain in her last moments. The faithful Nellie was there beside her, silent now and with her forehead pressed to the wall.

I bent close to the muffled figure, put my face almost up against the shapeless mound that was Martha Meadows, to try to catch the garbled muttering which came through the bandages. I couldn’t make it out. “Martha Meadows,” I begged, “Martha Meadows, what caused the accident?”

The muttering stopped, broke off short. I couldn’t tell whether she’d heard me or not. I repeated the question. Then suddenly I saw her head move slowly from side to side, slowly and slightly. “No—accident,” she mumbled. Then she repeated it a second time, but so low I couldn’t catch it any more. A minute later her head had lolled loosely over to the side again and stayed that way. She’d gone.

I went outside and stood there, lost in thought. I hadn’t found out what I’d come to find out—what did it—but I’d found out something else, much more important. “No—accident” meant it had been done purposely. What else could it mean? Or was I building myself a case out of thin air? Delirium, morphine—and a shaking of the head in her death-throes that I’d mistaken for “no”? I tried to convince myself I was just looking for trouble. But it wouldn’t work. I had an answer for every argument. She’d known what I was asking her just now. She hadn’t been out of her mind.

Death will strike during unconsciousness or sleep, maybe, but never during delirium. The mind will always clear just before it breaks up, even if only an instant before. And hadn’t she gotten threatening letters and asked for protection? Anyway, I told myself, as long as there was a doubt in my mind, it was up to me to track it down until there wasn’t any doubt left—either one way or the other. That was my job. I was going to sift this thing down to the bottom.

Nellie came out. She wasn't bellowing now any more like she had been on the set. "They musta been casting her in heaven today, but they sure picked a mis'able way to notify her," she said with a sort of suppressed savagery. "I'm gonna buy me a bottle a' gin and drink it down straight. If it don't kill me the fust time, I'll keep it up till it do. She'll need a maid on the set up there fust thing and I ain't gonna leave her flat!" She shuffled off, shaking her head.

I was hard-hearted enough to go after her and stop her. "That's all right about heaven, auntie, but you don't happen to know of anyone down below here who had a grudge against her, do you?"

She shook her head some more. "Stop yo' mouth. She was everybody's honey. Didn't she even go to the trouble of axing 'em and coazing 'em to give that Miss Tobias a job in her picher on account of she felt sorry for her cause she was a back-number and nobody wanted her no-how?"

"What about those threats she got, where are they?"

"She turned 'em over to her supe'visor. They weren't nothing, everybody in the business gets 'em. It means you a big-shot, that's all."

"You were there when it happened. What'd you see?"

"Weren't nothing to see. 'Pears like it musta been some of this here sponchaneous combusting."

That gave me an idea, but I hung it up to dry for a while. I rang headquarters and spilled what had happened to the chief. "Something new—an invisible accident. Right under everybody's nose and yet nobody saw it. Guess I better stay on it for a while, don't you?"

"You park your can on it till it breaks. I'll let the studio hot-shots know."

When I got back to the set they were all there yet—all but Stor-mann and Tobias! "I thought I told you—" I snarled in the guard's ear.

"They'll be right back," he whined, "they told me so. Stormy only stepped next door to get some more liquor. The

electrician that was supplying him ran out of it. And she went to take off her costume. She got jittery because Stormy was nervous and started smoking around her. After what happened to—Besides, they weren't under arrest. Nobody here is, and you don't know Stormy. If I'd a' tried to stop him, it woulda been good-bye to my job—"

They were back in no time at all. Tobias was back first and I made a mental note of that. Since when does it take a man longer to dig up some liquor than it does a woman to change clothes from head to foot—besides, scraping off a stage make-up in the bargain? That was another little chip stacked against Stormann. I had three of them so far. He hadn't wanted Meadows to bring me on the set with her. He bullied her into going in alone while my back was turned. And lastly he'd found an excuse for leaving the set, taking him longer to get back than it had a conceited frail, like Tobias, to do herself over from head to toe.

The ace turned up when I checked up on the electrician who'd been supplying him.

"Why, no," he admitted, "I got another bottle left. I told him so, only he got a sudden notion his own was better quality and went out after it."

What a dead give-away that was!

He had the staggers when he showed up, but he had enough decency left to straighten up when he saw me and breathe: "How is she?"

I made the announcement I'd been saving until he got there—to see how he'd take it.

"I'm sorry to say—she's quit."

I kept my eyes on him. It was hard to tell. Plop! went the bottle he'd brought in with him and he started folding up like a jack knife. They picked him up and carried him out. It might've been the drink—but if he hadn't wanted to be questioned, for instance, it was the swellest out he could've thought up.

Maybe I should and maybe I shouldn't have, but I'm frank to admit I stuck a pin in him before they got him to the door—just to see. He never even twitched.

I turned a chair around backwards, sat down on it, and faced the rest of them. "I'm in charge of this case now," I said, "by order of police headquarters and with the consent of the studio executives. All I'm going to do, right now, is repeat the question I've already asked Mr. Stormann, Miss Tobias, Nellie, and the script-girl. Did any of you see what caused it?" This meant the electricians, stage-hands, and the two cameramen. They all shook their heads.

I got up and banged the chair down so hard one leg of it busted off. "She wasn't six feet away from some of you!" I bawled them out. "She was in the full glare of the brightest lights ever devised! All eyes were on her watching every move and she was the center of attraction at the time! She burned to death, and yet no one saw how it started! Twenty-five pairs of human eyes and they might as well have all been closed! Well, there's one pair left—and they won't let him down."

I suppose they thought I meant my own. Not by a damn sight. "Now clear out of here, all of you, and don't touch anything as you go!" I pointed to the chief electrician. "You stay and check up on those lights for defects—one of'em might have got overheated and dropped a spark on her. And don't try to hold out anything to save your own skin. Criminal carelessness is a lot less serious than obstructing an agent of justice!" I passed my handkerchief to the guard. "You comb the floor around where she was standing. Pick up every cigarette butt and every cinder you find!"

The rest of them filed out one by one, giving me names and addresses as they went. I wasn't worried about getting them back again if I wanted them. They all reacted differently. Some were frightened, some just curious, some cracking wise. The script-girl's nose was still buried in her book. She hardly looked up at all. Tobias glided by me with

a little extra hip-action and purred over her shoulder: “Lots of luck, Handsome. And if you find out you were mistaken about those eighteen kids of yours, look a lady up sometime.”

“Thirtieth of next February,” I told her.

The chief cameraman came out of his booth with a round, flat, tin box—packed under his arm.

“Where you going with that?” I asked him.

“Drop it in the ashcan on my way out,” he said. “It’s what we took today, no good now any more.”

“Ashcan—hell,” I snapped. “Those machines of yours are the other pair of eyes I told you about! How soon can you develop that stuff?”

“Right away,” he told me, looking surprised. “But we can’t use this roll—it’s got her whole death-scene on it and it’ll turn your hair white just to look at it.”

“You do it yourself,” I warned him, “don’t call anybody in to help you. And don’t touch it, leave it just the way it is. Can I trust you?”

“Meet me in half an hour in projection room A,” he said. “She was a swell kid.”

The electrician came down from way up high somewhere and reported the lights all jake. No crossed wires, not a screw out of place anywhere.

“You dig up a typewriter and get that all down on paper, sign it, have a notary witness it, and shoot it in to me at headquarters—Galbraith’s the name. It better be on the level, the pay-off is withholding information from the authorities.” Which didn’t mean anything, but it was good enough to throw a scare into him. I never saw anyone take it on the lam so quick in my life.

The guard passed me my handkerchief back with a cigarette butt, a wire frame, and a lot of little pieces of glass in it.

“The butt’s Stormann’s,” he pointed out. “He was smoking it after it was all over. I saw him throw it down and

step on it before he went after that liquor. I remember because Tobias yapped 'Don't come near me with that thing! You want it to happen to me, too?"'

I wondered if that remark meant anything. Did he want it to happen to her, too? Get the point? I knew what the pieces of glass and the frame were right away—a busted lorgnette like I had seen Tobias fiddling with.

"Meadows had it around her neck I guess," he suggested, "and it fell and smashed when she started to run around crazy."

I felt like telling him he didn't know his ears from his elbow, but I kept quiet about it. These pieces of glass were clear, that burning celluloid would have smoked them up plenty if they had been anywhere near Martha Meadows. But there was an easy enough way of settling that.

"Get the wardrobe-woman in here and tell her to bring a complete list of every article she furnished Meadows and Tobias for this picture."

She was a society-looking dame, with white hair, and had had her face lifted. She had typewritten sheets with her.

"Did you supply Meadows with a lorgnette?"

"Why no," she said. "Young girls didn't wear them even in those days."

"But Tobias wore one. Is this it?" I showed her the pieces.

"It must be," she returned. "She turned in her costume a little while ago and explained that she'd broken her lorgnette while that awful thing was happening to poor Martha. You see I have everything else crossed off but that. We usually charge players for anything that isn't returned to us, but in this case of course nothing like that will happen."

That explained something that had bothered me for a minute or two. Because I'd distinctly seen the lorgnette on Tobias after the accident, when she was making those first passes at me. She must have broken it later—while I was outside in the infirmary with Meadows. But a chiseler like

her who would cadge a drink from Stormann would try to make them believe it had happened during all the excitement—to get out of paying for it.

"You keep those two lists just the way they are now, I may want to see them again." I folded up the handkerchief with the pieces of broken glass and put it away in my pocket.

A kid came in and said: "The rushes are ready for you in projection room A," and took me over there.

It had rows of seats just like a miniature theatre and a screen on one wall. I closed the door and locked the cameraman and myself in.

"It's ghastly," he said, "better hang on tight."

"Run it through at normal speed first," I said. "I'll see if I can stand it."

I sat down in the front row with the screen almost on top of me. There wasn't much to it at regular speed—about five minutes worth of picture—what they call a "sequence." It was pretty grisly at that. It opened on Tobias sitting there in the rocker, broadside to the camera. Meadows came in almost at once.

"I'm going away with him tonight," she said.

Tobias opened her lorgnette and gave her the once-over through it. Meadows went over to the window, and the camera followed her part of the way. That left Tobias over at the left-hand side of the screen and partly out of the picture, with just one shoulder, arm, and the side of her head showing. She started to rock back and forth and tap her lorgnette against the back of her hand. I had my eyes glued to Meadows though. She turned around to look at her "sister."

"Oh, won't he ever come?" she said.

Her face sort of tightened up—changed from repose to tenseness. A look of horror started to form on it, but it never got any further. Right then and there the thing happened.

The best way I can describe it is, a sort of bright, luminous flower seemed to open up half way down her dress, spreading, peeling back. But the petals of it were flame. An instant later it was all over her, and the first screams of a voice that was gone now came smashing out at my eardrums. And in between each one, the hellish sound-track had even picked up and recorded the sizzling that her hair made.

"Cut!"

I turned around and yelled back at him: "For Pete's sake, cut, before I throw up!" and I mopped my drenched forehead. "I did—twice—while I was processing it," he confessed, looking out of the booth at me.

It hadn't told me a thing so far, but then I hadn't expected it to—the first throw out of the bag.

"Go back and start it over," I shivered, "but, whatever you do, leave out that finale! Take it up where she turns at the window. Slow-motion this time. Can you hold it when I tell you to?"

He adjusted his apparatus. "Say when," he called.

The figures on the screen hardly moved at all this time, eight times slowed down. They drifted lazily—sort of floated. I knew the place to look for on Meadows' dress now, and I kept my eyes focussed on it and let everything else ride. A moment later something had shown up there.

"Hold it!" I yelled, and the scene froze into a "still."

Now it was just a magic-lantern slide, no motion at all. I left my seat and stood close up against the screen, keeping to one side so my own shadow wouldn't blur out that place on her dress. No flame was coming from it yet. It was just a bright, luminous spot, about the size and shape of a dime.

"Back up one!" I instructed. "One" meant a single revolution of the camera. The scene hardly shifted at all, but the pin-point of light was smaller—like a pea now. You couldn't have seen it from the seat I'd been in at first.

Two heads are better than one. I called him out and showed it to him. “What do you make of this? It’s not a defect in the film, is it?”

“No, it’s a blob of light coming to a head at that place on her dress. Like a highlight, you might say. A gleam.” Which is what I’d had it figured for, too.

“Go three forward,” I said, “and then hold it.”

He came out again to look. It was back to the size of a dime again, and only a turn or two before the flames were due to show up.

“There’s heat in it!” I said. “See that!”

The white spot had developed a dark core, a pin-head of black or brown.

“That’s the material of the dress getting ready to burn. See that thread coming out of the dot? Smoke—and all there’ll ever be of it, too. Celluloid doesn’t give much warning.”

So far so good. But what I wanted to know was where that gleam or ray was coming from. I had the effect now, but I wanted the cause. The trouble was you couldn’t follow the beam through the air—to gauge its direction. Like any beam of light, it left no trail—only showed up suddenly on her dress. The set-up, so far, seemed to fit Nellie’s theory of spontaneous combustion perfectly. Maybe one of the powerful Klieg lights, high overhead and out of the picture, had developed some flaw in its glass shield, warping one of its rays. But the electrician had gone over them afterward and given them all a clean bill of health.

“Start it up again,” I said wearily. “Slow motion,” and went back and sat down. I was farther away now and had a better perspective of the thing as a whole; maybe that’s what did it.

As the scene on the screen thawed and slowly dissolved into fluid motion once more, it gave the impression for a moment of everything on it moving at once. Therefore it was only natural that the one thing that didn’t move should

catch my eye and hold it. Tobias' lorgnette, and the wrist and hand that held it. The three objects stayed rigid, down in the lower left-hand corner of the screen, after everything else was on the go once more. The chair she was in had started to rock slowly back and forth, and her body with it, but the forearm, wrist, hand and lorgnette stayed poised, motionless. There was something unnatural about it that caught the eye at once. I remembered she had opened the scene by tapping her lorgnette as well as rocking.

Now, with the fire due to break out any second, she was only rocking. The lorgnette was stiff as a ramrod in her grasp. Not that she was holding it out at full length before her or anything like that, she was holding it close in, unobtrusively, but straight up and down—a little out to one side of her own body. Maybe the director's orders had been for her to stop fiddling with it at a certain point. Then again maybe not. All I wanted to find out was at what point she had stopped tapping and playing with it. I had been concentrating on Meadows until now and had missed that.

"Whoa, back up!" I called out to him. "All the way back and then start over—slow."

I let Meadows go this time and kept my eye on Tobias and her lorgnette. The minute I saw it stop—"Hold it!" I yelled and ran over to the screen and examined Meadows' dress. Nothing yet. But in three more revolutions of the camera that deadly white spot had already showed up on the celluloid-lined hoopskirt. Effect had followed cause too quickly to be disregarded.

"Lights!" I roared. "I've got it!"

He turned a switch, the room blazed all around me, and I took that handkerchief out of my pocket and examined the pieces of glass it held. Some were thicker than others—the lens had therefore been convex, not flat. I held one up and looked at my cuff through it. The weave stood out. A magnifying glass. I held it about a foot away from the back of my hand, where I'd already been burned once this

afternoon, and even with the far weaker lights of the projection-room working through it, in about thirty seconds something bit me and I jumped.

He'd come out and was watching what I was doing. "Pack that film up again in the box the way you had it," I said. "I'll be back for it in a minute. I'm taking it down to headquarters with me!"

"What'd you find out?" he asked.

"Look it up in tomorrow morning's papers!"

I called Tobias' dressing-room. "How's the lay of the land?" I greeted her.

She knew me right away. "I know, it's Handsome."

"I was wrong about those eighteen kids," I told her. "I counted 'em over—only nine."

She sure was a hard-boiled customer. "Nine to go," she said cheerfully. "When will I see you?"

"I'll pick you up in about twenty minutes."

"Where we going?" she cooed when she got in the car.

"You'll find out."

Then when we got there, she said: "Why, this looks like police headquarters to me."

"Not only does, but is," I told her. "Won't take a minute, I just want to see a man about a dog."

"Wouldn't you rather have me wait outside for you?"

I chucked her under the chin. "I'm getting so fond of you I want you with me wherever I go. Can't stand being without you even for five minutes."

She closed her eyes and looked pleased and followed me in like a lamb. Then when the bracelets snapped on her wrists she exploded: "Why you dirty double-crossing—I thought you said you wanted to see a man about a dog."

"I do," I said, "and you're the dog."

"What're the charges?" the chief asked.

"Setting fire to Martha Meadows with a magnifying glass and causing her to bum to death. Here's the glass she used; picked up on the set. Here's the original harmless glass that

was in the frame before she knocked it out; picked up in the trashbasket in her dressing room. The film, there in the box, shows her in the act of doing it. She's been eaten away with jealousy ever since she faded out and Meadows stepped into her shoes."

I never knew a woman knew so many bad words as she did; and she used them all. After she'd been booked and the matron was leading her away she called back: "You'll never make this stick. You think you've got me, but you'll find out!"

"She's right, Gal," commented the chief, after she'd gone. "The studio people'll put the crusher on the case before it ever comes up for trial. Not because they approve of what she's done—but on account of the effect it would have on the public."

"She may beat the murder rap," I said, "but she can't get around these." I took a bundle of letters and a square of blotting-paper out of my pocket and passed them to him. "Wrote them in her very dressing room at the studio and then mailed them to Meadows on the outside, even after Meadows had gotten her a job. The blotting-paper tells the story if you hold it up to a mirror. She didn't get rid of it quickly enough."

"Good work, Gal," the chief said; and then, just like him, he takes all the pleasure out of it. "Now that you're in for promotion, suppose you step around to that grill and pay the guy for that plate-glass window you busted."

MURDER IN WAX

He always called me Angel Face. Always claimed I didn't have a thing inside my head, but that the outside was a honey. When he began to let up on the ribbing, I should have known something was wrong. But I figured maybe it was because we had been married four years—and didn't tumble right away.

One morning no different from any other, the pay-off comes. Everything is peaches and cream and I'm trying to make up my mind between my green and my blue with the whosis around the neck when the doorbell rings. The guy looked like a taxi-driver. It turned out he was.

"I've come to collect that dollar'n a half your husband owes me, lady. He knows where my stand is, he shoulda squared it long ago." And then to cinch the argument he flashes Jackie's cigarette case at me, the one I gave him the Christmas before. "I'm sick of carrying this around for security, it ain't worth a dime at the hock shop. The only reason I trusted him in the first place was on account of the dame he was with that night is a very good customer of mine. My stand is right outside her door—"

Plop went my heart! "Be right back," I said, and dialed Jackie's office on the phone. "Why, he quit last Saturday," they told me. This was Wednesday. I took a look in the closet where his valise was. It was locked but when I lifted it by the handle it weighed a ton. It had everything in it all ready, all set to move out. So she'd put the Indian sign on him, had

she? I went back to the door again hooking my blue up and down the back.

"You're getting your dollar fifty," I said, "and you've also got a fare all the way up to where that lady lives. Step on it."

East Fifty-fourth Street, a couple of doors down from that big beer garden on the corner of Third. "Sure I know her name," he said, "it's Boinice. I hear 'em all call her that whenever she's with anybody in my cab." The other half of it was on the mailbox—Pascal.

No one saw me go in, and the elevator was automatic. She was having breakfast—bromo-seltzer and a cigarette—and if he called me Angel Face, I wonder what he called her. Helen of Troy would have been homely. She had one of those faces that only happen once in a hundred years.

"Who're you?" she snapped.

"Jackie Reardon's wife," I said, "and I've come here to ask you to give me a break."

It was no use though. I found it out that night when I tried to tell him. The coffee I got in my face wasn't hot enough to scald me, luckily, and I didn't even mind hitting the floor over in the corner of the dining nook. It was when he snatched up his valise and went for the door that it hurt. I beat it inside, fixed up the purple mark on my jaw with powder, jammed on a hat, and caught up with him at the subway station. "Jackie, listen to me! You've got to listen to me!"

"All right, I forgot," he said, and tried to pass a couple of sawbucks to me. I let them fall and the wind carried them down the tracks.

All I could say was, "Not tonight, Jackie! No, no, not tonight! Don't go near her, you'll get in trouble. Wait over until tomorrow, then go if you have to. But not tonight, Jackie, stay away—" His train came roaring in and drowned out every sound. I saw his lips say, "So long, kid," and then him and his valise and his train all went away and left me

there calling out, “Don’t go there, Jackie, you’ll get in trouble!” on the empty platform.

I went back and bawled from then until midnight. I killed the gin he’d left behind him, from midnight until dawn; and slept from daylight until it was almost evening again.

By that time the papers were on the streets with the big scare-heads—PLAYGIRL FOUND SLAIN. My hunch must have still been with me from the night before. I signaled from the window and hauled in a batch of them. Sure enough, Bernice Pascal, 225 East Fifty-fourth street, had been found shot to death in her apartment at about nine the night before. They’d caught up with Jackie less than half an hour later at Grand Central, trying to powder out on the Montreal train—alone. With two tickets on him and the key to her apartment. His valise was back at her place, where he’d left it in care of the doorman while he went upstairs.

I sank to my knees, held my head in my hand and went wading down the column with swimming eyes. What a set-up! He’d shown up at 8:30 the first time, asked the doorman to mind his valise, and gone ahead up without being announced—she’d given him the key, hadn’t she? The doorman had never seen him come down again. The next time the doorman had seen him the body had already been discovered and Jackie was being brought in from the outside, by the homicide men who had picked him up. Quickest pinch in years, raved the papers and the bureau.

A time-table, left in her place with the 9:40 Montreal train underlined, had tipped them off. There was one every night, but they didn’t wait for the next night to make sure. Her things had been all packed, too, you see.

“Oh, you fool, you fool!” I groaned and banged my head against the windowsill a couple of times.

Two days later they finally let me at him.

“You didn’t do it,” I said. “I’ll get you a good lawyer.”

“You stay out of this,” he said. “I don’t want you dragged into it. I’ve done you enough dirt without that.”

“I’m your wife, Jackie. You don’t have to tell me, I know you didn’t do it.”

“She was dead when I let myself in,” he said, “and the radio was playing Nobody’s Sweetheart Now. I remember that. That’s all I remember. I lost my head I guess. I beat it down the emergency staircase and slipped out while the doorman was out front getting a cab for someone. I got into one myself around the corner and drove around and around in a daze. Then I made for the train—”

“You’ll get your lawyer, Jackie,” I promised him.

My brother-in-law in Trenton turned me down flat. I had the diamond engagement-ring Jackie had given me five years before, though. And my wedding-ring was platinum. That went, too. I got Westman for him. You spell his name with dollar marks.

“I like the case,” he said. “I don’t like the looks of it much, but that’s why I like it. Hold on tight.”

I liked the looks of it even less than he did—after all, Jackie was my husband, not his—but I held on tight.

The trial opened in the middle of a freak heat wave that had got its dates mixed. At 90 in the shade, with a perspiring jury ready to convict the Angel Gabriel if they could only get out of there and into a shower bath and a cranky judge who hated his own mother, he didn’t have a chance.

It was a mess all the way through. The State’s proposition was that she’d agreed to beat it to Montreal with him; then when she changed her mind at the last minute for some unknown reason, he’d killed her in a fit of jealous rage. The gun was her own, but it had been found at the bottom of the elevator shafts—and she’d died instantly with a hole between her eyes. Soundproof walls, no shot heard. The doorman had seen him go up at 8:30; he was the last person he’d seen go up there; he’d known him by sight for months. And about everybody else in New York seemed to

chip in their say-so after that—the State had them stepping up and stepping down all day long.

"Do something," I kept saying to Westman, "do something!"

Westman drew nothing but blanks. The night doorman, who'd come on duty at six, was obviously greased—or so he said. Then when he went out after the day doorman, who might have been able to mention any callers she'd had earlier in the day, that gentleman had chucked his job two days after the murder and gone home to Ireland or somewhere without leaving any forwarding address. He dug up a former colored maid of hers who would have been a walking card-index of the men in Pascal's life, and just as he had her nicely subpoenaed and all, she got mysteriously knocked down by a speeding car at 135th and Lenox and had a fine funeral. All wet, all wet.

I sat through it day after day, in the last row behind a pair of smoked glasses. The jury came in on the 21st with their shirts sticking to their backs and stubble on their jaws and found him guilty.

I keeled over and a court attendant carried me outside, but no one noticed because people had been passing out from the heat the whole time the trial lasted.

It was nice and cool when he came up for sentence, but it was too late to do any good by that time. Jackie got the chair.

"So my husband goes up in sparks for something he never did!" I said to Westman.

"Ten million people think he did, one little lady thinks he didn't. You can't buck the State of New York."

"No, but I can give it a run for its money. What do you need for a stay of execution?"

"New evidence—something I haven't got."

"No? Watch me. How long have we got?"

"Week of November Eighth. Six weeks to us, a lifetime to him." At the door I turned back. "The five centuries, I

suppose, was to pay for the current they're going to use on him."

He threw up his hands. "You can have the retainer back. I feel worse about it than you do."

I took it because I needed it. I'd been living in a seven-dollar-a-week furnished room and eating corn flakes, since I'd retained him. Now here was the job—to separate the one right person from the 6,999,999 wrong ones—or whatever the population of New York was at the last census—and hang the killing of Bernice Pascal on him so that it would stick and give my Jackie an out.

Six weeks to do it in. Forty-two days. A thousand hours. And here was the equipment: five hundred dollars, a face like an angel and a heart like a rock. The odds? A thousand to one against me was putting it mild. Who could stand up and cheer about anything so one-sided?

I just sat there holding my head in my hands and wondering what my next move was. Not a suspicion, not a hunch, not a ghost of an idea. It was going to be tough going all right. I couldn't figure it out and the minutes were already ticking away, minutes that ticked once and never came back again.

They let me say goodbye to Jackie next day before they took him upstate. He was cuff-linked, so we didn't have much privacy. We didn't say much.

"Look at me. What do you see?"

"You've got a funny kind of light in your eyes," he said.

"It's going to bring you back alive," I said, "so never mind the goodbyes."

When I got back to the room there was a cop there. "Oh-oh," I thought, "now what?"

"I been looking all over for you," he said. "Mr. Westman finally tipped me off where I could find you. Your husband asked us to turn his things over to you."

He passed me Jackie's packed valise, the one he'd taken up to her house that night.

“Thanks for rubbing it in,” I said, and shut him out.

I never knew what punishment shirts and socks and handkerchiefs could hand out until I opened it and started going through it. His gray suit was in it, too. I held the coat up against my face and sort of made love to it. The cops had been through the pockets a million times of course but they’d put everything back. A couple of cards from liquor concerns, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, his silver pencil clamped onto the breast pocket.

Being a Sing Sing widow already, I spread them all out in front of me in a sort of funeral arrangement. It was when I started smoothing out the coat and folding it over that I felt something down at the bottom—in one of the seams. He’d had a hole in the lining of his side pocket and it had slipped through, out of reach. But when I’d worked it back up into the light again, I saw the cops hadn’t missed much. It was just a folder of matches.

I put it down. Then I picked it up again. It wasn’t a commercial folder of matches. There wasn’t an ad on it. It was a private folder, a personal folder. Fancy. Black cover with two gilt initials on it—T.V. You can pick them up at the five-and-ten at a dime a throw; or at any department store for two bits. Just the same, it belonged to one single person and not to any hotel or grillroom or business enterprise of any kind. T.V. It hadn’t been Bernice’s because those weren’t her initials.

Where had he gotten hold of it then? I knew who most of his friends were, she’d been the only dark horse in his life, and none of their names matched the two letters. Just to check up, I went out and called up the firm he’d worked for.

“T.V. there?” I asked off-handedly.

“No one by those intials works here,” the office girl said.

It was when I went back to the room again that the brain-wave hit me. I suddenly had it. He had picked them up at Bernice’s apartment after all, he must have—without their being hers. Somebody else had called on her,

absentmindedly left his matches lying around the place, and then Jackie had showed up. He was lit up and, without noticing, put them in his pocket and walked off with them.

Even granting that—and it was by no means foolproof—it didn't mean much of anything. It didn't mean that "T.V." had anything to do with her death. But if I could only get hold of one person who had known her intimately, I'd be that much ahead, I could find out who some of the rest of her friends were.

"T.V." was elected. Just then I looked over in the corner and saw a cockroach slinking back to its hole. I shivered. That—and all the other cockroaches I'd been seeing for weeks—did the trick. I got an idea.

First a folder of matches, then a cockroach. I dolled up and went around to the building she'd lived in—225. I dug up the superintendent. "Listen, I want to talk to you about 3-H," I said. "Have you rented it yet?"

"No," he said, "and God knows when we'll be able to. People are funny about things like that, it was in all the papers."

I made him take me up and I took a look around. The phone was still in, disconnected, of course. The phone books were lying on the floor in the clothes closet. Everything else was gone long ago.

"Nice roomy closet you have here," I said, fluttering the leaves of the Manhattan directory. Then I put it down and came out again. You have to have good eyes to be able to see in a dim closet. Mine are good.

"I'll make you a proposition," I said. "I'm not at all superstitious, and I haven't got much money, and I don't like the brand of cockroaches over at my place. You haven't got an earthly chance of renting this place until people forget about what happened and you know it. I'll take it for exactly one quarter of what she was paying. Think it over."

He went down, phoned the real-estate agents, came back again, and the place was mine. But only for six weeks; or, in

other words, until just around the time Jackie was due to hit the ceiling—which suited me fine as that was only as long as I wanted it for anyway.

The minute the door had closed behind him and I was alone in the place, I made a bee line for that clothes closet and hauled out the Manhattan directory. I held it upside down and shook it and the card fell out, the one I'd seen the first time. It was just one of those everyday quick-reference indexes ruled off into lines for names and numbers that the phone company supplies to its subscribers.

There were two or three penciled scrawls on hers. Probably had so many numbers on tap she couldn't keep them all in her head. Anyway there it was—

Ruby Moran—Wickersham, so-and-so
Gilda Johnson—Stuyvesant, such-and-such
Tommy Vaillant—Butterfield 8-14160

This was getting hotter all the time. Butterfield is a Gold Coast exchange, Park Avenue and the Sixties. But the cream of the crop don't sport store-bought monogrammed matches—that's tin-horn flash. Which meant that this guy, whoever he was, was in quick money of some kind and hadn't caught up with himself yet. Which meant some kind of a racket, legitimate or otherwise. Which meant that maybe she had known a little too much about him and spoken out of turn, or had been about to, and therefore was now sprouting a lot of grass up at Woodlawn. At the same time, as I said before, it didn't necessarily have to mean any of those things, but that was for me to find out.

As for the police, they'd had such an open-and-shut case against Jackie that it hadn't behooved them to go around scouting for little things like folders of matches in the seams of a suit he hadn't been wearing when they arrested him nor unlisted numbers on reference cards hidden away in

the leaves of a phone book. It took a little party like me, with nothing behind her face, to do that much.

I went out, thought it over for awhile, and finally went into one of the snappy theatrical dress shops on Broadway.

“Show me something with a lot of umph,” I said. “Something that hits your eye if you’re a him and makes you see stars.”

The one I finally selected was the sort of a bib that you wore at your own risk if the month had an “r” on the end of it. It made a dent in the five hundred but that was all right. I wrapped it up and took it, and everything that went with it. Then I found a crummy, third-class sort of bar near where I lived and spent a good deal of time in there building myself up with the bartender and pouring a lot of poisonous pink stuff into the cuspidor whenever he wasn’t looking.

“Why no,” he said when I finally popped the question, “I couldn’t slip you anything like that. I could get pinched for doing that. And even if I wanted to, we don’t have nothing like that.”

“I only wanted it for a little practical joke,” I said. “All right, forget it. I never asked for it. I haven’t even been in here at all, you never saw me and I never saw you.”

But I paid for the next Jack Rose with a ten-dollar bill. “There isn’t any change coming,” I said. When he brought the drink there was a little folded white-paper packet nestled in the hollow of his hand. I took the drink from him without letting it touch the counter.

“Try this,” he said out of the corner of his mouth, and sauntered up front, polishing the bar. I put it in my bag and blew.

They’d already tuned in my phone when I got back and I christened it by calling that Tommy Vaillant number. A man’s voice answered. “Tommy there?” I cooed as though I’d known him all my life.

Mr. Vaillant, said the voice, was out for the evening. The "Mr." part told me it must be his man Friday. And who was this wanted to know?

"Just a little playmate of his. Where can I reach him?"

"The Gay Nineties Club." Which made it all the easier, because if he had come to the phone himself I would have been in a spot.

It took me an hour to get ready, but if my face was good before I started you should have seen it when I got through. I figured I had plenty of time, because anyone who would go to a club that early must own an interest in it and would stick around until curfew. I nearly got pneumonia going there in that come-and-get-it dress, but it was worth it.

I rocked the rafters when I sat down and wisps of smoke came up through the cracks in the floor. The floor show was a total loss, not even the waiters watched it. I ordered a Pink Lady and sat tight. Then when I took out a cigarette there were suddenly more lighters being offered me from all directions than you could shake a stick at, the air was as full of them as fireflies.

"Put 'em all down on the table," I said, "and I'll pick my own."

A guy that went in for monogrammed matches wasn't going to neglect putting his initials on his cigarette-lighter and I wanted to pick the right one. I counted nine of them. His was a little black enamel gadget with the T.V. engraved on it in gold.

"Who goes with this?" I said and pushed the empty chair out. He wasn't the ratty type I'd been expecting. He looked like he could play a mean game of hockey and went in for cold baths.

"Whew!" I heard someone say under his breath as the other eight oozed away. "There would have been fireworks if she hadn't picked his!"

Oh, so that was the type he was! Well, maybe that explained what had happened to Bernice.

He sent my Pink Lady back and ordered fizz water. “What’s your name?”

“Angel Face,” I said.

“You’re telling me?” he said.

“Shay come on,” he said three hours later, “we go back my plashe—hup—for a li’l nightcap.”

“No, we’ll make it my place,” I said. “I’d like to get out of this dress and get some clothes on.”

When we got out of the cab I turned back to the driver while the doorman was helping Vaillant pick himself up after he’d tripped over the doorstep going in. “Stick around, I’m coming out again by myself in about half an hour, I’ll need you.”

Vaillant was just plastered enough to vaguely remember the house and too tight to get the full implication of it. “I been here before,” he announced solemnly, going up in the elevator with me.

“Let’s hope you’ll be here some more after this, too.” I let him in and he collapsed into a chair. “I’ll get us our nightcap,” I said, and got the two full glasses I’d left cooking in the fridge before I went out. One was and one wasn’t. “Now if you’ll just excuse me for a minute,” I said after I’d carefully rinsed the two empty glasses out in hot water.

I changed scenery and by the time I came in again he was out like a light. I got his address and his latchkey, went downstairs, got in the cab, and told him where to take me. It was Park Avenue all right and it was a penthouse; but very small—just two rooms.

I’d found out back at the Gay Nineties that his Filipino didn’t sleep there but went home at about ten each night, otherwise it would have been no soap. The elevator was private.

“Expect me?” I froze the elevator-man. “He sent me home ahead of him to punch the pillows together!”

It was three A.M. when I got there and I didn't quit until seven. I went over the place with a fine-tooth comb. Nothing doing. Not a scrap of paper, a line of writing to show he'd ever known her. He must have been burning lots more than logs in that trick fireplace of his—around the time Bernice was decorating the show window at Campbell's Funeral Parlor. There was a wall-safe, but the locked desk in the bedroom was a pushover for a hairpin and I found the combination in there in a little memo book.

The safe started in to get worthwhile. Still no dope about Bernice, but he'd hung onto the stubs of a lot of canceled checks that he shouldn't have. One in particular was made out to a Joe Callahan of Third Avenue, two days after she'd died. Two hundred and some-odd bucks—just about enough to take a man and wife to the other side—third-class.

Joe Callahan had been the name of that day doorman at 225 East 54th that Westman had tried so hard to locate, only to find he'd quit and gone home to Ireland. I slipped it under my garter just for luck. If he'd also greased the night doorman to forget that he'd been a caller at Bernice's, he'd had sense enough to do it in cash. There was no evidence of it. Ditto the driver of the car that had smacked down her maid up in Harlem.

So, all in all, the inventory was a flop.

It was broad daylight out and I was afraid the Filipino would check in any minute, so I quit. In ten minutes time I had the place looking just like it had been when I first came in, everything in order.

When Vaillant came to in the chair he'd passed out in, I was sitting there looking at him all dressed and rosy as though I'd just got up feeling swell. His latchkey was back in his pocket but it had only taken a locksmith twenty minutes to make me a duplicate to it. The check stub I'd left at a photographer's to have photostatic copies made of it.

"You're a nice one," I crooned when he opened his eyes, "folding up on me like that. Come on, get under the shower,

I'll fix you some coffee."

When he'd finished his second cup he looked around. "There's something familiar about this room," he said. He got up and looked out the window and I saw his face turn white. "My God, it's the same apartment," he muttered, "let me out of here!"

"Got the jitters?" I said sweetly.

"I'm not yellow, but I've got a hangover," he said. "Don't ask me to tell you about it now, this ain't the time. I've got to get some air."

He grabbed his hat and I grabbed his sleeve. "Is that a promise?" I said. "Will you tell me later on? Tonight for instance?"

"There's nothing to tell," he said and slammed the door.

I'd been close that time! I picked up his empty cup and smashed it against the wall opposite me.

"I gotta have more than that!" barked Westman when I passed him the photostat of the check stub. "What am I, a magician? This don't prove his connection with her. All this shows is he paid some guy named Joe Callahan two hundred bucks. There's scads of'em in New York. How you going to identify this 'J.C.' with the one that worked as doorman at her house? And, even if you do, that still don't prove the payor had anything to do with her death. It may point to it—but that ain't enough."

"Wait," I said, "who said this was all? I'm not through yet. Always remember the old saying, 'Every little bit, added to what you've got, makes a little bit more.' I only brought you this to put away in a safe place, put it in your office vault. There's more coming, I hope, and this will tie up nicely with the rest when we get it. Meanwhile I'll be needing more jack for what I have in mind."

"I'm a lawyer, not a banker."

"I sat through your last case," I reminded him, "you're a banker, all right. Give—it'll be a good investment from your point of view." I got it.

I went to the biggest music specialty shop in town and had a talk with the head man. “I’m trying out for the stage,” I said. “I want to make some records of my own voice—at home. Can it be done? Not singing, just speaking. But it’s got to come out clear as a bell, no matter where I’m standing.”

They had nothing like that on the market, he told me, only some of those little tin platters that you have to stand right up close to and yell at. But when I told him that expense was no object, he suggested I let him send a couple of his experts up and condition my phonograph with a sort of pick-up and string some wiring around the room. Then with some wax “master” records—blanks—and a special sort of needle I could get the same effect as the phonograph companies did at their studios.

I told him go ahead, I’d try it out. “See, there’s a famous producer coming to call on me and my whole career depends on this.”

He had to order the needle and dummy records from the factory. He didn’t carry things like that. “Make it two dozen, just to be on the safe side,” I said. “He might ask me to do Hamlet’s Soliloquy.” I could tell he thought I was a nut, but he said: “I’ll get you a trade discount on them.”

“Oh, and don’t forget the phonograph itself,” I said on my way out. “I forgot to mention I haven’t got one.”

They were all through by five that afternoon. There really wasn’t as much to it as I thought there’d be. It looked like just another agony box. The only difference was you couldn’t play anything on it like the real ones, it recorded sounds instead of giving them out.

“Now, here’s one very important thing,” I said. “I want to be able to start and stop this thing without going over to it each time.”

But that, it turned out, was a cinch. All they did was to attach a long taped cable with a plunger on the end of it, which had been featured commercially with certain types of

phonos for years. You sat across the room from it, pushed the plunger and it started, released it and it stopped. It was plugged in of course, didn't need winding.

"Move it up closer against the daybed," I said. "As close as you can get it, that's where I want it to go."

When it was all set, we put a record on and I tried it out. I stood off across the room from it and said: "Hello, how are you? You're looking well," and a lot of other junk, anything that came into my head. Then I sat down on the daybed and did it from there.

They took the record off and played it for me on a little portable machine they'd brought with them—it couldn't be played on the original machine, of course—and with a softer needle, fibre or bamboo, so as not to spoil it. The part it had picked up from across the room was blurred a little, but the part it had picked up from the daybed came out like crystal and so natural it almost made me jump.

"We'll let it go at that," I said. "Just so long as I know where I'm at, that satisfies me. By the way, how am I going to tell when a record's used up and it's time to put a new one on?"

"It's got an automatic stop, the plunger'll come back in your hand." After they'd gone I made a couple of minor improvements of my own. I hung an openwork lace scarf over the cabinet so you couldn't tell what it was and I paid out the cable with the plunger under the daybed, where it was out of sight. But it could be picked up easily by just dropping your hand down to the floor, no matter which end you were sitting on.

He was completely sold on me when we got back from the Gay Nineties the next night. I'd purposely left there with him earlier than the night before and kept him from drinking too much. It's easier to get anyone to talk when they're cockeyed, but it doesn't carry much weight in court.

He came in eating out of my hand but grumbling just the same. "Why couldn't we have gone to my place? I tell you I

don’t like it here, it gives me the heebies.”

This time I mixed the nightcaps right in front of him. He took the glass I passed him and then he smiled and said: “Is this another Micky Finn?”

I nearly stopped breathing. Then I did the only thing there was to do. I took the glass back from him and drank it myself. “You say some pretty careless things,” I answered coldly. “Can you back that up?”

“I suppose you did it to keep me from making a pass at you,” he said. I got my breath back again. Then he said: “How you going to stop me tonight?”

I hadn’t exactly thought of that. Just because my mind was strictly on business, I’d forgotten that his might be on monkey business.

“Make yourself comfortable,” I said quietly, “while I get off the warpaint,” and I went inside. I was halfway through when I suddenly heard him say, “Where’s the radio? Let’s have a little music.”

My God, I thought, if he finds that thing! I ran back to the doorway and stuck my head out and it must have been pretty white. “I—I haven’t got any,” I said.

“What’s this thing?” he said, and reached over to lift up the lace scarf covering it.

“That’s an electric sewing-machine,” I said quickly. “I make my own clothes. Tommy, come here a minute, I want to show you something.” He came over and my lungs went back to work for me again. “Isn’t this a keen little dressing room?” He misunderstood and made a reach. “Oh, no, no, put on the brakes!” I said. “Come on, let’s go in and sit down and talk quietly.”

We sat down side by side and I parked my drink on the floor, an inch or two away from the cable connecting with the machine. “Why do you keep saying you don’t like this place?” I remarked cagily. “Why do you get so shivery each time you come here? This morning you got all white when you looked out of the window—”

“Let’s talk about you,” he said.

“But I want to know. You promised you’d give me the lowdown.” But it wasn’t going to be as easy as all that. “God, you’re a sweet number, you’re tops, kid,” he said soft and low, “you’ve got me off my base, this isn’t just a one-night stand, I want to marry you.” He slipped his arm around me and leaned his head against me, so I knew I had him branded. I was on the inside track with him now. My hand dipped down toward the floor in the dark and felt the corded cable lying there. “You’ll marry in hell, you punk!” I thought savagely.

“You’re a chaser,” I stalled. I groped along the cable, gathering it up in my fingers until I got to the end and felt the plunger in my hand. “You used to know someone in this very apartment, you said the same thing to her I bet.”

“That rat,” he said sourly, “she was no good.”

“Who was she anyway?” I waited.

“You musta read about it in the papers,” he said. “That Pascal woman that got bumped.”

I reared up on my elbow and pushed the plunger. I raised my voice a little, spaced each word. “Why, Tommy Vaillant,” I said, and I went double on it for purposes of identification. “Tommy Vaillant, did you know her, Bernice Pascal, that girl that was found dead right here in this very building?”

“Did I know her? We were like this!” He held up two fingers to show me. The record would muff that, so I quickly put in: “As thick as all that? How’d you feel when she got it in the neck?”

“I gave three cheers.”

“Why, what’d you have against her?”

“She was a mutt,” he said. “Her racket was blackmail. She accidentally found out something about me that wouldn’t have looked good on the books. It was good for a Federal stretch. A shooting back in Detroit, in the old Prohibition days. I warned her, if she ever opened her trap, her number was up. I had her colored maid fixed and she

tipped me off Pascal was all set to blow to Montreal with this Reardon guy. I knew what that meant. The first time she ran short of cash, off would come the lid—up there where I couldn't stop her!"

"What'd you do about it?"

"I came over here to the apartment to stop her. And with a dame like her, there was only one way to do that."

"You came here intending to kill her?"

"Yeah," he said, "she had it coming to her."

I suddenly cut the motor. My hand seemed to act without my telling it to. Don't ask me how I knew what he was going to say next, I wasn't taking any chances.

"She was dead when I found her," he said. "Somebody beat me to it. She was lying on the floor, cold already. First I thought she was just drunk. Then when I saw different I tipped my hat to whoever done it and closed the door again. I got out of there in a hurry."

I turned it on again between "again" and "I."

"What's that whirring noise?" he said. "Is there a mosquito in here?"

"That's the frigidaire," I said. "The motor goes on and off." Westman would know enough to erase this before he had the wax record copied in hard rubber.

"I shouldn't be telling you all this," he said. "But you're not like her." I nestled a little closer to him to give him confidence, but not enough to start the fireworks up again. "What was the first thing you did after that?" I purred.

"I threw the key to her place down the sewer. Then I got a taxi on the next corner and drove over to the club and fixed myself a good alibi. Next day I went around to where the day doorman lived and paid his way back to Ireland—just to be on the safe side. He'd seen me with her too much for my own good."

"What about the night doorman?"

"He was new on the job, didn't know me by sight, didn't know which apartment I'd come into or gone out of." So he

hadn’t been greased, was just dumb.

“What about the colored maid, didn’t she worry you?”

“That was taken care of,” he said, “she had an accident.” I could tell by the tone of his voice that it must have been really an accident, that he hadn’t had anything to do with it, but I fixed that. I gave a loud boisterous laugh as though he’d meant it in a different way. “You think of everything!” I said, and switched the thing off.

It was a risky thing to say, but he wasn’t noticing, let me get away with it. “What’s funny about it?” he droned sleepily.

The phone rang all of a sudden. It was for him. They wanted him at the club on account of a raid was coming up. He’d left word where they could reach him. Just when I wanted him out of the way, too. Who said there was no Santa Claus?

“See you tomorrow night, Angel Face.”

He grabbed his hat, grabbed a kiss, and breezed.

It was getting light out, and I was all in. Some night’s work. And all on one record. I let the cord that had done all the dirty work slip out of my hand. I looked at it and shook my head and thought, “That poor slob.” I guess I was too tired by then, myself, to feel joyful about it. Maybe that was why I didn’t.

When I opened my eyes, the record was still on the turntable. You’d think the first thing I’d do would be to take a look under the lid and make sure. But I didn’t go near it for a long time, and when I finally did I didn’t feel much like crowing. I stood there holding it in my hand. Such a fragile thing! All I had to do was just let it fall, just let it slip out of my fingers and—goodbye. I thought of Jackie, then I put it down and ran to the phone as if I was scared of my life. Ran isn’t the word—flew. I got Westman at his office, told him I had what he needed.

“Swell, bring it down,” he tried to tell me.

“I can’t, you’d better come up and get it! Quick, right now! Jump in a cab, don’t give me time to think it over. Hurry, will you, hurry, before I—”

He came all right. He stripped off a pillowcase and slipped the record in that. “I’ll get Albany on the wire,” he promised. “I’ll have a stay of execution for you before the day’s over!” Then he wanted to know: “What’re you looking so down in the mouth about? Is this a time for—”

“Go on, Westman,” I said, “don’t stand here chinning, get that thing out of my sight.”

After awhile I went back to the phone again and called Tommy Vaillant. “Tom,” I said, “how quickly can you blow town?”

“Why, in five minutes if I have to,” he said. “Why? What’s up?”

“You better see that you do then. I just got a hot tip—they’re going to reopen the Pascal case.”

“Where do I figure?” he asked. “I’m in the clear.”

“Take my advice and don’t hang around arguing about it. Goodbye, Tom,” I sobbed. “Can you beat an extradition rap?”

“With one hand tied behind my back. What’re you crying about?” he asked.

“I—I sort of liked you, Tom,” I said, and I hung up.

This morning when I opened my eyes Jackie was sitting up on one elbow looking at me in a worried sort of way. “Oh, my head,” I groaned. “Never again!”

“Angel Face,” he said, “promise me you won’t take any more nightcaps.”

“Why?”

“You talk in your sleep, you say such funny things. You say it was you killed Bernice Pascal that time.”

I gave him a starry look and smiled. Then he smiled back.

“Angel Face,” he said.

He always calls me that. Always says I haven’t a thing inside my head, but that the outside is a honey.

THE BODY UPSTAIRS

I

I got home that night about 6:15. “Have a hard day?” the wife wanted to know as I pitched my hat at the chandelier. “Supper’s ready.”

“With you as soon as I polish off the body,” I said. I went in the bathroom, stripped and hopped into the tub.

Halfway through, I stopped and looked around me. Either I was cockeyed or there was something the matter with the soap. It was Healthglo and it was red, like it always is, but the color seemed to be running from it. Apparently it was dyeing the water a pale pinkish shade all around me. Very pretty but not my type of bath.

All of a sudden something hit my shoulder and made me look up. I let out a yip. The whole ceiling over me was sopping wet. The stain kept spreading around the edges and a single drop at a time would come to a head right in the middle of it, very slowly, and then drop off. There must be a man-sized leak in the bathroom above, I thought, and what a leak—a young cloudburst to make it come all the way through like that! But that wasn’t what was peculiar about it. If it had been only a leak it would have been the plumber’s business and not mine. This was a pink leak! It was water mixed with something else. It was even changing the color of my bathwater little by little as it dripped into it.

What that something else was I hated to think but I Had a rough idea.

I jumped into my pants and shirt, wet the way I was, and came tearing out of there. I nearly knocked my wife down getting to the door. “It’s the Frasers,” I said. “Something’s happened up there!”

“Oh, that poor woman!” I heard her say in back of me.

“You keep out of the bathroom for awhile,” I grunted.

I chased up the stairs without waiting for the elevator. We were on the third, and they were on the fourth. There was a guy standing outside their door just taking his hand away from the knob when I got up there. When he turned around I saw that it was Fraser himself.

“I can’t seem to get in,” he said. “I went off and forgot my key this morning.” He gave me a strained sickly sort of smile with it. He was a pale good-looking guy, with his hat over his left ear.

I didn’t answer. Instead I turned and hollered down the stair-well: “Katie!” She wouldn’t have been a woman at all if she hadn’t been out at the foot of the stairs listening instead of staying inside the flat where she belonged. “Call up the super from our place and tell him to bring his passkey with him.”

It didn’t seem to dawn on Fraser that something might be up. After all, I only knew him by sight. You’d think he’d wonder why it was up to me to worry about whether he got in or not. If he did, he didn’t let on. All he said was: “You don’t have to do that, my wife’ll be along any minute now.”

“I doubt that, buddy, I doubt that,” I said, but I didn’t explain what I meant. That’d come soon enough.

The elevator door banged open and the super came hustling out. I put out my hand for the key. “Give it here,” I said. “I’m doing it.”

Fraser for the first time showed some slight surprise. “I don’t get you,” he said. “What do you want in my place?”

I just said: “Save your breath, you’re going to need it,” and went in first. The first room, the living room, was perfectly O.K., neat as a pin, not an ashtray out of place. From there a short passageway led into the bedroom (same lay-out as our place) and in between the two was the bathroom. The bathroom door was closed tight and you couldn’t notice anything for a minute until you looked down at the floor. A pool of water had formed just outside the sill, still as glass. But when I opened the door—boy! It was about a foot deep in there, and the tub was brimming over. But that wasn’t it, it was what was in the tub that counted! It—or she—was in the tub, completely submerged. But she wasn’t undressed for a bath; she was clothed. There was a flatiron in the tub with her. Her head had been pounded to pieces and you couldn’t have recognized her any more, even if you had known her. It was a blood-bath if there ever was one! No wonder it had come through to our place.

It was Fraser’s wife all right. I heard a sound in back of me like air being slowly let out of a tire. Fraser had fainted dead away in the super’s arms. The super himself looked pretty green in the face, and my own stomach did a half-turn. ‘Take him downstairs to my place,” I said.

I locked up again to keep the other tenants out and followed them down. “Katie, do something for this man, will you?” I said, dialing Spring 7-3100 on our phone.

“Murder?” she breathed.

“And how. Pour me out two fingers will you, it’s the fiercest thing I’ve ever seen.” She wasn’t a detective’s wife for nothing; she didn’t ask any more questions sifter that.

“This is Galbraith, chief. Reporting from home. There’s been a murder right in my own building. A Mrs. Fraser, Apartment Four-C. Head mashed with a flatiron.”

“Orright, get busy,” he snapped. “I’ll have the medical examiner with you right away.” *Click!*

“You stay away from there, I told you. Keep that door closed.” This to Katie, whom I caught standing outside the

bathroom staring hypnotized up at our stained ceiling. “We’ll have to have that replastered tomorrow.”

I had my dinner by turning the little whiskey glass she’d handed me upside down over my mouth, then I ran back upstairs and let myself in.

I took a look at the chamber of horrors through the door and sized her up. She was wearing a flowered kimona and house-slippers with pom-poms. I reached over, closed my eyes, turned the tap off and pulled up the plug to let the water out of the tub. Then I got the hell out of there.

I went around and took a look in the bedroom. They had one of these double photograph-folders set up on the dresser—one of him, one of her—and that gave me a good idea what her face had looked like while she still had one. Not pretty, but intelligent—lots of brains. They were all over the bathroom now, I thought to myself, for anyone to see. I threw open the bureau drawers and had a look-see at them. His junk was all crowded into one little top drawer, all the others were full of hers. Liked her own way, had she? Next the closet. He had one suit, she had nine dresses. A funny thing though, the air in the bedroom was clear and odorless but that in the closet smelt distinctly of stale cigarette smoke. I quickly closed the door, took a deep breath on the outside, opened it again and sniffed inside. It was fainter than the first time but still there.

“Yeah, I’m in here, don’t bother me, go look in the bathroom,” I hollered out to the medical examiner and all the boys, who had just then arrived. A cop was hung outside the door to keep the reporters out, and everyone got down to work. When they began to get in my way I went down to my own place to give myself a little more elbow room, taking with me an insurance policy on Mrs. Fraser’s life I’d found tucked away in the bottom bureau drawer and two hairpins, one from the carpet in the bedroom, one from the mess on the bathroom floor. The policy was for ten grand and the first premium had been paid just one week before,

so it was now in full swing. I phoned the salesman who'd made it out and had a talk with him.

"Naw, he didn't, she took it out herself," he told me. "She said she was doing it because he wanted her to very badly, kept after her about it day and night."

"Oh-oh," I grunted. "Got any idea who this Mrs. Drew is?"

"Some woman friend of hers. She did that because she said she'd heard too many cases of people being killed for their insurance money, so she wasn't taking any chances. Wouldn't make her husband beneficiary, just in case."

But that didn't go over at all with me. No woman that crowds all her husband's belongings into one little top bureau drawer and appropriates all the rest for herself is afraid of her husband doing anything like that to her. She has too much to say over him. Or if she really had been afraid, why take out a policy at all, why not just lie low and steer clear of trouble altogether?

I went in to ask Fraser a few questions, ready or not. He was sitting on the edge of the sofa in our living room, sticking his tongue in a glass of spirits of ammonia mixed with water and having St. Vitus's dance from the waist up. Katie and the super, one on each side of him, were trying to buck him up. "Out," I said to the two of them and jerked my thumb at the door.

"Now no rough-house in here," Katie warned me out of the comer of her mouth. "I just had this room vacuumed today."

"How much do you make?" I asked him when they'd both gone outside. He told me. "How much insurance y'carrying?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

"And your wife?"

"None," he said.

I watched him hard. He wasn't lying. His eyes went up at me when he answered instead of dropping down.

I took a turn around the room and lit a butt. “What was her maiden name?” I said.

“Taylor.”

“You got any married sisters?”

“No, just a single one.”

“She have any?”

“No.”

I went over to him and kicked his foot out of the way. “When was the last time you saw Mrs. Drew?”

“Who?” he said.

I said it over, about an inch away from his face.

He screwed his eyes up innocently. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know any Mrs. Drew.”

I had him figured for the nervous type. Slapping around wasn’t any good. It wasn’t in my line anyway. “All right, Mac, come on in the bathroom with me.” I hauled him in by the shoulder. He let out a moan when he saw the ceiling. I made him sit on the edge of the tub, then I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and held his head down. It was still coming through. It was mostly water but he couldn’t see that. He squirmed and tried to jerk back when the first drop landed on the back of his head. Sweat came out all, over his face like rain. “Why’d you do it?” I said.

“I didn’t, my God, I didn’t,” he choked. “Let me out of here—”

“You’re going to sit here until you tell me why you did it and who Mrs. Drew is.”

“I don’t know,” he moaned. “I never heard of her.” Another drop landed, on his pulse this time, and I thought he’d have convulsions. “Why’d you do it? Who’s Mrs. Drew?”

He could hardly talk any more. “I didn’t. I don’t know her. How can I tell you if I don’t know her?” He kept waiting for the third drop that was coming. All of a sudden his head flopped and he fainted away again.

It may have been cruel, but I don't think so. It saved his life for him. It convinced me he hadn't done it, and that he didn't know who Mrs. Drew was. I got him over to a big chair and went and flagged Katie.

"Maybe you can help me. What made you say 'that poor woman!' when I started up the first time? How is it you didn't say 'that poor man!' ?"

She looked indignant. "Why, he abused her! You were never home enough to hear what went on up there. They used to have terrible rows. She dropped in here only this morning and told me he'd threatened her life."

"I didn't know you knew her that well."

"I didn't," she said. "As a matter of fact today was the first time she'd ever been in here."

"I don't get it," I remarked. "Why should she come to you to spill a thing like that, if she hardly knew you at all?"

"She mentioned she'd found out from one of the neighbors that I was married to a detective. Maybe she was looking for protection." Or maybe, I said to myself, she was planting evidence against her husband. First with the insurance salesman, now with Katie. Somehow it smelled a little fishy to me. Women will gossip about other women's husbands maybe, but never their own. This one had. She hadn't just talked at random either. She'd shot off her mouth where it would do the most good; she'd created two star witnesses for the state in case anything happened.

"Wait a minute," I said. I went and got the two hairpins I'd picked up upstairs and rinsed off the one I'd found on the bathroom floor. Then I went back to Katie. "You're a woman," I said. "How was she wearing her hair?"

It took her four and a half minutes to tell me all about it, without once repeating herself. Then I showed her the two hairpins. "Which would go with that?"

"Why, the amber one of course." She nearly laughed in my face.

“Only a man would ask a thing like that! How could a blonde like her use a black hairpin like this other one? It would have stood out a mile off.”

“Here’s four bits,” I said. “Run along to the movies, you’ve earned it. And I don’t want you around when the boys come down to see Fraser.”

I jiggled the two hairpins up and down in my hand. The black one was the one I’d found in the bedroom. Something told me that Mrs. Drew, when she showed up a few months from now to cash in on that ten grand, was going to turn out to be a dark-haired lady. But I wasn’t going to wait until then to make sure. I very much wanted to meet her now.

I got my claws in the superintendent and hauled him in from the hallway, where Katie had lingered to give him instructions about kalsomining our ceiling. “Mrs. Fraser had a woman visitor sometime during the day today,” I told him. “Think hard.”

“I don’t have to,” he said. “She came right up to me and asked me which entrance to take, it must have been her first visit.” The building is one of those inner garden things with four wings.

“She had dark hair, didn’t she?”

Then he goes and spoils my day. “Nah, she was as blond as they come.”

I recovered after awhile. Just because he’d seen one caller didn’t mean there hadn’t been others later on that he hadn’t seen. “You didn’t see her when she left, did you?” That was asking too much. But not of him, it turned out; he seemed to know everything that was going on. “I think I did at that,” he said. “I ain’t sure.”

“Whaddye mean?” I said impatiently. “If you got a good look at her going in, how could you miss knowing her when she came out?”

“I don’t know if it was her or not,” he said. “I saw someone come out of there that looked like her, was dressed just like her, but when she went in she was alone

and when she came out there was a guy with her. I wasn't close enough to her the second time to tell if it was the same one."

"That's because y'mind ain't trained," I snapped. "Now forget all about her coming out and just concentrate on her going in. That ought to be easy because you said she stepped right up to you. All right, got it?" He nodded dumbly. "What color was she wearing?"

"Black."

"Well, wasn't there some ornament, some gadget or other on her that would strike your eye, catch your attention?"

"I didn't notice," he said.

"Close your eyes and try it."

He did, then opened them right up. "That's right, there was," he grinned happily. "I saw it just now with my eyes shut. She had a big bow on the side of her hat." He snapped his fingers. "Yeah, it must have been her I saw coming out, the second one had it too. I spotted that same bow all the way across the court."

"See how it works?" I said. "Drop around sometime and we'll be glad to give you a job—scrubbing the floor." So she had a guy with her when she left. That explained who had done the smoking in the clothes closet up there. Clothes are too sacred to a woman, whether they're her own or not, for her to risk getting sparks on them. It would take a man not to give a damn where he lit up.

It was still all balled up to me. The best I could do was this: the lady-visitor had arrived first, openly, and been let in by Mrs. Fraser. Then when Mrs. F. wasn't looking she had slipped a male accomplice into the flat and he'd hidden in the closet and waited for a favorable opportunity to jump out and give her the works. I scratched the part out of my hair. That was lousy, it stank. First, because the woman had gone right up to the super of her own free will and let him take a good look at her when it would have been easy enough to avoid that. Second, because she was a blonde,

and the hairpin I'd picked up was a black one. Third, because it was Mrs. Fraser herself and not anyone else who had gone around planting suspicion against her husband. You might almost say that she had lent a hand in her own murder.

I went up to 4-C again, giving myself a scalp treatment on the way. The cop was still outside the door. "Never mind trying to hide your cigarette behind you," I said, "you're liable to burn yourself where it won't do you any good." No more reporters, they had a deadline, and the medical examiner had gone too. She was still in there, on the living-room floor now, waiting to go out. "Oh, by the way," I mentioned, "I'm holding the husband down in my place, in case you guys want to take a look at him." They almost fell over each other in their hurry to get out and at him. "He didn't do it," I called after them, but I knew better than to expect them to listen to me.

I followed them out and right away another door down the hall opened an inch or two. It was just Mrs. Katz of 4-E trying to get a free look at the body when it was carried out. I beckoned to her and she came the rest of the way out, pounds and pounds of her. I liked Mrs. K. at sight. I bet she cooked a mean bowl of noodles. "Maybe you can tell me something I'd like to know."

She finished swallowing the marshmallow she was chewing on. "Sure, sure, maybe I'll get my name in the papers, huh? Poppa, come here."

"No, never mind Poppa. Did you see anyone go in there yesterday to call on her, in a black dress?"

"No," she said, "but somebody in a black dress was coming out. I met them down by the elevator when I was coming home from the grocer, a man and a woman together. They didn't live in the building so maybe they was visiting."

"Big bow on her hat?"

She nodded excitedly. "Sure, sure."

“That’s them. Blond, wasn’t she?”

“Get out! Dark—darker as I am even.”

I wheeled her around on her base and pushed her back in again. I had it now! The super met her coming in and he said she was blond. Mrs. Katz passed her going out and said she was dark. Well, they were both right. She’d come in blond and she’d gone out brunette.

I ran all the way downstairs to the basement and dragged the super away from his radio. “What time do you start the fire in the incinerator?”

“Not until after midnight,” he said. “Let it burn out between then and morning.”

“Then all today’s rubbish is still intact?”

“Sure. I never touch it until the tenants are all asleep.”

“Show me where it is, I’ve got to get at it.” We took a couple of torches, a pair of rubber gloves, and an iron poker and went down into the sub-basement. We should have taken gas masks too. He threw open the doors of the big oven-like thing and I ducked my coat and started to crawl in head-first.

“You can’t go in there!” he cried aghast. “They’re still using the chutes at this hour, you’ll get garbage all over you.”

“How the hell else am I going to get at it?” I yelled back over my shoulder. “Which of these openings is fed by the C-apartments?”

“The furthest one over.”

“It would be! You go up and give orders no one in the building is to empty any more garbage until I can get out of here.”

I don’t ever want a job like that again. Pawing around among the remains of people’s suppers is the last word in nastiness. Slippery potato peels got in my shoes and fishbones pricked my fingers. Holding my breath didn’t help much. I was in there over half an hour. When I was through I came out backwards an inch at a time and took a good

sneeze, but what I came out with was worth it. I had two fistfuls of human hair, blond hair cut off short at the scalp. Cut off in a hurry, because one of the hairpins that had dressed it was still tangled in it. It hadn't come from the dead woman's head; there was no blood on it. The hairpin was amber, mate to the one I'd found upstairs. I also had the crumpled lid of a cardboard box that said Sylvia, Hairdresser on it. It looked like a hatbox but it wasn't, hairdressers don't sell hats. I didn't really need it, I had a general idea of what was what now, but as the saying goes, every little bit added to what you've got makes a little bit more.

Upstairs I hung my duds out on the fire-escape to air and put on clean ones. Then I beat it over to headquarters to talk some more to Fraser. I found him in the back room where a couple of the boys had been holding hands with him since he'd been brought in. I got the cold shoulder all around, to put it mildly. "Well, well," said one of them, "look who's here. Nice of you to drop in. Care to sign your name in the guest-book?"

"I remember now," said the other. "Isn't Galbraith the name? Weren't you assigned to this case just tonight?"

"He wouldn't know. It didn't happen close enough to get him steamed up," said the first one. "The corpse only just about landed in his—"

I stuck my hands deep in my pockets and grabbed hold of the lining. "What's that paper you've got in your hand?" I cut in.

"Why, this is just the confession of Fraser here that he killed his wife, which he is now about to sign. Aren't you, Fraser?"

Fraser nodded like a jack-in-the-box and his eyes seemed to roll around all over his head. "Anything, anything," he gasped. They read it back to him and he almost tore it away from them, he was so anxious to sign and get it over with. I just stood by and took it all in. It didn't amount to a hell of a

whole lot. In fact it stacked up to exactly nothing. “Phooey!” I said. “You’ve got him punch-drunk, that’s all. Who the hell couldn’t get anything out of that nerve-wreck?”

His hand wobbled so that he could hardly put his name to it. They had to steady him by the elbow. “Now will you lemme alone, now will you lemme alone?” he kept murmuring over and over.

“Get wise,” I said as I followed them outside. “Why don’t you save yourselves a lot of razzing and tear that thing up before you show it to anybody?”

“Get that!” one of them laughed.

“Green with envy,” added the other.

“Look,” I said patiently, “let me show you. He didn’t have the key, couldn’t get in to do it even if he wanted to.”

“That’s what he tried to hand us, too.”

“I know it’s the truth because I found his key myself, found it on the living-room floor right in my own flat. The super had dumped him on the sofa, see, with his feet higher than his head.”

Did they laugh! They made more noise than a shooting-gallery. “Know where it had been all the time? In the cuff of his trouser. Dropped in when he was dressing this morning and stayed there all day long. It’s a natural, one of those crazy little things that do happen ever once in a while. That’s why I believe him. If it had disappeared altogether, I wouldn’t have. But who’d think of planting a key in his own trouser-cuff? If that ain’t enough for you dimwits, I checked up on where he worked, called his employer at his home, found out what time he left the office. He’d only just gotten to his door when I came up the stairs and found him standing outside of it.”

But I could have saved my breath, it was like talking to the walls. They had their suspect in the bag and were going to see that he stayed there. They shook their heads pityingly at me and went on out to break the glad news to the chief. I went in to Fraser again and sent the cop out of

the room. His hair was all down over his face and he was just staring out under it without seeing anything. I couldn't help feeling sorry for him, but I didn't let him know it.

"What'd you do that for?" I said quietly.

He knew I meant signing that cheesy confession. "It's no fun when they jab cigarette butts up under your armpits."

"Can that." I gave him a hard look. "I don't want to hear about your troubles. If there's anything yellower than killing your wife, it's saying you did it when you didn't. Now try to snap out of it and act like a man even if you're not. I want to ask you something." I called the cop and told him to bring him in a cup of coffee. While he was slobbering it all over the front of his shirt and sniffing into it I said: "You told me you've got an unmarried sister. She blond?"

"Yeah," he sobbed, "like me."

"Where can I get hold of her?"

"She don't live here, she's up in Pittsfield, Mass., with my folks."

"How'd she get along with your wife?"

"Not so hot," he admitted.

I let him alone after that. "Put him back in mothballs," I told the cop.

In the chief's office the two half-baked rookies were all but doing a war-dance around their embalmed confession, while the chief read it over through his glasses. Embalmed is right, it smelled out loud.

"You showed up smart on that last case," the chief said to me sourly.

"Why, it hasn't broken yet, I'm still with it," I said quietly. "That guy in there, Fraser, didn't have anything to do with it."

"Who did?"

"A Mrs. Drew," I said. "I'll show her to you as soon as I can. G'night."

I ran up a big bill by calling Pittsfield, Mass., long-distance, but it didn't take me long to find out all I wanted

to know about Fraser's sister. Which was simply that she wasn't there. The last anyone had seen of her had been the night before, waiting around the depot for a train. I wondered if even a girl from Pittsfield would be dumb enough to think she was disguising herself by changing her hair from blond to dark—still, you never can tell. Every once in awhile one of those 1880 twists crops up in a 1935 case. Apart from that, I found out there wasn't anyone named Drew in the whole of Pittsfield.

Even so, I had a pretty good set-up after just twenty-four hours' work. I had the two angles of the triangle now—the two women—Fraser's wife and sister. All I needed was a third angle, the man in the case. And that wasn't Fraser, he was just the fall guy in this.

Who the guy was, that had smoked in the clothes-closet and then stepped out to turn Mrs. Fraser's head into caviar, wasn't going to be any cinch. Starting from scratch I had this much on him: both the super and Mrs. Katz had lamped him on his way out, which wasn't much but it was better than nothing at all. In addition there was one other little thing I didn't need to be told by anybody. I was as sure as though I had been present at his christening that his name was going to turn out to be Drew, the same as the lady who was down on the insurance policy as beneficiary. But that was only a detail. He could call himself Smith for all I cared just as long as I got hold of him. As far as Fraser's sister was concerned she could keep. The point being that wherever Drew was, Mrs. Drew wouldn't be very far away. And if the Fraser girl happened to be Mrs. Drew, with or without benefit of clergy, that was her tough luck.

The first thing I did was to get hold of the super and Mrs. Katz, one at a time, and quiz them to get a rough idea of what he had looked like. It took hours and used up thousands of words, because neither of them were exactly Einsteins, but I got a couple of interesting facts out of them. The super, who had been all the way across the court from

him, could only contribute that on his way out he had taken the woman who was with him by the arm to help her manage the two very low, harmless steps that led down to the sidewalk level. Mrs. Katz, who had been waiting to go in the elevator as they came out, enlarged on this trait of gallantry he seemed to possess.

"Well, one thing, he was no loafer," she said approvingly. "I had my arms full with bundles, so what does he do, he turns and holds the elevator door open for me, I should go in."

Darned polite, I said to myself, for a guy who had just committed a murder. Politeness must have been an awfully strong habit with him, a hangover from whatever line of business he was in. Mrs. Katz was certainly no spring chicken, and I've seen better lookers. Who, I asked myself, is trained to be polite to women of all ages, no matter what they look like? Who has to be, in order to earn a living? A gigolo. A headwaiter. A floorwalker in a department store. An automobile salesman. A hairdresser—

Sure. I might have known that from the beginning. Hair seemed to have a lot to do with this. This woman had gone in there blond and come out brunette. I'd found a lot of blond hair cut off in a hurry in the incinerator, without any blood on it. This unknown guy had been up there at the time, although nobody saw him go in. And he's so used to handing out the oil to his customers that even when he comes out with that butchery on his conscience, he instinctively holds the door open for one woman, elaborately helps the other down a two-inch step. What you might call a reflex action. And to cinch the whole thing, there was that crumpled lid of a cardboard box that had been thrown down the garbage chute; the one that said Sylvia, Hairdresser on it.

That gave me a pretty good idea of how he had employed his talents up there in the flat, apart from mangling Mrs. Fraser. But all the same it took my breath away, left me with

a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach. The guy must be a monster. Was it possible for a human being to batter one woman to death and then right on top of that, in the very next room, calmly sit down and go to work giving his accomplice a quick treatment to change the color of her hair?

He must have said: “Anyone see you come in?” She must have said: “I had to ask the superintendent where it was.” He must have cursed her out for being ninety-nine kinds of a fool, then said: “Well, I took a chance on someone spotting you. I brought something that’ll fix it so they won’t know you as you go out.”

Well, I could fix it so nobody’d know either one of them this time next year, and I wasn’t wasting any more time about it either. I looked up Sylvia’s in the directory, and luckily there were only three of them to buck. If it had been Frances or Renee I would have had half a column to wade through. Nothing doing with the first two; I got to the third a little before five in the afternoon.

It was a whale of a place. Twenty-two booths going full-blast and a lot of steam and perfume and cigarette smoke all mixed up. It gave me the creeping willies to be in there, especially after somebody’s face with black mud all over it nearly scared me out often years’ growth. I stayed close to the door and asked to see the proprietor. It turned out Sylvia was just a trade-name and the proprietor was a man after all. He came out rubbing his hands; maybe he was just drying them off.

“You got anybody named Drew working for you?” I said.

“No,” he said, “we had an expert named de la Rue here until the day before yesterday, but he isn’t with us any more.”

That interested me right away. “Come again, what’d you say the name was?”

He made a mouth like that guy in the hair-tonic ads. “Gaston de la Rue,” he gargled.

I flashed my identification at him and he nearly jumped out of his skin and forgot about being French. “Break down,” I said, “I’m not one of your customers. Nobody on two legs ever had a name like that. Was it Drew or wasn’t it?”

“Sh, not so loud,” he said, “very bad for business. They like ’em French. This is just between us. Please keep it to yourself. Well yes, in private life I think he was called Gus Drew or something like that. But what an artist, he could have put a permanent-wave in a porcupine—”

“Let me see your appointment book for the past few weeks.” He took me back in his office and showed it to me. Mrs. Fraser’s name was down there three times in one month, and right next to it each time were “de la Rue’s” initials. “Why’d she always get him?” I wanted to know.

He shrugged. “She always asked for him. Some of them, they like to flirt a little.”

“Flirt with death,” I growled to myself. “Is he due back here for anything?” I asked him.

“He’s got a week’s pay coming to him, but when he called up and I asked him about it he said he wasn’t coming in for it. He told me to mail it to where he lives.”

“And did you? When?”

“Last night at closing time.”

It was just about being delivered. “Quick,” I said. “Got his last address on record? Fork it over.”

He gave it to me, then made a crack that nearly killed me. “Why ‘last,’ did he move?”

“Oh no, he’ll probably wave to me from the window.”

He followed me back to the front of the place again, sort of worried. “What’s he done?” he said. “What do they want him for?”

“The chief would like to have his mustache curled,” I answered and walked out.

I took a taxi and rode right up to the door of the address Mr. “Sylvia” had given me. I didn’t expect him to be there

any more and he wasn't. "Just moved out yesterday," the janitor said. "Didn't say where. Nice quiet fellow, too."

"Where's that letter you're holding for him?" I said. "Did it come yet?"

"Just now. He said he'd be back for it." His mouth opened. "How'd you know?"

"This is who I am," I said. "Now get this. I can't be hanging around the hallway. He mayn't show up for days. I'll take one of your rooms. You give him his letter when he asks for it, but watch yourself, keep a straight face on you. Then ring my bell three times, like this, see? Don't let him see you do it, but don't wait too long either—do it as soon as he turns his back on you. Now have you got that straight? God help you if you muff it."

"Golly, ain't this exciting!" he said. He showed me a sliver of a hall room at the back of the ground floor, with exactly three things in it—a bed, a light-bulb, and a window. I paid him a dollar apiece for them and after that I lived there. I tested the doorbell battery by staying where I was and having the janitor ring it for me from the vestibule. It was no cathedral chime but at least you could hear it, which was all that interested me.

They say you should be able to see the two sides to any story. Sitting here like that, waiting, with the walls pressing me in at the elbows, I saw as much of Drew's side of it as I was ever likely to. No wonder ten grand had seemed a lot of money, no wonder murder hadn't stopped him, if it meant getting out of a hole like this. Not that

I felt sorry for him, I just understood a little better than before. But there was one good angle to it. The ten grand wouldn't be his for a long time yet, not for months. Meanwhile he needed what was in that envelope the janitor had, needed the little that was coming to him from "Sylvia's," needed it bad. He'd be around for it. I couldn't lose.

Once in awhile I'd hear a step on the stairs, the old wooden stairs that seemed to go right up over my room, when somebody in the house came up or went down them. Once some woman hollered down from the top floor for her kid to come up. That was all. Silence the rest of the time. The minutes went like hours and the hours like weeks. I didn't even smoke; there wasn't room enough for two kinds of air in the place. I just sat, until I had a headache.

It came a little before eight, sooner than I'd expected. He must have needed it bad to come that quickly, or maybe he thought it was safer to get it over with right away than to wait a few days. He'd probably read in the papers by now that Fraser was taking the rap, anyway. And once he had this letter in his pocket and had walked around the corner, try to locate him again, just try.

II

Ding-ding-ding peeped the bell battery, and the air in the room got all churned up. I hauled the door out of the way and loped down the dim hallway. The janitor was standing just inside the street door waving his arm to me like a windmill. "He just went away," he said. "There he goes, see him?" His cheap khaki waterproof was a pushover to tail.

"Get back!" I snarled and gave him a shove. "He's liable to turn around." I waited a second to get set, then I mooched out of the house, took a squint at the sky, turned my coat-collar up and started down the street in the same direction. He did look back from the corner just before he turned, but I'd finished crossing to the opposite side and was out of his line of vision.

I gave him a lot of rope for the first two blocks, then I saw a subway entrance heading toward us and I closed up on

him in a hurry. He went into it like I'd been afraid he would. It's about the best way of shaking anyone off there is, but he had to change a dime or something, and when I got down the steps myself he'd only just gone through the turnstile. There was a train already in, with its doors wide open and jammed to the roof. He took it on the run along with a lot of others and wedged himself in on the nearest platform just as the doors started to slip closed. There was just room enough left to get my fingernails in by the time I got there, but that was all the leverage I needed. They were the pneumatic kind. Back they went and I was standing on his feet and we were breathing into each other's faces. "Whew!" I thought to myself, and kept my eyes fixed on the back of a newspaper the fat man next to him was reading.

He squirmed and yanked at 110th and tugged himself free. When I got up to the street myself he was just going into an A.&P. store. I took a look in the door as I went past. He was standing at the counter waiting his turn. Evidently they hadn't even had the price of groceries until he called for that money that was coming to him. I walked all the way to the next corner, then doubled back on the other side of the street and finally parked at a bus stop and stood there waiting. But the right bus for me never seemed to come along.

He was in there over ten minutes, and then when he came out his arms were still empty anyway. Meaning he'd ordered so much that he couldn't carry it himself. So they were going to stock up for the next few weeks and lie low, were they? I just barely kept him in sight after this, only close enough to tell which building he'd hit, as I knew there would be a last look back before he ducked. He finally got where he was going, gave a couple of cagy peeks, one over each shoulder, and then it was over. He was in—in Dutch.

I sized it up from where I was, tying my shoelace on somebody's railing. It was a President McKinley-model flat on the south side of 109th, crummy as they come, without

even a service entrance. That meant the groceries would have to be delivered at the front door when they came around, which was a chance for a lot more than groceries to crash in. No lights showed up in any front windows after he'd gone in, so I figured they had a flat in the rear. I eased myself into the vestibule. Half of the mailboxes had no names in them, so they were no help. I hadn't expected his to have any, but if the rest of them had I could have used a process of elimination. It was so third-class the street door didn't even have a catch on it, you just opened it and walked in.

I worked my way up the stairs floor by floor, listening carefully at the rear doors on each landing. There was a radio going behind one of them, but nobody seemed to be in any of the others. If I had them cornered they were lying mighty low. I hated to think I might have slipped up in some way. I started soft-shoeing my way down again, and just below the second floor met the groceries coming up in a big box about twice the size of the lad struggling with it. "Where they going?" I said.

"Fourth floor, rear."

I had him put them down, then I thumbed him downstairs. "I'll see that they get them." He was too exhausted to argue. I unlimbered my gun, gave the door a couple of taps, and flattened myself back to one side of it.

Not a sound, not even a footfall, for a couple of minutes. Then all of a sudden a voice spoke from the other side of the door, only a few inches away from me. "Who's out there?"

I thinned my voice to make it sound like a kid's. "A.&P., boss."

A chain clanked and fell loose. The lock, I noticed, was shiny and new, must have just been put on. I reached out with my heel and kicked a can of tomatoes to give him confidence. The door cracked and before it was an inch wide I had the gun pushing in his belt buckle. "Up," I snapped. He lifted them all right but couldn't keep them

from shaking. He didn't have anything on him though, so the precautions must have been just to give them time to make a get-away, and not because he'd intended fighting it out. There was no hall and the door opened right into the living room. I cuffed him to me and started to push in.

"What's all this about?" he tried to stall, and I heard a window go up.

"Hold it!" I yelled, and covered her from across his shoulder just as she raised one leg to go over. "Come on in again, baby."

There was my black-haired lady, a little pale around the gills, eyes nearly popping out of her head. There was something funny about her which I couldn't dope out at first. I took a second look and nearly keeled over. If I had, though, they wouldn't have hung around waiting for me to revive, so I gave a long whistle instead and let it go at that. I gave her a shove with my knee to show her which direction to take. "Get started, you head the daisy-chain going downstairs."

The chief was damn near bowled over when I brought them in to him. "So your Mrs. Drew wasn't a myth after all and you finally found her," he opened.

I knocked the black wig off her head with the back of my hand. "Mrs. Drew your eye. If you're holding Fraser for killing his wife better turn him loose. This is her right here." Her blond hair, clipped off short, stood up funny all over her head.

One of the boys who had used Fraser's armpits as ashtrays spoke up. "Then what was that we saw in the bathtub—"

"That was Fraser's sister, poor kid," I said. "She left Pittsfield that day and hasn't been seen since. Fraser didn't know she was coming but this pair did—maybe they got her to come down some way—but she must have walked in unannounced and spoiled their big love scene. Drew hid in the closet until time to come out and do his stuff. Mrs.

Fraser probably led up to it with a quarrel. She and the sister didn't hate each other. Anyway, they had the frame all planned to pass off her body as his wife's and let him fry for it. They dressed her in Mrs. F.'s kimona, dumped her in the tub and then proceeded to mutilate her face with the iron until even her supposed husband couldn't recognize her any more. Then the real Mrs. Fraser put on the dead girl's clothes and this black wig and beat it with her side-kick. As soon as Fraser had hit the ceiling at Sing Sing she would have married Drew, and then there would have been a Mrs. Drew all right to collect that ten-grand premium on her own life."

I shoved all the evidence I had across the desk at him and went home.

"Supper's ready," the wife said. "Should I wait until you've had your bath?"

"Just open the windows," I said. "You don't catch me in that tub again until Nineteen Forty."

KISS OF THE COBRA

Mary's old man, after six years of office-managing for a tire company in India, comes heading back with a brand-new wife. He breaks it to us in a telegram first and then makes a bee-line for the place we've taken up in the hills beyond San Bernardino. It seems he wants to show her to us.

My boss has been whiter than snow to me. I'm on leave of absence with pay, and that's how we happen to be there.

When I had dragged myself in, a few weeks before, to report for duty after a tussle with the flu, I was down to 130, stripped, and saw spots in front of my eyes. He took one look at me and started swearing. "Get out of here!" he hollered. "Go 'way back someplace and sit down for six weeks. I'll see that you get your checks. It gives me the shivers to look at you!" When I tried to thank him he reached for his inkwell, maybe just to sign some report, but I didn't wait to find out.

So we hauled two centuries out of the bank, took the kid brother with us, and wound up in this dead-end up in the San Benny mountains. It hasn't even electric lights, but it isn't so bad at that. You can't quite hear the caterpillars drop. So there we are now, the three of us, Mary and me and the kid brother, waiting for her old man to show up.

He drives up around eight in the evening, smack off the boat, in a car he's hired down in L. A. He's brought her with him. She gets out and comes up to the house on his arm, while the driver starts unloading half of Asia behind them.

He comes in grinning all over and shakes hands with the three of us. “This is Veda,” he says.

“Where’d she ever get that name?” I think to myself.

She’s a slinky sort of person, no angles at all; and magnetic—you can’t take your eyes off her. She’s dressed like a Westerner, but her eyes have a slant to them. They are the eyes of an Easterner. She doesn’t walk like our women do, she seems to writhe all in one piece—undulates is the word.

She’s smoking a ten-inch Russian cigarette, and when I touch her hand the sensation I get is of something cold wriggling in my grasp—like an eel. I can’t help it, the skin on the back of my own hand crawls a little. I try to tell myself that anyone’s handshake would feel like that after a drive in the open on a raw, damp night like this. But I can tell Mary doesn’t like her either. She acts a little afraid of her without knowing why, and I have never known Mary to be afraid of anything in her life before. Mary keeps blinking her eyes rapidly, but she welcomes her just the same and takes her upstairs to show her her room. A peculiar odor of musk stays behind in the room after she’s gone.

I go out to the pantry and I find the kid brother helping himself to a stiff nip. “The rain is bringing things up out of the ground,” he mutters.

Kids don’t finish growing until they’re twenty-five, so I kick him in the shins, take it away from him, and kill it myself, so as not to cheat him out of an extra half inch or so. “What’s your trouble?” I snap.

“She’s Eurasian,” he scowls, staring down at the floor. “Something mixed like that.” He’s been to college and I haven’t, so he has me there. “Tough on sis,” he says. “Damn it, I would have preferred some little digger with a pickax and baby-blue eyes. There’s something musty, something creepy about her. Brrh!”

Me too, but I won’t give in to him. “It’s the house, it’s been shut up all summer.” And we look at each other and

we know I’m lying.

All kinds of trunks, boxes, crates come in and go up to her room, the driver is paid off and takes the car back to L. A., and the five of us are left alone now in the house.

When she comes down to supper I don’t like her any better; in fact, a hell of a lot less. She’s put on a shiny dress, all fish-scales, like this was still India or the boat. On her head she’s put a sort of beaded cap that fits close—like a hood. A mottled green-and-black thing that gleams dully in the candlelight. Not a hair shows below it, you can’t tell whether she’s a woman or what the devil she is. Right in front, above her forehead, there’s a sort of question-mark worked into it, in darker beads. You can’t be sure what it is, but it’s shaped like a question-mark.

Then, when we all sit down and I happen to notice how she’s sitting, all the short hairs on the back of my neck stand up. She’s sort of coiled around in her chair, like there were yards and yards of her. One arm is looped sinuously around the back of the chair, like she was hanging from it, and when I pretend to drop my napkin and look under the table, I see both her feet twined around a single chair-leg instead of being flat on the floor. But I tell myself, “What the hell, they probably sit different in India than we do,” and let it go at that.

Then, when Mary slaps around the soup-plates I get another jar. We’re none of us very refined and we all bend our heads low over the soup, so as not to miss any of it. But when I happen to look up and take a gander at her, her head is down lower than anyone else’s with that damn flat hood on it, and I get a sudden horrible impression, for a minute, of a long black-and-green snake sipping water down by the edge of a river or pool. I shake my head to clear it and keep from jumping back, and tell myself that that nip I had in the pantry just before dinner was no good. Wait’ll I get hold of that guy in San Benny for selling me stuff like that!

O.K. Supper's over and Mary tickles the dishes, and then we light a log fire in the fireplace and we sit around. At ten Mary goes up to bed; she can't stand that damn Indian perfume or whatever it is. Vin, that's the kid brother, and I stick around a little longer sipping port and listening to the old man jaw about India, and I keep watching Veda.

She's facing the fire, still in that coiled-up position. She's sort of torpid, she hasn't moved for hours, but her eyes glitter like shoe-buttons in the light of the flames. There's something so reptilian about her that I keep fighting back an impulse to grab up a long stick, a fire-iron, anything at all, and batter and whack at her sitting over there.

It scares me and I sweat down the back—God, I must be going screwy! It's my father-in-law's wife, it's a woman, and me thinking things like that! But you can't see the lines of her body at all, they're lost in a thick, double coil, the top one formed by her hip, the lower one by her calf, and then that flat, hooded head of hers rising in the middle of it and brooding into the fire with its basilisk eyes.

After a long time, she moves, but it only adds to the horrid impression that I can't seem to get rid of. I'm watching her very closely and she evidently doesn't know it. But what I see is this: she sort of arches her neck, which is long and thin anyway, so that her head comes up a little higher. She holds it for a minute, reared like that, and then she lets it sink back again between her shoulder-blades. So help me God if it isn't like a snake peering out from some tall grass to see what's what!

She repeats it again a little while later, and then a third time. Vin and the old man don't see it at all, and it's barely noticeable anyway. Just like a person easing a stiff neck by stretching it. Only she does it in a sort of rounded way, almost a spiral way. But maybe it's just a nervous habit, I try to tell myself, and what's the matter with me anyway? If this keeps up, I'm a son of a so-and-so if I don't go in and see a doctor tomorrow.

I look at the wall-clock and it's five to eleven, late for the mountains, so I give Vin the eye to clear, to give the newlyweds a break alone together by the fire. Meanwhile a big orange moon has come up late and everything is as still as death for miles around, not even a mountain owl's hoot, as if the whole set-up was just waiting for something to happen.

The kid and I get up and say good-night, and, fire or no fire, her hand isn't any warmer than before, so I let go of it in a hurry. Vin goes right up but I take a minute off to lock up the windows and the door. Then, as I'm climbing, I glance around at them. They've moved closer together and the dying fire throws their shadows on the wall behind them. The old man's head looks just like what it should, but hers is flat, spade-shaped, you almost expect to see a forked tongue come darting in and out. She's moving a little and I see what she's doing, she's rouging her lips. I give a deep sigh of relief and it takes such a load off my mind to find out she's just a regular woman after all, that I stop there for a minute and forget to go on.

Then she takes something out of the little bag she has with her and offers it to him. It's one of those long reefers she seems partial to. She also takes one herself. "Cigarette," she murmurs silkily, "before we go up?" She says it in such a soft voice it almost sounds like a hiss.

I know I have no business watching, so I soft-shoe it the rest of the way up and go about my business. Only five minutes go by, less than that even, and I hear a rustling and a swishing in the upstairs hall and that's her going to her room—by herself. You don't hear any footsteps when she walks, just a soft sound that scaly dress of hers makes when it drags along the floor.

Her door closes and goodnight to her, I say to myself; and I think I wouldn't want to be in Mary's father's shoes for all the rice in China. Then, as I come out of the bathroom with my toothbrush in my hand, I hear the old man's step

starting up the stairs from the floor below and I wait there out in the hall to have a last word with him.

He comes up slow, he's breathing kind of hard, sounds like sandpaper rubbing on concrete, and then when he gets halfway to where the landing is, he hesitates. Then he comes on a step or two more, stops again, and then there's a soft plop like something heavy falling. Right after that the woodwork starts to creak and snap a lot, as if somebody was wrestling on it. I don't wait to listen to any more, I throw my toothbrush away and I chase to the end of the hall. When I look down, I gasp in surprise.

He's lying flat on his back on the staircase landing between the two floors, and he's threshing about and squirming horribly, as if he's in convulsions. The agonized movement of his body is what's making the woodwork creak like that. Something seems to be jerking him all over, his arms and legs will stiffen to their full length and then contract again like corkscrews. His tongue's sticking all the way out of his mouth, and saliva or foam or something is bubbling around it. His eyes are glazed over.

One jump brings me down to where he is, and I lift his head and get it off the floor. As I do so, his whole face begins to blacken in my hands. There is one last hideous upheaval, as if I was trying to hold down a wild animal, and then everything stops. There's not a twitch left in his whole body after that.

Vin's heard the racket and he comes tearing out of his room.

"Whiskey," I pant. "Don't know what it is, gotta bring him to!" But there isn't any bringing to. Before the kid can sprint down past me and then up again with it, he's stiff as a board in my arms. I'm holding a lead weight, with a color that matches.

The blackness has spread all over his body like lightning and shows up in the veins in his throat and on his wrists, as if ink had been poured into his arteries. Nothing to be done,

he isn’t breathing. We pour the whiskey into his open mouth, but when we tilt his head to make it go down it comes right back again.

I pass him to Vin and get out from under and go down and take a miniature Keeley cure right then and there. It isn’t because he’s Mary’s old man or because it happened right in my arms, it’s those terrific spasms and that blackness that have gotten me. I get over it in a minute and we bring him down off the landing between us and lay him out. Then I let the kid have a double bracer and the hell with his extra growth.

We look at him lying there on the divan, stiff as a ramrod, and I try to flex his arms and legs. A peculiar muscular rigidity has already set in all over, even in those few minutes. I’m no medical student but I know it can’t be rigor mortis that soon. This is the United States, but this was an unrecognizable death, a sudden, thrashing, black, tropical death—here in the States.

“Get your hat,” I say to Vin, “and thumb yourself down into town and bring back the medical expert. Damn this place anyway for not having a telephone!” I push him out the door.

Now there are only four of us left in the house, two of them women and one a dead man, and the moon’s peeping in at all the windows and filling the place with black shadows. From the minute the kid’s dogs have left the wooden porch, you don’t hear another sound outside, not the snapping of a twig, not the rustling of a dry leaf.

I’m not scared of stiffs. That’s because of the unpleasant business I’m in. I cover his face to hide the blackness and then I pull down all the shades to keep the nosey moon out.

Then, as I start up the stairs to break the news to Mary, I see a thread hanging, moving in the air above the landing where he fell. It shows up against the light shining down from the upstairs hall, and that’s how I happen to notice it.

It’s a cigarette burning itself out where he dropped it when he fell. It’s the same one she gave him when I left them before the fire. I said those Russian ones are long, it’s lasted all this while, as long as a cigar would. There’s still an inch or two left of it, there’s still a dab of unburned tobacco in it; and the end, the mouth part, is still intact. That’s all that matters, so I pinch it out and wrap it in my handkerchief.

After I’ve told Mary and persuaded her it’s better if she doesn’t go down and look at him, I knock on the other door across the hall, her door. No answer. So I open it and I go in. Not there. She must have gone downstairs while I was in Mary’s room just now.

The air is loaded with that sticky musk smell that follows her wherever she goes. It’s even worse up here though. Downstairs, it was more like a perfume; up here it’s rank, fetid. It recalls stagnant, green pools and lush, slimy, decaying vegetation.

On the dresser, she had a lot of exotic scents and lotions in bottles, the same as any other woman would, the only difference being that hers hail from India. Sandalwood, attar of roses—but one of them’s just ordinary everyday liquid mucilage mixed in with the others. No label on it, but my nose tells me this—and my fingertips, when I try it. I even take a pretty good-sized chance and test it on the tip of my tongue. Just mucilage. Anyone that’s ever sealed an envelope or licked a stamp knows the taste. I wonder what it’s doing there among those other things, but I put it back.

In the drawer, I come across a box of those extra-long cigarettes of hers, and I help myself to two or three just to see how they’ll stack up against chemical analysis. She has some other peculiar junk hanging around too, that I can’t make head or tail of. I know what it is all right, but I can’t figure what she’s doing with it.

First off, she has a cake of that stuff they call camphor ice—in a tin box. It freezes the skin, closes up the pores, is

supposed to be good for chapped hands or something. But since when do they have chapped hands in India? All right, I argue to myself, maybe she brought it with her to guard against the colder climate over here, and I put that back too.

Then there's a funny little Indian contraption of wood about the size of a cup and saucer, which looks like a baby-sized pestle and mortar. The hollow part of it is all smeared red, like she was in the habit of pounding out and mixing her own rouge instead of buying it ready-made. Well, maybe they do that in India too.

Next I come across a hell of a whole lot of flannel. At first I think it is bandage, but there is too much of it for that. So the best I can figure she makes her undies out of it.

So much for the dresser, and I haven't gotten anywhere much. She has a lot of trunks, bags, boxes, etc., ranged around the room—all the stuff that I saw the driver unload from the car when she and the old man got here. One of the biggest pieces has a cover draped over it.

When I yank this off, lo and behold, a chicken-coop! Not only that, but the peculiar rank smell I've mentioned seems to come stronger from there than anywhere else. It nearly throws me over when I try to go near it. So she keeps pets, does she? I get up close to the thing and try to peer down into it between two of the slats, and I can't see a thing, there's a very close wire mesh on the inside. There's something alive in it though, all right, because while I'm standing there with my face up against it, I hear the wire netting sing out. The wing of a chicken must have brushed against it.

I cluck a little at it. No answering cluck. I shift it around a little and shake it up a little to try to get a peep out of them—it must be more than one chicken, one chicken couldn't smell that strong—and the wire sings out plenty, zing, zing, zing.

I go around on the other side of it and I spot a saucer of milk standing there on the floor next to it. One of the slats on that side is hinged, so that it can be opened up just about six inches from the floor. I reach down and I put my hand on it and I'm just fixing to lift it, then I think: "The hell with her and her chickens, I'd better go down and find out what she's up to instead of wasting my time up here." So I ease out of the room and go downstairs.

She's down there with the body. I stop and watch her for a minute from the stairs. She's uncovered his face and she's groveling upon him—sort of twined about him. Her face is hidden against him as if she was trying to burrow her way into his clothes and she couldn't have got any closer if she tried. Maybe it's just the Oriental mode of displaying grief, but I have my doubts. There's something pathological in this, that creature is less than human—or thinks she is.

Something snaps in me. "Don't coil up on him like that!" I bark at her. "You're like a damn snake nesting on something it's killed!" She untwines slowly and raises her head and turns it my way, and a ghoulish smile flickers on her face. Maybe I just imagine that, for it's dark in the room.

There's a pounding outside at the door and Vin has come back with the medical expert and a policeman. There's a motorcycle throbbing against a tree out there, and it's the friendliest sound I've heard in twenty-eight years. They've parked the ambulance as close to the house as they can get it, which is about half a mile down the dirt road which gives up at about that point.

"So what's the riot?" says the medical guy. "This kid comes tearing in on a Ford without brakes, which he stole from a Jap farmer, and knocks over one of the lamp posts outside headquarters—"

"That was the only way I could stop it," explains Vin.

"Stole ain't the word," I squelch the hick. "I'm Lawton of the L. A. homicide bureau, and since he was deputizing for

me, you call that commandeering. I want an autopsy from you."

"When'd it happen?"

"Five after eleven."

He goes over and he fumbles around a little, then he straightens up and his mouth is an O. "P.M., huh?"

"Not last year and not last week, eleven tonight!" I snap.

"Never saw anything like it," he mutters. "Stiff as a board and all black like that! You're gonna get your autopsy, mister."

"And make it gilt-edged, too."

There's a rustling on the stairs and we all look upward. Veda's on her way back to her room, with that damn long dress of hers trailing after her up the steps like a wriggling tail.

"Who's the spook?" asks the examiner.

"We're coming to her. First, the autopsy," I tell him. "Don't put it off, I want it right away—as soon as you get back with him!"

The driver comes in with a rubber sheet and he and the cop carry the old man out between them.

"Turn these over for me too," I say, "and get me a chemical analysis on them," and I pass him the butts I swiped in her room and the one the old man was smoking on the stairs when he fell. "And make room for my wife on the front seat. I'm sending her in with you."

He gives me a surprised look. "You sure you want her to ride with us on a death car like that?"

"One sure thing, she's not staying another minute in this house, not while I know it. Wait, I'll bring her right down!"

I go up to get her, and I find her in the hall shivering and pop-eyed. She's standing outside Veda's door bent over at the keyhole like she was rooted to the spot. But as soon as she sees me she comes running to me and goes into a clinch and hides her head on my shoulder and starts bawling and shaking all over. "Charlie, I'm afraid to stay here! That

awful woman, that awful heathen woman in there, she's possessed of the devil."

I lead her downstairs and out, and walk her down the road to where the car is, and on the way she tells me about it. "It's enough to make your hair stand on end," she whispers. "Such awful goings-on in there."

"All right," I say soothingly, "tell Charlie about it, Charlie'll know if it's bad or not."

"I heard the gentlemen come downstairs," she says, "so I got up to come down and make them a cup of coffee. As I was going past her door, I heard funny sounds from there. I'm only a woman after all, so I stopped and took a look through the keyhole. And after that I couldn't move from there. I was held there against my will, until you came along. Charlie, she was dancing—all by herself in such a weird way, and it kept getting worse all the time. She kept getting nearer and nearer the door, until I think she would have caught me there if you hadn't come. She seemed to know someone was outside her door, and she kept her eyes on it. I couldn't budge!"

I know she isn't exaggerating, because I myself noticed a sort of magnetism or mild hypnotism about this Veda from the minute she came in the house. "What kind of a dance was she doing?" I ask her.

"First, she was just standing in one place and just wriggling back and forth and curving in and out like she didn't have any spine at all. She still had on that horrible, glittery dress clinging to her like a wet glove and that ugly hood on her head and she kept making a hissing noise and sticking her tongue in and out like she was tasting something. But then, afterwards, it got even worse than that. All of a sudden she went down on the floor in a heap and began crawling around on her stomach and switching her legs from side to side, like she was a fish or mermaid got stranded outside of the water—"

"Or a snake?" I put in.

She grabs my arm. “That’s it, that’s it! Now I know what she reminded me of! Every once in awhile she’d lift her head off the floor and raise it up and look around, and then she’d drop it back again. Then, finally, she squirms over to a little saucer of milk standing next to a big packing case and she starts drinking from it, but just with her tongue, without using her hands at all.”

“O.K., Toots, get in, you’re going to town.”

“Charlie, I think you’d better notify the state asylum,” she whispers. “I think his death has made her lose her mind. She must really think she’s a snake.”

This is putting it so mild that I have a hard time not laughing right in her face. That creature lurking back there in the house doesn’t only think she’s a snake; for all practical purposes, she is one. I don’t mean in the slang sense, either. She is sub-human, some sort of monstrosity or freak that India has bred just once in all its thousands of years of history.

Now, there are two possibilities as I see it. She is what she is, either of her own free will—maybe a member of some ghastly snake-worshiping cult—or without being able to control herself. Maybe her mother had some unspeakable experience with a snake before she was born. In either case she’s more than a menace to society, she’s a menace to the race itself.

As for Mary’s tip about the asylum, what’s the sense? She could beat an insanity rap too easily. The strangeness of her ways, the far country she comes from, would be points in her favor. It would be a cinch for her to pass off the exhibition Mary saw through the keyhole as just an Asiatic way of showing grief for the departed. And even if I could get her booked in an institution, look what I’d have on my conscience, unloading her on a bunch of poor harmless nuts clipping paper dolls! She’d depopulate the place in a week. No, I tell myself, if I can only get the goods on her for the old man’s death, she goes up for first-degree murder

without any fancy insanity trimmings. The rope's the only sure cure for what's the matter with her.

So far I haven't got a thing, no motive and not even any evidence, and won't have until that damned medical examiner reports to me. The law being what it is, a person's innocent until you can prove him guilty. I can't prove her guilty just because I don't like how she dresses, how she hisses when she talks, how her room smells, and how she drinks milk off the floor.

I go back to the house alone. The moon's on the late shift and now there are only three of us there—one of them a kid of twenty who's just goofy enough to fall for this exotic vamp of death.

My footsteps don't make any noise on the dirt road, and as I come up on the porch, the living-room windows are orange from the fire going inside. I look in through one of them and I see her and the kid there in the room. He's standing there motionless, as if fascinated, and she's coiled up next to him and I see one of her white arms creeping, wavering like a vine up his coat sleeve. I freeze all over with dread. Their heads start coming closer together, slowly, very slowly, and in another minute their lips will meet.

Maybe this first kiss won't hurt him any, but I'm not in the mood to take a chance; I'd rather see him kissing poison ivy. Her head starts to weave a little and her neck lengthens in that old familiar movement. It's the almost hypnotic slowness of the thing that gives me a chance to do something about it. I nearly take the front door off its hinges and before they can even turn their heads to look, I've split them wide apart with my shoulder for a wedge.

They each react differently. He flops back, and I can tell the buildup she has given him has already taken effect, because he turns sore. Maybe he's ashamed too. She sinks back into a sort of coiled watchfulness and tries to look very innocent and harmless. She wets her lips a little.

“Watch what you’re doing!” he shouts wrathfully, and before I can get out of the way, wham, right below the ear! I go down holding onto my jaw and I feel rotten, not from the blow either. Something tells me he’s a goner, unless I can reason with him. If he won’t listen to me nothing can save him. “Vin, for Pete’s sake, you don’t know what you’re up against!”

“In the East,” she lisps, “a kiss means only friendship, peace.” But the look she squirts at me would drop an ox.

“Your kind of kiss means death, East or West!” Maybe I shouldn’t show my hand like that, but my busting in has told her enough already. She goes slinking up the stairs like a noisome reptile crawling back into its hole.

“You let up on her!” the kid blusters. “You’re all wrong! Being a detective has gone to your head! She told me herself you suspect her of all kinds of God-awful stuff. She didn’t have anything to gain from the old guy’s cashing in!”

I pick myself up and brush myself off. “No? Not much!”

He points at the fireplace. “Know what she just did before you got here? She brings down a codicil to the old guy’s will, that he signed on the boat coming over, and shows it to me—makes me read it. It cut her in on his estate instead of leaving it to me and your wife, Mary. It was done against her wishes, as a wedding present to her. Then she throws it in the fire. She don’t want his money, especially when there’s suspicion attached to her!”

Damn clever! I swear softly to myself. Not that I believe for a minute that she isn’t interested in the old guy’s money. She isn’t throwing it away that easy. Probably it was only a carbon-copy and the original’s put away in a safe place. But, this way, she’s given herself an out; gypped me out of my motive. If I jump on her now, I can’t produce any—and without one where am I?

A money motive will stack up stronger in a criminal court of justice than any other you can dig up. It’s liable to make an innocent person guilty in the minds of any twelve people

in a jury box, I don’t care who they are. If you can’t produce one you may as well turn your defendant loose unless you can show them newsreel films of the crime in the act of being committed!

Veda was a pushover for a deaf, dumb and blind defense attorney now, if I dared haul her up. As a matter of fact, now that the original will was the only one left in circulation, a much stronger motive could be pinned on Mary and the kid than on her, and there was nothing to prevent the defense boomeranging and trying to show that it was to their interest to get the old guy out of the way before he changed his will and dished them out of it in favor of this stranger from the East. There wouldn’t be much danger of its going any further than that, but at least it would free her—and then woe betide California, Oregon, Washington, while she roamed the Pacific Coast jacking up the death rate!

“So now,” the kid says bitterly, “why don’t you get smart to yourself, y’ would-be gumshoer, and lay off her? Strain a muscle and act chivalrous even if it ain’t in you!”

I close my eyes to shut out what I see coming to him. Is he sold on her! Has she got what it takes to catch ’em young and brand ’em! He’s doomed if I don’t break this thing up in a hurry. It may be puppy love to him, but what has he got that she wants? She don’t want anything from him but his life! She would probably have picked on me instead, only she knows I’m on to her, can tell I don’t trust her. The resistance ratio would be too high. Maybe guys in their prime aren’t her meat; she only works on the old and the young.

What the hell can I do? I can’t drive him out of the house at the point of my gun and make him stay away from her. He’d probably throw a rock at me the minute my back was turned and come right in again the back way. “All right, Sir Galahad,” I tell him sadly, “have it your way.”

“Aw, go to hell!” he says, and bangs out of the house to kick around among the trees outside and blow off steam. I do too. I smash last night’s empty whiskey bottle across the room, then I just sit down and wait. The old man never died a natural death, and my hands are tied. It hurts where I ought to have pleasure!

The moon chokes down out of sight, it gets light, and at six there’s a lot of commotion and backfiring outside and the San Benny medical expert is back with his report. No cop with him this time, I notice, which doesn’t look encouraging. I can hardly wait for him to get in the house. I almost haul him in by the collar. The kid looks up scornfully, I notice, then goes ahead scuffling pebbles with the point of his shoe out there.

“All right, what’s the ticket? Hurry up!” I fire at the examiner.

“I been up all night,” he says. “I been working like a machine. I wouldn’t do this for my own mother.” He has a baffled air about him. “I’m out of my depth,” he admits.

“I ain’t interested in your swimming ability, I wanna know about that stiff and those cigarettes. What’d you find?”

“Well, we’ll tackle the butts first. They’re out. I had the tobacco and the paper analyzed, triple-ply. No narcotic, not dipped or impregnated in any poisonous solution—absolutely nothing wrong anywhere.”

“Wa-a-ait a minute, wa-a-ait a minute now!” I haul up short. “I got eyes. What was that brownish stain on the mouthpiece of the one he’d smoked? Don’t try to hand me it was nicotine discoloring the paper, either, because it didn’t run all the way around the tip. It was just in one place and one only!”

“That,” he explains, “was a dot of dried blood. He’d torn his lip there in smoking the cigarette. Too dry. Often happens.”

“O.K.,” I say disappointedly, “let’s get on with it. What are you putting down in your report as the direct cause?”

“Paralysis of the nerve centers.” He takes a turn or two around the room. “But there was no rhyme or reason for it. It wasn’t a stroke, it wasn’t apoplexy, it wasn’t the bubonic plague—”

Through the window just then, I see the kid look up at the upper part of the house, as though a pebble or something fell near him and attracted his attention. But I’m too interested in what we’re talking about to give him much thought right then. He sort of smiles in a goofy way.

I turn back to the examiner. “Then you can’t tell me anything? You’re a big help!”

“I can’t give you any more facts than those. And since it’s my business to give you facts and not theories, I’ll shut up.”

“The pig’s aunt you will!” I blaze. “You’ll give me whatever you’ve got whether you can back it up or not.”

“Well, this is off the record then. I’d be laughed at from here to

Frisco and back. But the only close parallel to the symptoms of that corpse, the only similarity to the condition of the blood stream and to the bodily rigidity and distortion I’ve ever found, was in bodies I used to see every once in awhile along the sides of the roads, years ago, when I was a young medical student out in India, Java, and the Malay States.”

“Write a book about it!” I think impatiently. “And what stopped ’em?” I hurry him up. It’s like pulling teeth to get anything out of this guy.

“The bite of a cobra,” he says in a low voice.

The front door inches open and the kid slides back in the house and tracks up the stairs sort of noiseless and self-effacing like he didn’t want to attract attention. He’s been up all night, and I figure he’s going to bed and don’t even turn my head and look around at him. Besides, I’ve finally got something out of this guy, and it chimes in with what’s been in the back of my mind ever since she first showed up

here, and I’m too excited right then to think of anything else.

“Then what’s holding you up?” I holler out excitedly. “Put it down in your report, that’s all I need! If you ain’t sure of the species, just say ‘poisonous snakebite.’ What are you waiting for? You want me to catch the thing and stuff it for you before you’ll go ahead? I’ll produce it for you all right!”

I remember those “chickens” of hers in that crate with the wire netting—upstairs in her room at this very minute. Chickens, me eye! And a couple of hours after I should have thought of it, I realize that chickens don’t drink milk, they peck com.

“And when I do produce it, the findings aren’t going to be ‘accidental death.’ The charge is going to be murder in the first degree—with a cobra for a weapon.”

Whereupon, he goes and throws cold water all over me. “You can produce dozens of ’em,” he tells me, shaking his head. “You can empty the whole zoo into this house, and I still can’t put anything like that into my report.”

I nearly have pups all over the carpet. “Why? For Pete’s sake, why?”

“Because, for anyone to die of snake bite, there has to be a bite—first of all. The fangs of any snake would leave a puncture, a livid mark, a zone of discoloration. What do you suppose my assistant and I were doing all night, sitting playing rummy? I tell you we went over every inch of body surface with the highest-powered microscopes available. There wasn’t a blemish. Absolutely no place anywhere into which the venom could have been injected.”

I throw all the possibilities that occur to me at him one after the other. I’m not a trained doc, remember. Anyway, he squelches them as fast as they come.

“When you examined the blood stream, or what was left of it, weren’t there heavier traces of this stuff in some parts than others? Couldn’t you track it down from there?”

“It’s very volatile. It diffuses itself all over the system, like lightning, once it’s in. Does away with itself as a specific. It’s not a blood poison, it’s a nerve poison. You can tell it’s there by the effects rather than by the cause.”

“How about a hypodermic needle?”

“That would have left a swelling—and a puncture too; even if smaller than the snake’s fangs, even if invisible to the naked eye.”

“How about internally?”

“It doesn’t kill internally. We analyzed the contents of his stomach. Nothing foreign there, nothing harmful.”

I move the position of one of the chairs in the room rather suddenly—with my foot. “What a temper,” he says reproachfully.

“Maybe I’ve stuck too close to the village green,” I let him know. “Maybe I should have had L. A. in on this.”

“Suit yourself. But, if you go over our heads like that, you better have a direct accusation ready—and be able to back it up. I can’t support you if it comes to a showdown. This report’ll have to stay the way it is—‘paralysis of the nerve centers, of unknown origin’—take it or leave it.”

“You take it,” I say violently, and I tell him a good place to keep it while I’m at it. “You get L. A. on the wire for me when you go back,” I order him as he prepares to leave in a huff, “and have ’em send a squad up here with butterfly nets and insect guns. We’re gonna play cops and robbers.” And when he takes his departure we don’t say goodbye to each other.

I lock the front door on the inside and ditto the back door and drop both keys into my pocket. Then I latch all the shutters and fasten down all the windows with a hammer and wedges of wood. She isn’t going to get away from here until I’ve cinched this thing one way or the other, and I’ve got to be having some sleep soon. I can’t hold out forever.

I go upstairs, and there’s not a sound around me. It’s been light out for a long time now, but the upstairs hallway

is still dim, and at the end of it, where the kid's room is, lamplight is shining through the crack of his door. I thought he was asleep by now, and I get a little worried for a minute, but when I tap on it and hear him say, "Come in," I heave a long breath of relief, it's sweet music to my ears.

He's in bed, all right, but he's propped up reading a book, with a cigarette in his mouth. He hasn't noticed it got light and he's forgotten to turn out the lamp. That's all right—I used to do that too, when I was his age. "Didn't mean to butt in," I say. I figure it's a good time to patch up that little set-to we had downstairs before.

He beats me to the rap. "I'm sorry about what happened before."

"Forget it." I haul up a chair and sit down alongside the bed, and we're all set to bury the hatchet and smoke the pipe of peace. "You got me wrong, that was all." I frisk myself, no results. "Let's have one of your butts."

"I'm out of them myself," he grins.

"Then where'd you get that one?" I get a little uncomfortable for a minute. I give it a quick look. It's just one of the regular-size ones though.

"One of Veda's," he admits. He keeps talking around it without taking it out of his mouth. "I been dragging on it for ages, they last a long time." So that's why it's down to ordinary size! "Now don't go getting all het up again," he says as he sees me change color. "I didn't ask her for it, she offered it to me."

I try to remind myself those butts got a clean bill of health. I try to tell myself that if nothing's happened so far, after he's smoked it all this time—

I can hardly stay still on the chair. I lean forward and watch his face anxiously. He seems perfectly normal. "Feel all right, kid?"

"Never felt better."

Then I see something that I haven't noticed until now, and I go pins and needles all over. "Wait a minute, whatcha been

doing? Where'd ya get all that red all over your mouth?"

He turns all colors of the rainbow and looks guilty. "Aw, there you go again! All right, she kissed me. So what? I couldn't push her away, could I?"

My heart's pounding in my ears and I can hardly talk. It's too much like the set-up she gave the old man! She was rouging her lips, she was getting set to kiss him when I left them alone, and when I found him he had one of her butts. Still, there's no use losing my head, nothing's happened to the kid so far, and if I frighten him—

I haul out my handkerchief and try to talk slow and easy. "Here, get it off with this. Get it off easy, don't rub." My wrist is jerking like sixty as I pass it to him, though. "Just sort of smooth it off, keep your tongue away from it."

That's where the mistake happens. To do it he has to get the cigarette out of the way. He touches it, he parts his lips. It goes with the upper one! It's adhered, just like the old man's!

He flips it out, there isn't time for me to stop him, he winces and he says "Ow!"

I'm on my feet like a shot. "What'd you do?"

"Caught my lip on it," he says and tosses it down angrily. He's out of bed before he knows what's happened to him and I've flung him halfway across the room to the door. "Bathroom, quick!" I pant. "One of my razor blades—cut it wide open, split it to the gums if you have to, bleed like a pig, it's your only chance!"

He does it, he must read death on my face, for once he doesn't argue. I don't go with him, can't. I'm shaking so, I'd cut his throat. The water gives a roar into the washbasin, he lets out a yell of pain, and he's done it.

Second mistake. Opening it up like that only gives all the red stuff a chance to get in. He's young, maybe he could have fought off the smaller amount that would have penetrated through the original slit. Too late, the examiner's words come back to me: "It isn't a blood poison,

it’s a nerve poison. Letting the blood out won’t help, it isn’t rattlesnake venom.” I’ve finished him!

He’s back in the doorway, white as a sheet. Blood’s pouring down his chin and the front of his pajamas look like he’d had a nosebleed. It isn’t a nosebleed; he’s opened the cleft of his lip to the nostrils. It’s started in already though, the poison; it’s in him already, and he doesn’t know what it is.

“What’d you make me do that for? I feel—” He tries to get to me and totters. Then I guess he knows what it is—for just one minute he knows what it is—that’s all the time he has to know it in.

I get him onto the bed—that’s all I can do for him—and the rest of it happens there. He just says one thing more. “Don’t let me, will you? Charlie, I dowanna die!” in a voice like a worn-out record running down under a scratchy needle. After that, he’s not recognizable as anything human any more.

I can’t do anything for him, so I just turn my face to the wall and shut out the rustling with my hands clapped to my ears. “Charlie, I dowanna die!” He isn’t saying it any more, it’s over already, but it goes on and on. For years I’ll probably hear it.

After awhile I cover him over without looking and I go to my own room. I’ve got a job to do—a job no one but me can do. While I’m in there, there’s a sort of fluttery sound for a minute outside, as though something whisked itself along the hall and down the stairs just then. That’s all right, I took care of the doors and windows before I came up. “Charlie, I dowanna die!” No, no insanity plea. Not this time—that’s too easy. An asylum’s too good.

I get my gun out of the closet where it’s been since we came here, and I break it. Two slugs in it. Two are enough. I crack it shut again and shove it on my hip. Then I take a long pole that’s standing in a comer, the handle of a floor-mop or something, and I go across the hall to her room.

She’s pounding on the door downstairs. I can hear her shaking it, clawing at it, trying to get out of the house. She can wait.

I shift the chicken coop around so it faces my way, and zing, zing, zing goes the wire netting. Then I step back and prod the hinged slat open with the end of the long pole. Then I dig the pole into the bedclothes and loosen them up. There’s no wire mesh over the place that the one movable slat covers. There’s sort of a wicket left in it there, and out through that wicket comes the hooded head, the slow, coiling, glistening length of one of the world’s deadly things, the king cobra of India! I see Veda’s twin before my dilating eyes. The same scaly, gleaming covering; even the same marking like a question-mark on its hood! Endless lengths of it come out, like gigantic black-and-green toothpaste out of a squeezed tube, and I want to throw up in revulsion. Twelve feet of it—a monster. The story might have ended then, right in the room there—but the thing is torpid, sluggish from the cold climate and its long confinement.

It sees me, standing back across the room from it. Slowly it rears up, waist high, balancing on tightening coils for the thrust. Quickly the horrid hood swells, fills out with animosity. There’s not a sound in the room. I’m not breathing. The pounding and the lunging at the door downstairs has stopped some time ago. And in the silence I suddenly know that she’s come back into the room with me, that she’s standing somewhere right behind me.

I dare not turn around and look; dare not take my eyes off the swaying, dancing funnel of death before me for an instant. But I feel a weight suddenly gone from my hip. She’s got my gun!

Over my shoulder comes a whisper. “You’ve locked death into the house with you.”

The split second seems to expand itself into an hour. She edges her way along the wall until she comes into my range

of vision. But my eyes can’t even flicker toward her. I know my own gun’s on me. But rather that than the other death.

Suddenly, I dip on buckled knees. I heave the long pole out from the bed like a fishing rod. A scarlet blanket and sheet come with it. The sheet drops off on the way, the blanket, heavier, clings to the end. The loathsome, fetid mouth of the thing below it has already gone wide. The blanket falls in swift effacement, covers the monster in stifling folds just as its head has gone back in the last preparatory move.

A fraction of an instant later, there is a lightning lunge against the blanket. A bulge appears there which soon is gone again—where the snake’s head struck after its spring. After that, everything is squirming, thrashing, cataleptic movement under the folds as it tries to free itself.

There’s a flash of fire from the wall and my hand burns—but if I drop that pole I’m gone. I wield the mop-handle in my bleeding, tortured hand, making it hiss through the air, flattening the blanket under it. It breaks in two under the terrific impacts, but I keep on with the short end of it until there’s no life under that blanket any more. Even then I step on the mess and grind and stamp with my steel-rimmed heels until the blanket discolors in places.

Veda stands there against the wall, the smoking gun in her hand, moaning: “You have killed a god!” If she really worshipped that thing, her whole world has come to an end. The gun slips from her hand, clatters to the floor. I swoop for it and get it again. She sinks down to her knees, her back against the wall, very still, looking at me. Her breath is coming very fast, she doesn’t betray her feelings in any other way.

Sometimes under the greatest tension, in moments almost of insanity, you can think the clearest. I am almost insane just then. And, in a flash, the whole set-up comes to me, now that it’s too late, now that the old man and the kid

are gone. That lunge at the blanket just now has told me the whole story. The thick flannel I found in her drawer!

She held that before the opening in the crate and extracted the venom that way—when the cobra struck. Then she mixed it with her rouge in the little wooden mortar. Then she waxed her lips with camphor ice, freezing the pores tight shut, forming an impervious base for the red stuff. Then she kissed them, smeared them with it, offered them a cigarette to smoke—

They're still there on the dresser, her long, thick-tipped cigarettes. I take a couple out of the box. Then I take the little bottle of mucilage, standing with all the perfumes, and I let a drop of it fall on the end of each cigarette. She did that too—I know that, now.

It dries in no time, but the moisture of the human mouth will dampen it again and cause the paper to stick to the lips. She sees me do all this, and yet she doesn't move, doesn't try to escape. Her god is dead, the fatalism of the East has her in its grip. Almost, I relent. But—"Charlie, I dowanna die!" rings in my ears.

I turn to her. You'd think nothing had happened, you'd think the kid was only asleep back there in his room, the way I talk to her. "Have a cigarette."

She shakes her head and backs away along the wall.

"Better have a cigarette," I say, and I take up the gun and bead it at her forehead. This is no act, and she can tell the difference. I won't even ask her a second time. She takes a cigarette. "What have I done?" she tries to say.

"Nothing," I answer, "nothing that I can prove, or even care to prove any more. Doll up. You have it with you."

She smiles a little, maybe fatalistically, or maybe because she still thinks she can outsmart me. She rouges her lips. She raises the cigarette. But I see the half-curves it makes. "No you don't, not that end. The way it's supposed to be smoked."

She puts the glued end in and I hold the match for her. She can't tell yet about it but the smile goes and her eyes widen with fear.

I light my own—that's glued, too. "I'm going to smoke right along with you; one of these is no different from the other. See, I have a clear conscience; have you?" I'm going to match her, step by step—I want to know just when it happens. I didn't know I could be that cruel, but—"Charlie, I dowanna die!"

She begins by taking quick little puffs, not letting it stay any time in her mouth, and each time she puts it in at a different place. She thinks she'll get around it that way. That's easy to stop. "Keep your hands down. Touch it one more time and I'll shoot."

"Siva!" she moans. I think it is their goddess of death or something. Then to me: "You are going to kill me?"

"No, you are going to kill yourself. You last through that cigarette and you are welcome to your insanity plea when they get here from L.A."

We don't talk any more after that. Slowly the cigarettes burn down. I don't take mine out, either. A dozen times her hands start upward and each time the gun stops them. Time is on my side. She begins to have trouble breathing, not from fear now, from nicotine and burnt paper. Her eyes fill with moisture. Not even an inveterate smoker can consume a ten-inch fag like that without at least a couple of clear breaths between drags.

I can't stand it myself any more and out comes my own, and there's a white-hot sting to my lower lip. She holds on, though, for dear life.

So would I, if death was going to be the penalty. I can see her desperately trying to free hers by working the tip of her tongue around the edges. No good. She begins to strangle deep down in her throat, water's pouring out of her eyes. She twists and turns and retches and tries to get a free

breath. It’s torture, maybe, but so were the thousand red-hot needles piercing that kid’s body upstairs—awhile ago.

All at once, a deep groan seems to come all the way up from her feet. The strangling and the gasping stop and the cigarette is smoldering on the floor. A thread of blood runs down her chin—purer, cleaner than the livid red stuff all around it. I lay the gun down near her and I watch her. Let her make her own choice!

“There’s only one more bullet in it,” I tell her. “If you think you can stand what’s coming, you can pay me back with it.”

She knows too well what it’s going to be like, so she has no time to waste.

She grabs for the gun and her eyes light up. “I am going, but you are coming with me!” she pants.

She levels my rod at me. Four times she pulls the trigger and four times it clicks harmlessly. The first chamber and the last must have been the loaded ones, and the ones in between were empty.

Now, she has no more time to waste on getting even. The twitching has already set in. She turns the gun on herself.

“Once more will get you out of it,” I say, and I turn away.

This time, there’s a shattering explosion behind me and something heavy falls like a log. I don’t bother looking. I wrap my handkerchief around my throbbing hand and go downstairs to the front door to wait for the men from L.A. to show up. I don’t smoke while I’m waiting, either.

DARK MELODY OF MADNESS

At four in the morning, a scarecrow of a man staggers dazedly into the New Orleans Police Headquarters building. Behind him at the curb, a lacquered Bugatti purrs like a drowsy cat, the swellest thing that ever parked out there. He weaves his way through the anteroom, deserted at that early hour, and goes in through the open doorway beyond. The sleepy desk-sergeant looks up; an idle detective scanning yesterday's Times-Picayune tipped back on the two hind legs of a chair against the wall raises his head; and as the funnel of light from the cone overhead plays up their visitor like a flashlight-powder, their mouths drop open and their eyes bat a couple of times. The two front legs of the detective's chair come down with a thump. The sergeant braces himself, eager, friendly, with the heels of both hands on his desk-top and his elbows up in the air. A patrolman comes in from the back room, wiping a drink of water from his mouth. His jaw also hangs when he sees who's there. He sidles nearer the detective and says behind the back of his hand, "That's Eddie Bloch, ain't it?"

The detective doesn't even take time off to answer. It's like telling him what his own name is. The three stare at the figure under the conelight, interested, respectful, almost admiring. There's nothing professional in their scrutiny, they're not the police studying a suspect; they're nobodies getting a look at a celebrity. They take in the rumpled tuxedo, the twig of gardenia that's shed its petals, the tie

hanging open in two loose ends. His topcoat was slung across his arm originally; now it trails along the dusty station-house floor behind him. He gives his hat the final, tortured push that dislodges it. It drops and rolls away behind him. The cop picks it up and brushes it off—he never was a bootlicker in his life, but this guy is Eddie Bloch.

Still it's his face, more than who he is or how he's dressed, that would draw stares anywhere. It's the face of a dead man—the face of a dead man on a living body. The shadowy shape of the skull seems to peer through the transparent skin; you can make out its bone-structure as though an X-ray were playing it up. The eyes are stunned, shocked, haunted gleams, set in a vast hollow that bisects the face like a mask. No amount of drink or dissipation could do this to anyone, only long illness and the foreknowledge of death. You see faces like that looking up at you from hospital cots when all hope has been abandoned—when the grave is already waiting.

Yet strangely enough, they knew who he was just now. Instant recognition of who he had been came first—realization of the shape he's in comes after that—more slowly. Possibly it's because all three of them have been called to identify corpses in the morgue in their day. Their minds are trained along those lines. And this man's face is known to hundreds of people. Not that he has ever broken or even fractured the most trivial law, but he has spread happiness around him—set a million feet to dancing in his time.

The desk sergeant's expression changes. The patrolman mutters under his breath to the detective. "Looks like he just came out of a bad smash-up with his car."

"More like a binge to me," answers the detective. They're simple men, capable, but those are the only explanations they can find for what they now see before them.

The desk sergeant speaks.

“Mr. Eddie Bloch, am I right?” He extends his hand across the desk in greeting.

The man can hardly seem to stand up. He nods, he doesn’t take the hand.

“Is there anything wrong, Mr. Bloch? Is there anything we can do for you?” The detective and the patrolman come over. “Run in and get him a drink of water, La tour,” the sergeant says anxiously. “Have an accident, Mr. Bloch? Been held up?”

The man steadies himself by stiff-arming himself against the edge of the sergeant’s desk. The detective extends an arm behind him in case he should go backwards. He keeps fumbling, continually fumbling in his clothes. The tuxedo swims on him as his movements shift it around. He’s down to about a hundred pounds, they notice. Out comes the gun, and he doesn’t even seem to have strength to lift it. He pushes it and it skids a little way across the desk-top, then spins around and faces back at him.

“I’ve killed a man. Just now. Little while ago. 3:30.” He speaks, and if the unburied dead ever spoke, this is the voice they’d use.

They’re completely floored. They almost don’t know how to handle the situation for a minute. They deal with killers every day, but killers have to be gone out after and dragged in. And when fame and wealth enter into it, as they do once in a great while, fancy lawyers and protective barriers spring up like wildfire to hedge them in on all sides. This man is one of the ten idols of America, or was until just lately. People like him don’t kill people. They don’t come in out of nowhere at four in the morning and stand before a simple desk sergeant and a simple detective, stripped to their naked souls, shorn of almost all resemblance to humanity.

There’s silence in the room—for just a minute—a silence you could cut with a knife. Then he speaks again, in agony.

“I tell you I’ve killed a man! Don’t stand looking at me like that! I’ve k—!”

The sergeant speaks, gently, sympathetically. “What’s the matter, Mr. Bloch, been working too hard?” The sergeant comes out from behind the desk. “Come on inside with as. You stay here, Latour, and take the phone.”

And when they’ve taken him into the back room: “Get him a chair, Humphries. Here, drink some of this water, Mr. Bloch. Now what’s it all about?” The sergeant has brought the gun in with him. He passes it before his nose, then cracks it open. He looks at the detective. “He’s used it all right.”

“Was it an accident, Mr. Bloch?” the detective prompts respectfully. The man in the chair shakes his head. He’s started to shiver all over, although the New Orleans night outside is warm and mellow. “Who’d you do it to? Who was it?” the sergeant puts in.

“I don’t know his name,” Bloch mumbles. “I never have. They call him Papa Benjamin.”

His two interrogators exchange a puzzled look, “Sounds like—” The detective doesn’t finish it. Instead he turns to the seated figure and asks almost perfunctorily: “He was a white man, of course, wasn’t he?”

“He was colored,” is the unexpected answer.

The thing gets more crazy, more inexplicable, at every turn. How should a man like Eddie Bloch, one of the country’s ace bandsmen, pulling down his two-and-a-half grand every week for playing at the Bataclan, come to kill a nameless colored man—then be pulled all to pieces by it? These two men in their time have never seen anything like it; they have put suspects through forty-eight-hour grillings and yet compared to him now, those suspects were fresh as daisies when they got through with them.

He has said it was no accident and he has said it was no hold-up. They shower him with questions, not to break him down but rather to try and pull him together. “What’d he

do, talk out of turn to you? Forget himself? Get wise?" This is the Southland, remember.

The man's head goes from side to side like a pendulum.

"Did you go out of your head for a minute? Is that how it was?" Again a nodded no.

The man's condition has suggested one angle to the detective's mind. He looks around to make sure the patrolman outside isn't listening. Then very discreetly: "Are you a needle-user, Mr. Bloch? Was he your source?"

The man looks up at them. "I've never touched a thing I shouldn't. A doctor will tell you that in a minute."

"Did he have something on you? Was it blackmail?"

Bloch fumbles some more in his clothes; again they dance around on his skeletonized frame. Suddenly he takes out a cube of money, as thick as it is wide, more money than these two men have ever seen before in their lives. "There's three thousand dollars there," he says simply, and tosses it down like he did the gun. "I took it with me tonight, tried to give it to him. He could have had twice as much, three times as much, if he'd said the word, if he'd only let up on me. He wouldn't take it. That was when I had to kill him. That was all there was left for me to do."

"What was he doing to you?" They both say it together.

"He was killing me." He holds out his arm and shoots his cuff. The wristbone is about the size of the sergeant's own thumb-joint. The expensive platinum wrist-watch that encircles it has been pulled in to the last possible notch and yet it still hangs almost like a bracelet. "See? I'm down to 102. When my shirt's off, my heart's so close to the surface you can see the skin right over it move like a pulse with each beat."

They draw back a little, almost they wish he hadn't come in here. That he had headed for some other precinct instead. From the very beginning they have sensed something here that is over their heads, that isn't to be

found in any of the instruction-books. Now they come out with it. “How?” Humphries asks. “How was he killing you?”

There’s a flare of torment from the man. “Don’t you suppose I would have told you long ago, if I could? Don’t you suppose I would have come in here weeks ago, months ago, and demanded protection, asked to be saved—if I could have told you what it was? If you would have believed me?”

“We’ll believe you, Mr. Bloch,” the sergeant says soothingly. “We’ll believe anything. Just tell us—”

But Bloch in turn shoots a question at them, for the first time since he has come in. “Answer me! Do you believe in anything you can’t see, can’t hear, can’t touch-?”

“Radio,” the sergeant suggests not very brightly, but Humphries answers more frankly: “No.”

The man slumps down again in his chair, shrugs apathetically. “If you don’t, how can I expect you to believe me? I’ve been to the biggest doctors, biggest scientists in the world. They wouldn’t believe me. How can I expect you to? You’ll simply say I’m cracked, and let it go at that. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in an asylum—” He breaks off and sobs. “And yet it’s true, it’s true!”

They’ve gotten into such a maze that Humphries decides it’s about time to snap out of it. He asks the one simple question that should have been asked long ago, and the hell with all this mumbo-jumbo. “Are you sure you killed him?” The man is broken physically and he’s about ready to crack mentally too. The whole thing may be an hallucination.

“I know I did. I’m sure of it,” the man answers calmly. “I’m already beginning to feel a little better. I felt it the minute he was gone.” If he is, he doesn’t show it. The sergeant catches Humphries’ eye and meaningfully taps his forehead in a sly gesture.

“Suppose you take us there and show us,” Humphries suggests. “Can you do that? Where’d it happen, at the Bataclan?”

“I told you he was colored,” Bloch answers reproachfully. Bataclan is tony. “It was in the Vieux Carr6. I can show you where, but I can’t drive any more. It was all I could do to get down here with my car.”

“I’ll put Desjardins on it with you,” the sergeant says, and calls through the door to the patrolman: “Ring Dij and tell him to meet Humphries at corner of Canal and Royal right away!” He turns and looks at the huddle on the chair. “Buy him a bracer on the way. It don’t look like he’ll last till he gets there.”

The man flushes a little—it would be a blush if he had any blood left in him. “I can’t touch alcohol any more. I’m on my last legs. It goes right through me like—” He hangs his head, then raises it again.

“But I’ll get better now, little by little, now that he’s—”

The sergeant takes Humphries out of earshot. “Pushover for a padded cell. If it’s on the up-and-up, and not just a pipe dream, call me right back. I’ll get the commissioner on the wire.”

“At this hour of the night?”

The sergeant motions toward the chair with his head. “He’s Eddie Bloch, isn’t he?”

Humphries takes him under the elbow, pries him up from the chair. Not roughly, but just briskly, energetically. Now that things are at last getting under way, he knows where he’s at; he can handle them. He’ll still be considerate, but he’s business-like now; he’s into his routine. “All right, come on, Mr. Bloch, let’s get up there.”

“Not a scratch goes down on the blotter until I’m sure what I’m doing,” the sergeant calls after Humphries. “I don’t want this whole town down on my neck tomorrow morning.”

Humphries almost has to hold him up on the way out and into the car. “This it?” he says. “Wow!” He just touches it with his nail and they’re off like velvet. “How’d you ever get

this into the Vieux Carr6 without knocking over the houses?”

Two gleams deep in the skull jogging against the upholstery, dimmer than the dashboard lights, are the only sign that there’s life beside him. “Used to park it blocks away—go on foot.”

“Oh, you went there more than once?”

“Wouldn’t you—to beg for your life?”

More of that screwy stuff, Humphries thinks disgustedly. Why should a man like Eddie Bloch, star of the mike and the dance-floor, go to some colored man in the slums and beg for his life?

Royal Street comes whistling along. He swerves in toward the curb, shoves the door out, sees Desjardins land on the running-board with one foot. Then he veers out into the middle again without even having stopped. Desjardins moves in on the other side of Bloch, finishes dressing by knotting his necktie and buttoning his vest. “Where’d you get the Aquitania?” he wants to know, and then, with a look beside him: “Holy Kreisler, Eddie Bloch! We had you only

tonight on my Emerson—”

“Matter?” Humphries squelches. “Got a talking-jag?”

“Turn,” says a hollow sound between them, and three wheels take the Bugatti around into North Rampart Street. “Have to leave it here,” he says a little later, and they get out. Congo Square, the old stamping-ground of the slaves.

“Help him,” Humphries tells his mate tersely, and they each brace him by an elbow.

Staggering between them with the uneven gait of a punch-drunk pug, quick and then slow by turns, he leads them down a ways, and then suddenly cuts left into an alley that isn’t there at all until you’re smack in front of it. It’s just a crack between two houses, noisome as a sewer. They have to break into Indian file to get through at all. But Bloch can’t fall down; the walls almost scrape both his shoulders at once. One’s in front, one behind him. “You

packed?” Humphries calls over his head to Desjardins, up front.

“Catch cold without it,” the other’s voice comes back out of the gloom.

A slit of orange shows up suddenly from under a windowsill and a shapely coffee-colored elbow scrapes the ribs of the three as they squirm by. “This far ’nough, honey,” a liquid voice murmurs.

“Bad girl! Wash y’mouth out with soap,” the unromantic Humphries warns over his shoulder without even looking around. The sliver of light vanishes as quickly as it came . . .”

The passage widens out in places into mouldering courtyards dating back to French or Spanish colonial days, and once it goes under an archway and becomes a tunnel for a short distance. Desjardins cracks his head and swears with talent and abandon.

“Y’left out—” the rearguard remarks dryly.

“Here,” pants Bloch weakly, and stops suddenly at a patch of blackness in the wall. Humphries washes it with his torch and crumbling mildewed stone steps show up inside it. Then he motions Bloch in, but the man hangs back, slips a notch or two lower down against the opposite wall that supports him. “Lemme stay down here! Don’t make me go up there again,” he pleads. “I don’t think I can make it any more. I’m afraid to go back in there.”

“Oh no!” Humphries says with quiet determination. “You’re showing us,” and scoops him away from the wall with his arm. Again, as before, he isn’t rough about it, just business-like. Dij keeps the lead, watering the place with his own torch. Humphries trains his on the band-leader’s forty-dollar custom-made patent-leathers jerking frightenedly upward before him. The stone steps turn to wood ones splintered with usage. They have to step over a huddled black drunk, empty bottle cradled in his arms. “Don’t light a

match," Dij warns, pinching his nose. "There'll be an explosion."

"Grow up," snaps Humphries. The Cajun's a good dick, but can't he realize the man in the middle is roasting in hell-fire? "This is no time—"

"In here is where I did it. I closed the door again after me." Bloch's skull-face is all silver with his life-sweat as one of their torches flicks past it.

Humphries shoves open the sagging mahogany panel that was first hung up when a Louis was still king of France and owned this town. The light of a lamp far across a still, dim room flares up and dances crazily in the draught. They come in and look.

There's an old broken-down bed, filthy with rags. Across it there's a motionless figure, head hanging down toward the floor. Dij cups his hand under it and lifts it. It comes up limply toward him, like a small basketball. It bounces down again when he lets it go—even seems to bob slightly for a second or two after. It's an old, old colored man, up in his eighties, even beyond. There's a dark spot, darker than the weazened skin, just under one bleared eye, and another in the thin fringe of white wool that circles the back of the skull.

Humphries doesn't wait to see any more. He turns, flips out, and down, and all the way back to wherever the nearest telephone can be found, to let headquarters know that it's true after all and they can rouse the police commissioner. "Keep him there with you, Dij," his voice trails back from the inky stairwell, "and no quizzing. Pull in your horns till we get our orders!" That scarecrow with them tries to stumble after him and get out of the place, groaning: "Don't leave me here! Don't make me stay here-!"

"I wouldn't quiz you on my own, Mr. Bloch," Dij tries to reassure him, nonchalantly sitting down on the edge of the bed next to the corpse and retying his shoelace. "I'll never

forget it was your playing Love in Bloom on the air one night in Baton Rouge two years ago gave me the courage to propose to my wife—”

But the Commissioner would, and does, in his office a couple hours later. He’s anything but eager about it, too. They’ve tried to shunt him, Bloch, off their hands in every possible legal way open to them. No go. He sticks to them like flypaper. The old colored man didn’t try to attack him, or rob him, or blackmail him, or kidnap him, or anything else. The gun didn’t go off accidentally, and he didn’t fire it on the spur of the moment either, without thinking twice, or in a flare of anger. The Commissioner almost beats his own head against the desk in his exasperation as he reiterates over and over: “But why? Why? Why?” And for the steenth time, he gets the same indigestible answer: “Because he was killing me.”

“Then you admit he did lay hands on you?” The first time the poor Commissioner asked this, he said it with a spark of hope. But this is the tenth or twelfth and the spark died out long ago.

“He never once came near me. I was the one looked him up each time to plead with him. Commissioner Oliver, tonight I went down on my knees to that old man and dragged myself around the floor of that dirty room after him, on my bended knees, like a sick cat—begging, crawling to him, offering him three thousand, ten, any amount, finally offering him my own gun, asking him to shoot me with it, to get it over with quickly, to be kind to me, not to drag it out by inches any longer! No, not even that little bit of mercy! Then I shot—and now I’m going to get better, now I’m going to live—”

He’s too weak to cry; crying takes strength. The Commissioner’s hair is about ready to stand on end. “Stop it, Mr. Bloch, stop it!” he shouts, and he steps over and grabs him by the shoulder in defense of his own nerves, and can almost feel the shoulder-bone cutting his hand. He

takes his hand away again in a hurry. “I’m going to have you examined by an alienist!”

The bundle of bones rears from the chair. “You can’t do that! You can’t take my mind from me! Send to my hotel—I’ve got a trunkful of reports on my condition! I’ve been to the biggest minds in Europe! Can you produce anyone that would dare go against the findings of Buckholtz in Vienna, Reynolds in London? They had me under observation for months at a time! I’m not even on the borderline of insanity, not even a genius or musically talented. I don’t even write my own numbers, I’m mediocre, uninspired—in other words completely normal. I’m saner than you are at this minute, Mr. Oliver. My body’s gone, my soul’s gone, and all I’ve got left is my mind, but you can’t take that from me!”

The Commissioner’s face is beet-red. He’s about ready for a stroke, but he speaks softly, persuasively. “An eighty-odd-year-old colored man who is so feeble he can’t even go upstairs half the time, who has to have his food pulleyed up to him through the window in a basket, is killing—whom? A white stumble-bum his own age? No-o-o, Mr. Eddie Bloch, the premier bandsman of America, who can name his own price in any town, who’s heard every night in all our homes, who has about everything a man can want—that’s who!” He peers close, until their eyes are on a level. His voice is just a silky whisper. “Tell me just one thing, Mr. Bloch.” Then like the explosion of a giant firecracker, “How?” He roars it out, booms it out.

There’s a long-drawn intake of breath from Eddie Bloch. “By thinking thoughtwaves of death that reached me through the air.” The poor Commissioner practically goes all to pieces on his own rug. “And you don’t need a medical exam!” he wheezes weakly.

There’s a flutter, the popping of buttons, and Eddie Bloch’s coat, his vest, his shirt, undershirt, land one after another on the floor around his chair. He turns. “Look at my back! You can count every vertebra through the skin!” He

turns back again. “Look at my ribs. Look at the pulsing where there’s not enough skin left to cover my heart!”

Oliver shuts his eyes and turns toward the window. He’s in a particularly unpleasant spot. New Orleans, out there, is stirring, and when it hears about this, he’s going to be the most unpopular man in town. On the other hand, if he doesn’t see the thing through now that it’s gone this far he’s guilty of a dereliction of duty, malfeasance in office.

Bloch, slowly dressing, knows what he’s thinking. “You want to get rid of me, don’t you? You’re trying to think of a way of covering this thing up. You’re afraid to bring me up before the Grand Jury on account of your own reputation, aren’t you?” His voice rises to a scream of panic. “Well, I want protection! I don’t want to go out there again—to my death! I won’t accept bail! If you turn me loose now, even on my own cognizance, you may be as guilty of my death as he is. How do I know my bullet stopped the thing? How does any of us know what becomes of the mind after death? Maybe his thoughts will still reach me, still try to get me. I tell you I want to be locked up, I want people around me day and night, I want to be where I’m safe—”

“Shh, for God’s sake, Mr. Bloch! They’ll think I’m beating you up—” The Commissioner drops his arms to his side and heaves a gigantic sigh. “That settles it! I’ll book you all right. You want that and you’re going to get it! I’ll book you for the murder of one Papa Benjamin, even if they laugh me out of office for it!”

For the first time since the whole thing has started, he casts a look of real anger, ill-will, at Eddie Bloch. He seizes a chair, swirls it around, and bangs it down in front of the man. He puts his foot on it and pokes his finger almost in Bloch’s eye. “I’m not two-faced. I’m not going to lock you up nice and cozy and then soft-pedal the whole thing. If it’s coming out at all, then all of it’s coming out. Now start in!

Tell me everything I want to know, and what I want to know is—everything!”

The strains of Goodnight Ladies die away; the dancers leave the floor; the lights start going out, and Eddie Bloch throws down his baton and mops the back of his neck with a handkerchief. He weighs about two hundred pounds, is in the pink, and is a good-looking brute. But his face is sour right now, dissatisfied. His outfit starts to case its instruments right and left, and Judy Jarvis steps up on the platform, in her street clothes, ready to go home. She's Eddie's torch singer, and also his wife. "Coming, Eddie? Let's get out of here." She looks a little disgusted herself. "I didn't get a hand tonight, not even after my rumba number. Must be staling. If I wasn't your wife, I'd be out of a job, I guess."

Eddie pats her shoulder. "It isn't you, honey. It's us. We're beginning to stink. Notice how the attendance has been dropping the past few weeks? There were more waiters than customers tonight. I'll be hearing from the owner any minute now. He has the right to cancel my contract if the intake drops below five grand." A waiter comes up to the edge of the platform. "Mr. Graham'd like to see you in his office before you go home, Mr. Bloch."

Eddie and Judy look at each other. "This is it now, Judy. You go back to the hotel. Don't wait for me. G'night, boys." Eddie Bloch calls for his hat and knocks at the manager's office.

Graham rustles a lot of accounts together. "We took in forty-five hundred this week, Eddie. They can get the same ginger ale and sandwiches any place, but they'll go where the band has something to give 'em. I notice the few that do come in don't even get up from the table any more when you tap your baton. Now, what's wrong?" Eddie punches his hat a couple of times. "Don't ask me. I'm getting the latest orchestrations from Broadway sent to me hot off the griddle. We sweat our bald heads off rehearsing—"

Graham swivels his cigar. "Don't forget that jazz originated here in the South, you can't show this town

anything. They want something new."

"When do I scram?" Eddie asks, smiling with the southwest comer of his mouth.

"Finish the week out. See if you can do something about it by Monday. If not, I'll have to wire St. Louis to get Kruger's crew. I'm sorry, Eddie."

"That's all right," broadminded Eddie says. "You're not running a charity bazaar."

Eddie goes out into the dark danceroom. His crew has gone. The tables are stacked. A couple of old colored crones are down on hands and knees slopping water around on the parquet. Eddie steps up on the platform a minute to get some orchestrations he left on the piano. He feels something crunch under his shoe, reaches down, picks up a severed chicken's claw lying there with a strip of red rag tied around it. How the hell did it get up there? If it had been under one of the tables, he'd have thought some diner had dropped it. He flushes a little. D'ye mean to say he and the boys were so rotten tonight that somebody deliberately threw it at them while they were playing?

One of the scrubwomen looks up. The next moment, she and her mate are on their feet, edging nearer, eyes big as saucers, until they get close enough to see what it is he's holding. Then there's a double yowl of animal fright, a tin pail goes rolling across the floor, and no two stout people, white or colored, ever got out of a place in such a hurry before. The door nearly comes off its hinges, and Eddie can hear their cackling all the way down the quiet street outside until it fades away into the night. "For gosh sake!" thinks the bewildered Eddie. "They must be using the wrong brand of gin." He tosses the object out onto the floor and goes back to the piano for his music scores. A sheet or two has slipped down behind it and he squats to collect them. That way the piano hides him.

The door opens again and he sees Johnny Staats (traps and percussion) come in in quite a hurry. He thought Staats

was home in bed by now. Staats is feeling himself all over like he was rehearsing the shim-sham and he's scanning the ground as he goes along. Then suddenly he pounces—and it's on the very scrap of garbage Eddie just now threw away! And as he straightens up with it, his breath comes out in such a sigh of relief that Eddie can hear it all the way across the still room. All this keeps him from hailing Staats as he was going to a minute ago and suggesting a cup of java. But—"Superstitious," thinks broadminded Eddie. "It's his good-luck charm, that's all, like some people carry a rabbit's foot. I'm a little that way myself, never walk under a ladder—"

Then again, why should those two mammies go into hysterics when they lamp the same object? And Eddie recalls now that some of the boys have always suspected Staats has colored blood, and tried to tell him so years ago when Staats first came in with them, but he wouldn't listen to them.

Staats slinks out again as noiselessly as he came in, and Eddie decides he'll catch up with him and kid him about his chicken-claw on their way home together. (They all roost in the same hotel.) So he takes his music-sheets, some of which are blank, and he leaves. Staats is way down the street—in the wrong direction, away from the hotel! Eddie hesitates for just a minute, and then he starts after Staats on a vague impulse, just to see where he's going—just to see what he's up to. Maybe the fright of the scrubwomen and the way Staats pounced on that chicken-claw just now have built up to this, without Eddie's really knowing it.

And how many times afterward he's going to pray to his God that he'd never turned down that other way this night—away from his hotel, his Judy, his boys—away from the sunlight and the white man's world. Such a little thing to decide to do, and afterwards no turning back—ever . . .

He keeps Staats in sight, and they hit the Vieux Carr6. That's all right. There are a lot of quaint places here a guy

might like to drop in. Or maybe he has some Creole sweetie tucked away, and Eddie thinks: I'm lower than a ditch to spy like this. But then suddenly right before his eyes, halfway up the narrow lane he's turned into—there isn't any Staats any more! And no door opened and closed again either. Then when Eddie gets up to where it was, he sees the crevice between the old houses, hidden by an angle in the walls. So that's where he went! Eddie almost has a peeve on by now at all this hocus-pocus. He slips in himself and feels his way along. He stops every once in awhile and can hear Staats' quiet footfall somewhere way up in front. Then he goes on again. Once or twice the passage spreads out a little and lets a little green-blue moonlight part way down the walls. Then later, there's a little flare of orange light from under a window and an elbow jogs him in the appendix. "You'd be happier here. Doan go the rest of the way," a soft voice breathes. A prophecy if he only knew it!

But hardboiled Eddie just says: "G'wan to bed, y'dirty stay-up!" out of the corner of his mouth, and the light vanishes. Next a tunnel and he bangs the top of his head and his eyes water. But at the other end of it, Staats has finally come to a halt in a patch of clear light and seems to be looking up at a window or something, so Eddie stays where he is, inside the tunnel, and folds the lapels of his black jacket up over his white shirt-front so it won't show.

Staats just stands there for a spell, with Eddie holding his breath inside the tunnel, and then finally he gives a peculiar, dismal whistle. There's nothing carefree or casual about it. It's a hollow swampland sound, not easy to get without practice. Then he just stands there waiting, until without warning, another figure joins him in the gloom. Eddie strains his eyes. A gorilla-like, Negro roustabout. Something passes from Staats' hand to his—the chicken claw possibly—then they go in, into the house Staats has been facing. Eddie can hear the soft shuffle of feet going up

stairs on the inside, and the groaning, squeaking of an old decayed door—and then silence—

—He edges forward to the mouth of the tunnel and peers up. No light shows from any window, the house appears to be untenanted, deserted.

Eddie hangs onto his coat collar with one hand and strokes his chin with the other. He doesn't know just what to do. The vague impulse that has brought him this far after Staats begins to peter out now. Staats has some funny associates—something funny is going on in this out-of-the-way place at this unearthly hour of the morning—but after all, a man's private life is his own. He wonders what made him do this, he wouldn't want anyone to know he did it. He'll turn around and go back to his hotel now and get some shut-eye; he's got to think up some novelty for his routine at the Bataclan between now and Monday or he'll be out on his ear.

Then just as one heel is off the ground to take the turn that will start him back, a vague, muffled wailing starts from somewhere inside that house. It's toned down to a mere echo. It has to go through thick doors and wide, empty rooms and down a deep, hollow stairwell before it gets to him. Oh, some sort of a revival meeting, is it? So Staats has got religion, has he? But what a place to come and get it in!

A throbbing like a far-away engine in a machine-shop underscores the wailing, and every once in a while a boom like distant thunder across the bayou tops the whole works. It goes: Boom-putta-putta-boom-putta-putta-boom! And the wailing, way up high at the moon: Eeyah-eeyah-eeyah . . .

Eddie's professional instincts suddenly come alive. He tries it out, beats time to it with his arm as if he were holding a baton. His fingers snap like a whip. "My God, that's grand! That's gorgeous! Just what I need! I gotta get up there!" So a chicken-foot does it, eh?

He turns and runs back, through the tunnel, through the courtyards, all the way back where he came from, stooping here, stooping there, lighting matches recklessly and throwing them away as he goes. Out in the Vieux Carre again, the refuse hasn't been collected. He spots a can at the corner of two lanes, topples it over. The smell rises to heaven, but he wades into it ankle-deep like any levee-rat, digs into the stuff with both forearms, scattering it right and left. He's lucky, finds a verminous carcass, tears off a claw, wipes it on some newspaper. Then he starts back. Wait a minute! The red rag, red strip around it! He feels himself all over, all his pockets. Nothing that color. Have to do without it, but maybe it won't work without it. He turns and hurries back through the slit between the old houses, doesn't care how much noise he makes. The flash of light from Old Faithful, the jogging elbow. Eddie stoops, he suddenly snatches in at the red kimono sleeve, his hand comes away with a strip of it. Bad language, words that even Eddie doesn't know. A five-spot stops it on the syllable, and Eddie's already way down the passage. If only they haven't quit until he can get back there!

They haven't. It was vague, smothered when he went away; it's louder, more persistent, more frenzied now. He doesn't bother about giving the whistle, probably couldn't imitate it exactly anyhow. He dives into the black smudge that is the entrance to the house, feels greasy stone steps under him, takes one or two and then suddenly his collar is four sizes too small for him, gripped by a big ham of a hand at the back. A sharp something that might be anything from a pocket-knife blade to the business edge of a razor is creasing his throat just below the apple and drawing a preliminary drop or two of blood.

"Here it is, I've got it here!" gasps Eddie. What kind of religion is this, anyway? The sharp thing stays, but the hand lets go his collar and feels for the chicken-claw. Then the sharp thing goes away, too, but probably not very far away.

“Why for you didn’t give the signal?” Eddie’s windpipe gives him the answer. “Sick here, couldn’t.”

“Light up, lemme see yo’ face.” Eddie strikes a match and holds it. “Yo’ face has never been here before.”

Eddie gestures upward. “My friend—up there—he’ll tell you!”

“Mr. Johnny you’ friend? He ax you to come?”

Eddie thinks quickly. The chicken-claw might carry more weight than Staats. “That told me to come.”

“Papa Benjamin sen’ you that?”

“Certainly,” says Eddie stoutly. Probably their deacon, but it’s a hell of a way to. The match stings his fingers and he whips it out.

Blackness and a moment’s uncertainty that might end either way. But a lot of savoir-faire—a thousand years of civilization are backing Eddie up. “You’ll make me late, Papa Benjamin wouldn’t like that!” He gropes his way on up in the pitch-blackness, thinking any minute he’ll feel his back slashed to ribbons. But it’s better than standing still and having it happen, and to back out now would bring it on twice as quickly. However, it works, nothing happens.

“Fust thing y’know, all N’yorleans be cornin’ by,” growls the African watchdog sulkily, and flounders down on the staircase with a sound like a tired seal. There was some other crack about “darkies lookin’ lak pinks,” and then a long period of scratching.

But Eddie’s already up on the landing above and so close to the boom-putta-boom now it drowns out every other sound. The whole framework of the decrepit house seems to shake with it. The door’s closed but the thread of orange that outlines it shows it up to him. Behind there. He leans against it, shoves a little. It gives. The squealings and the grindings it emits are lost in the torrent of noise that comes rushing out. He sees plenty, and what he sees only makes him want to see all the more. Something tells him the best thing to do is slip in quietly and close it behind him before

he’s noticed, rather than stay there peeking in from the outside. Little Snowdrop might always come upstairs in back of him and catch him there. So he widens it just a little more, oozes in, and kicks it shut behind him with his heel—and immediately gets as far away from it as he can. Evidently no one has seen him.

Now, it’s a big shadowy room and it’s choked with people. It’s lit by a single oil-lamp and a hell of a whole lot of candles, which may have shone out brightly against the darkness outside but are pretty dim once you get inside with them. The long flickering shadows thrown on all the walls by those cavorting in the center are almost as much of a protection to Eddie as he crouches back amidst them as the darkness outside would be. He’s been around, and a single look is enough to tell him that whatever else it is, it’s no revival meeting. At first he takes it for just a gin or rent party with the lid off, but it isn’t that either. There’s no gin there, and there’s no pairing off of couples in the dancing—rather it’s a roomful of devils lifted bodily up out of hell. Plenty of them have passed out cold on the floor all around him and the others keep stepping over them as they prance back and forth, only they don’t always step over but sometimes on—on prostrate faces and chests and outstretched arms and hands. Then there are others who have gone off into a sort of still trance, seated on the floor with their backs to the wall, some of them rocking back and forth, some just staring glassy-eyed, foam drooling from their mouths. Eddie quickly slips down among them on his haunches and gets busy. He too starts rocking back and forth and pounding the flooring beside him with his knuckles, but he’s not in any trance, he’s getting a swell new number for his repertoire at the Bataclan. A sheet of blank score-paper is partly hidden under his body, and he keeps dropping one hand down to it every minute jotting down musical notes with the stub of pencil in his fingers. “Key of A,” he guesses. “I can decide that when I instrument

it. Mi-re-do, mi-re-do. Then over again. Hope I didn’t miss any of it.”

Boom-putta-putta-boom! Young a id old, black and tawny, fat and thin, naked and clothed, they pass from right to left, from left to right, in two concentric circles, while the candle flames dance crazily and the shadows leap up and down on the walls. The hub of it all, within the innermost circle of dancers, is an old, old man, black skin and bones, only glimpsed now and then in a space between the packed bodies that surround him. An animal-pelt is banded about his middle; he wears a horrible juju mask over his face—a death’s-head. On one side of him, a squatting woman clacks two gourds together endlessly, that’s the “putta” of Eddie’s rhythm; on the other, another beats a drum, that’s the “boom.” In one upraised hand, he holds a squalling fowl, wings beating the air; in the other, a sharp-bladed knife. Something flashes in the air, but the dancers mercifully get between Eddie and the sight of it. Next glimpse he has, the fowl isn’t flapping any more. It’s hanging limply down and veins of blood are trickling down the old man’s shrivelled forearm.

“That part don’t go into my show,” Eddie thinks facetiously. The horrible old man has dropped the knife; he squeezes the life-blood from the dead bird with both hands now, still holding it in mid-air. He sprinkles the drops on those that cavort around him, flexing and unflexing his bony fingers in a nauseating travesty of the ceremony of baptism.

Drops spatter here and there about the room, on the walls. One lands near Eddie and he edges back. Revolting things go on all around him. He sees some of the crazed dancers drop to their hands and knees and bend low over these red polka-dots, licking them up from the floor with their tongues. Then they go about the room on all fours like animals, looking for others.

“Think I’ll go,” Eddie says to himself, tasting last night’s supper all over again. “They ought to have the cops on

them.”

He maneuvers the score-sheet, filled now, out from under him and into his side-pocket; then he starts drawing his feet in toward him preparatory to standing up and slipping out of this hell-hole. Meanwhile a second fowl, black this time (the first was white), a squeaking suckling-pig, and a puppy-dog have gone the way of the first fowl. Nor do the carcasses go to waste when the old man has dropped them. Eddie sees things happening on the floor, in between the stomping feet of the dancers, and he guesses enough not to look twice.

Then suddenly, already reared a half-inch above the floor on his way up, he wonders where the wailing went. And the clacking of the gourds and the boom of the drum and the shuffling of the feet. He blinks, and everything has frozen still in the room around him. Not a move, not a sound. Straight out from the old man’s gnarled shoulder stretches a bony arm, the end dipped in red, pointing like an arrow at Eddie. Eddie sinks down again that half-inch. He couldn’t hold that position very long, and something tells him he’s not leaving right away after all. “White man,” says a bated breath, and they all start moving in on him. A gesture of the old man sweeps them into motionlessness again.

A cracked voice comes through the grinning mouth of the juju mask, rimmed with canine teeth. “Whut you do here?”

Eddie taps his pockets mentally. He has about fifty on him. Will that be enough to buy his way out? He has an uneasy feeling however that none of this lot is as interested in money as they should be—at least not right now. Before he has a chance to try it out, another voice speaks up. “I know this man, papaloi. Let me find out.”

Johnny Staats came in here tuxedoed, hair slicked back, a cog in New Orleans’ night life. Now he’s barefooted, coatless, shirtless—a tousled scarecrow. A drop of blood has caught him squarely on the forehead and been traced, by

his own finger or someone else's, into a red line from temple to temple. A chicken-feather or two clings to his upper lip. Eddie saw him dancing with the rest, groveling on the floor. His scalp crawls with repugnance as the man comes over and squats down before him. The rest of them hold back, tense, poised, ready to pounce.

The two men talk in low, hoarse voices. "It's your only way, Eddie. I can't save you—"

"Why, I'm in the very heart of New Orleans! They wouldn't dare!" But sweat oozes out on Eddie's face just the same. He's no fool. Sure the police will come and sure they'll mop this place up. But what will they find? His own remains along with that of the fowls, the pig and the dog.

"You'd better hurry up, Eddie. I can't hold them back much longer. Unless you do, you'll never get out of this place alive and you may as well know it! If I tried to stop them, I'd go too. You know what this is, don't you? This is voodoo!"

"I knew that five minutes after I was in the room." And Eddie thinks to himself, "You son-of-a-so-and-so! You better ask Mombo-jombo to get you a new job starting in tomorrow night!" Then he grins internally and, clown to the very end, says with a straight face: "Sure I'll join. What d'ye suppose I came here for anyway?"

Knowing what he knows now, Staats is the last one he'd tell about the glorious new number he's going to get out of this, the notes for which are nestled in his inside pocket right now. And he might even get more dope out of the initiation ceremonies if he pretends to go through with them. A song or dance for Judy to do with maybe a green spot focussed on her. Lastly, there's no use denying there are too many razors, knives, and the like, in the room to hope to get out and all the way back where he started from without a scratch.

Staats' face is grave though. "Now don't kid about this thing. If you knew what I know about it, there's a lot more

to it than there seems to be. If you're sincere, honest about it, all right. If not, it might be better to get cut to pieces right now than to tamper with it."

"Never more serious in my life," says Eddie. And deep down inside he's braying like a jackass.

Staats turns to the old man. "His spirit wishes to join our spirits." The papaloi bums some feathers and entrails at one of the candle-flames. Not a sound in the room. The majority of them squat down all at once. "It came out all right," Staats breathes. "He reads them. The spirits are willing."

"So far so good," Eddie thinks. "I've fooled the guts and feathers." The papaloi is pointing at him now. "Let him go now and be silent," the voice behind the mask cackles. Then a second time he says it, and a third, with a long pause between.

Eddie looks hopefully at Staats. "Then I can go after all, as long as I don't tell anyone what I've seen?"

Staats shakes his head grimly. "Just part of the ritual. If you went now, you'd eat something that disagreed with you tomorrow and be dead before the day was over."

More sacrificial slaughtering, and the drum and gourds and wailing start over again, but very low and subdued now as at the beginning. A bowl of blood is prepared and Eddie is raised to his feet and led forward, Staats on one side of him, an anonymous colored man on the other. The papaloi dips his already caked hand into the bowl and traces a mark on Eddie's forehead. The chanting and wailing grow louder behind him. The dancing begins again. He's in the middle of all of them. He's an island of sanity in a sea of jungle frenzy. The bowl is being held up before his face. He tries to draw back, his sponsors grip him firmly by the arms. "Drink!" whispers Staats. "Drink—or they'll kill you where you stand!"

Even at this stage of the game, there's still a wisecrack left in Eddie, though he keeps it to himself. He takes a deep breath. "Here's where I get my vitamin A for today!"

Staats shows up at orchestra rehearsal next A.M. to find somebody else at drums and percussion. He doesn't say much when Eddie shoves a two-week check at him. Spits on the floor at his feet and growls: "Beat it, you filthy—"

Staats only murmurs: "So you're crossing them? I wouldn't want to be in your shoes for all the fame and money in this world, guy!"

"If you mean that bad dream the other night," says Eddie, "I haven't told anybody and I don't intend to. Why, I'd be laughed at. I'm only remembering what I can use of it. I'm a white man, see? The jungle is just trees to me; the Congo, just a river; the night-time, just a time for 'lectric-lights." He whips out a couple of C's. "Hand 'em these for me, will ya, and tell 'em I've paid up my dues from now until doomsday and I don't want any receipt. And if they try putting rough-on-rats in my orange juice, they'll find themselves stomping in a chain gang!"

The C's fall where Eddie spat. "You're one of us. You think you're pink? Blood tells. You wouldn't have gone there—you couldn't have stood that induction—if you were. Look at your fingernails sometime, look in a mirror at the whites of your eyes. Goodbye, dead man." Eddie says goodbye to him, too. He knocks out three of his teeth, breaks the bridge of his nose, and rolls all over the floor on top of him. But he can't wipe out that wise, knowing smile that shows even through the gush of blood.

They pull Eddie off, pull him up, pull him together. Staats staggers away, smiling at what he knows. Eddie, heaving like a bellows, turns to his crew. "All right, boys. Altogether now!" Boom-putta-putta-boom-putta-putta-boom!

Graham shoots five C's on promotion and all New Orleans jams its way into the Bataclan that Saturday night. They're standing on each other's shoulders and hanging from the chandeliers to get a look. "First time in America, the original VOODOO CHANT," yowl the three-sheets on every billboard in town. And when Eddie taps his baton, the lights

go down and a nasty green flood lights the platform from below and you can hear a pin drop. “Good evening, folks. This is Eddie Bloch and his Five Chips, playing to you from the Bataclan. You’re about to hear for the first time on the air the Voodoo Chant, the age-old ceremonial rhythm no white man has ever been permitted to listen to before. I can assure you this is an accurate transcription, not a note has been changed.” Then very soft and faraway it begins: Boom-putta-putta-boom!

Judy’s going to dance and wail to it, she’s standing there on the steps leading up to the platform, waiting to go on. She’s powdered orange, dressed in feathers, and has a small artificial bird fastened to one wrist and a thin knife in her other hand. She catches his eye, he looks over at her, and he sees she wants to tell him something. Still waving his baton he edges sideways until he’s within earshot. “Eddie, don’t! Stop them! Call it off, will you? I’m worried about you!”

“Too late now,” he answers under cover of the music. “We’ve started already. What’re you scared of?”

She passes him a crumpled piece of paper. “I found this under your dressing room door when I came out just now. It sounds like a warning. There’s somebody doesn’t want you to play that number!” Still swinging with his right hand, Eddie unrolls the thing under his left thumb and reads it:

You can summon the spirits but can you dismiss them again? Think well.

He crumples it up again and tosses it away. “Staats trying to scare me because I canned him.”

“It was tied to a little bunch of black feathers,” she tries to tell him. “I wouldn’t have paid any attention, but my maid pleaded with me not to dance this when she saw it. Then she ran out on me—”

“We’re on the air,” he reminds her between his teeth. “Are you with me or aren’t you?” And he eases back center again. Louder and louder the beat grows, just like it did two

nights ago. Judy swirls on in a green spot and begins the unearthly wail Eddie's coached her to do.

A waiter drops a tray of drinks in the silence of the room out there, and when the headwaiter goes to bawl him out he's nowhere to be found. He has quit cold and a whole row of tables has been left without their orders. "Well, I'll be—" says the captain, and scratches his head.

Eddie's facing the crew, his back to Judy, and as he vibrates to the rhythm, some pin or other that he's forgotten to take out of his shirt suddenly catches him and sticks into him. It's a little below the collar, just between the shoulder-blades. He jumps a little, but doesn't feel it any more after that . . .

Judy squalls, tears her tonsils out, screeches words that neither he nor she know the meaning of but that he managed to set down on paper phonetically the other night. Her little body goes through all the contortions, tamed down of course, that that brownskin she-devil greased with lard and wearing only earrings performed that night. She stabs the bird with her fake knife and sprinkles imaginary blood in the air. Nothing like this has ever been seen before. And in the silence that suddenly lands when it's through, you can count twenty. That's how it's gotten under everyone's skin.

Then the noise begins. It goes over like an avalanche. But just the same, more people are ordering strong drinks all at once than has ever happened before in the place, and the matron in the women's restroom has her hands full of hysterical sob-sisters.

"Try to get away from me, just try!" Graham tells Eddie at curfew time. "I'll have a new contract, gilt-edged, ready for you in the morning. We've already got six grand worth of reservations on our hands for the coming week—one of 'em by telegram all the way from Shreveport!"

Success! Eddie and Judy taxi back to their rooms at the hotel, tired but happy. "It'll be good for years. We can use it

for our signature on the air, like Whiteman does the Rhapsody."

She goes into the bedroom first, snaps on the lights, calls to him a minute later. "Come here and look at this—the cutest little souvenir!" He finds her holding a little wax doll, finger high, in her hands. "Why, it's you, Eddie, look! Small as it is, it has your features! Well isn't that the clev—"

He takes it away from her and squints at it. It's himself all right. It's rigged out in two tiny patches of black cloth for a tuxedo, and the eyes and hair and features are inked onto the wax.

"Where'd you find it?"

"It was in your bed, up against the pillow."

He's fixing to grin about it, until he happens to turn it over. In the back, just a little below the collar between the shoulder blades, a short but venomous-looking black pin is sticking.

He goes a little white for a minute. He knows who it's from now and what it's trying to tell him. But that isn't what makes him change color. He's just remembered something. He throws off his coat, yanks at his collar, turns his back to her. "Judy, look down there, will you? I felt a pin stick me while we were doing that number. Put your hand down. Feel anything?"

"No, there's nothing there," she tells him.

"Musta dropped out."

"It couldn't have," she says. "Your belt-line's so tight it almost cuts into you. There couldn't have been anything there or it'd still be there now. You must have imagined it."

"Listen, I know a pin when I feel one. Any mark on my back, any scratch between the shoulders?"

"Not a thing."

"Tired, I guess. Nervous." He goes over to the open window and pitches the little doll out into the night with all his strength. Damn coincidence, that's all it was. To think otherwise would be to give them their inning. But he

wonders what makes him feel so tired just the same—Judy did all the exercising, not he—yet he's felt all in ever since that number tonight.

Out go the lights and she drops off to sleep right with them. He lies very quiet for awhile. A little later he gets up, goes into the bathroom where the lights are whitest of all, and stands there looking at himself close to the glass. "Look at your fingernails sometime; look at the whites of your eyes," Staats had said. Eddie does. There's a bluish, purplish tinge to his nails that he never noticed before. The whites of his eyes are faintly yellow.

It's warm in New Orleans that night but he shivers a little as he stands there. He doesn't sleep any more that night . . .

In the morning his back aches as if he were sixty. But he knows that's from not closing his eyes all night, and not from any magic pins.

"Oh, my God!" Judy says, from the other side of the bed, "look what you've done to him!" She shows him the second page of the Picayune. "John Staats, until recently a member of Eddie Bloch's orchestra, committed suicide late yesterday afternoon in full view of dozens of people by rowing himself out into Lake Pontchartrain and jumping overboard. He was alone in the boat at the time. The body was recovered half an hour later."

"I didn't do that," says Eddie grimly. "I've got a rough idea what did, though." Late yesterday afternoon. The night was coming on, and he couldn't face what was coming to him for sponsoring Eddie, for giving them all away. Late yesterday after—that meant he hadn't left that warning at the dressing-room or left that death sentence on the bed. He'd been dead himself by then—not white, not black, just yellow.

Eddie waits until Judy's in her shower, then he phones the morgue. "About Johnny Staats. He worked for me until yesterday, so if nobody's claimed the body send it to a funeral parlor at my exp—"

“Somebody’s already claimed the remains, Mr. Bloch. First thing this morning. Just waited until the examiner had established suicide beyond a doubt. Some colored organization, old friends of his it seems—”

Judy comes in and remarks: “You look all green in the face.”

Eddie thinks: “I wouldn’t care if he was my worst enemy, I can’t let that happen to him! What horrors are going to take place tonight somewhere under the moon?” He wouldn’t even put cannibalism beyond them. The phone’s right at his fingertips, and yet he can’t denounce them to the police without involving himself, admitting that he was there, took part at least once. Once that comes out, bang! goes his reputation. He’ll never be able to live it down—especially now that he’s played the Voodoo chant and identified himself with it in the minds of the public.

So instead, alone in the room again, he calls the best-known private agency in New Orleans. “I want a bodyguard. Just for tonight. Have him meet me at closing-time at the Bataclan. Armed, of course.”

It’s Sunday and the banks are closed, but his credit’s good anywhere. He raises a G in cash. He arranges with a reliable crematorium for a body to be taken charge of late tonight or early in the morning. He’ll notify them just where to call for it. Yes, of course! He’ll produce the proper authorization from the police. Poor Johnny Staats couldn’t get away from them in life, but he’s going to get away from them in death, all right. That’s the least anyone could do for him.

Graham slaps a sawbuck cover on that night, more to give the waiters room to move around in than anything else, and still the place is choked to the roof. This Voodoo number is a natural, a wow.

But Eddie’s back is ready to cave in, while he stands there jogging with his stick. It’s all he can do to hold himself straight.

When the racket and the shuffling are over for the night, the private dick is there waiting for him. “Lee is the name.”

“Okay, Lee, come with me.” They go outside and get in Eddie’s Bugatti. They whizz down to the Vieux, scrounge to a stop in the middle of Congo Square, which will still be Congo Square when its official name of Beauregard is forgotten. “This way,” says Eddie, and his bodyguard squirms through the alley after him. “ ‘Lo, suga’ pie,” says the elbow-pusher, and for once, to her own surprise as much as anyone else’s, gets a tumble. “’Lo, Eglantine,” Eddie’s bodyguard remarks in passing, “so you moved?”

They stop in front of the house on the other side of the tunnel. “Now here’s what,” says Eddie. “We’re going to be stopped halfway up these stairs in here by a big ourangoutang. Your job is to clean him, tap him if you want, I don’t care. I’m going into a room up there, you’re going to wait for me at the door. You’re here to see that I get out of that room again. We may have to carry the body of a friend of mine down to the street between us. I don’t know. It depends on whether it’s in the house or not. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Light up. Keep your torch trained over my shoulder.”

A big, lowering figure looms over them, blocking the narrow stairs, ape-like arms and legs spread-eagled in a gesture of malignant embrace, receding skull, teeth showing, flashing steel in hand. Lee jams Eddie roughly to one side and shoves up past him. “Drop that, boy!” Lee says with slurring indifference, but then he doesn’t wait to see if the order’s carried out or not. After all, a weapon was raised to two white men. He fires three times, from two feet away and considerably below the obstacle, hits where he aimed to. The bullets shatter both knee-caps and the elbow-joint of the arm holding the knife. “Be a cripple for life now,” he remarks with quiet satisfaction. “I’ll put him out of his pain.” So he crashes the butt of his gun down on the skull of the writhing colossus, in a long arc like the overhand pitch

of a baseball. The noise of the shots goes booming up the narrow stairwell to the roof, to mushroom out there in a vast rolling echo. “Come on, hurry up,” says Eddie, “before they have a chance to do away with—”

He lopes on up past the prostrate form, Lee at his heels. “Stand here. Better reload while you’re waiting. If I call your name, for Pete’s sake don’t count ten before you come in to me!”

There’s a scurrying back and forth and an excited but subdued jabbering going on on the other side of the door. Eddie swings it wide and crashes it closed behind him, leaving Lee on the outside. They all stand rooted to the spot when they see him. The papaloi is there and about six others, not so many as on the night of Eddie’s initiation. Probably the rest are waiting outside the city somewhere, in some secret spot, wherever the actual burial, or burning, or—feasting—is to take place.

Papa Benjamin has no juju mask on this time, no animal pelt. There are no gourds in the room, no drum, no transfixed figures ranged against the wall. They were about to move on elsewhere, he just got here in time. Maybe they were waiting for the dark of the moon. The ordinary kitchen chair on which the papaloi was to be carried on their shoulders stands prepared, padded with rags. A row of baskets covered with sacking is ranged in a row along the back wall.

“Where is the body of John Staats?” raps out Eddie. “You claimed it, took it away from the morgue this morning.” His eyes are on those baskets, on the bleared razor he catches sight of lying on the floor near them.

“Better far,” cackles the old man, “that you had followed him. The mark of doom is on yo’ even now—” A growl goes up all around.

“Lee,” grates Eddie, “in here!” Lee stands next to him, gun in hand. “Cover me while I take a look around.”

“All of you over in that corner there,” growls Lee, and kicks viciously at one who is too slow in moving. They huddle there, cower there, glaring, spitting like a band of apes. Eddie makes straight for those baskets, whips the covering off the first one. Charcoal. The next. Coffee-beans. The next. Rice. And so on.

Just small baskets that negro women balance on their heads to sell at the market-place. He looks at Papa Benjamin, takes out the wad of money he’s brought with him. “Where’ve you got him? Where’s he buried? Take us there, show us where it is.”

Not a sound, just burning, shriveling hate in waves that you can almost feel. He looks at that razor-blade lying there, bleared, not bloody, just matted, dulled, with shreds and threads of something clinging to it. Kicks it away with his foot. “Not here, I guess,” he mutters to Lee and moves toward the door. “What do we do now, boss?” his henchman wants to know. “Get the hell out of here, I guess, where we can breathe some air,” Eddie says, and moves on out to the stairs.

Lee is the sort of man who will get what he can out of any situation, no matter what it is. Before he follows Eddie out, he goes over to one of the baskets, stuffs an orange in each coat-pocket, and then prods and pries among them to select a particularly nice one for eating on the spot. There’s a thud and the orange goes rolling across the floor like a volleyball. “Mr. Bloch!” he shouts hoarsely. “I’ve found—him!” And he looks pretty sick.

A deep breath goes up from the comer where the negroes are. Eddie just stands and stares, and leans back weakly for a minute against the door-post. From out the layers of oranges in the basket, the five fingers of a hand thrust upward, a hand that ends abruptly, cleanly at the wrist.

“His signet,” says Eddie weakly, “there on the little finger —I know it.”

“Say the word! Should I shoot?” Lee wants to know.

Eddie shakes his head. “They didn’t—he committed suicide. Let’s do what—we have to—and get out of here!”

Lee turns over one basket after the other. The stuff in them spills and sifts and rolls out upon the floor. But in each there’s something else. Bloodless, pallid as fish-flesh. That razor, those shreds clinging to it, Eddie knows now what it was used for. They take one basket, they line it with a verminous blanket from the bed. Then with their bare hands they fill it with what they have found, and close the ends of the blanket over the top of it, and carry it between them out of the room and down the pitch-black stairs, Lee going down backwards with his gun in one hand to cover them from the rear. Lee’s swearing like a fiend. Eddie’s trying not to think what the purpose, the destination of all those baskets was. The watchdog is still out on the stairs, with a concussion.

Back through the lane they struggle, and finally put their burden down in the before-dawn stillness of Congo Square. Eddie goes up against a wall and is heartily sick. Then he comes back again and says: “The head—did you notice—?”

“No, we didn’t,” Lee answers. “Stay here, I’ll go back for it. I’m armed. I could stand anything now, after what I just been through.” Lee’s gone about five minutes. When he comes back, he’s in his shirt, coatless. His coat’s rolled up under one arm in a bulky bulge. He bends over the basket, lifts the blanket, replaces it again, and when he straightens up, the bulge in his folded coat is gone. Then he throws the coat away, kicks it away on the ground. “Hidden away in a cupboard,” he mutters. “Had to shoot one of ‘em through the palm of the hand before they’d come clean. What were they up to?”

“Practice cannibalism maybe, I don’t know. I’d rather not think.”

“I brought your money back. It didn’t seem to square you with them.”

Eddie shoves it back at him. “Pay for your suit and your time.”

“Aren’t you going to tip off the squareheads?”

“I told you he jumped in the lake. I have a copy of the examiner’s report in my pocket.”

“I know, but isn’t there some ordinance against dissecting a body without permission?”

“I can’t afford to get mixed up with them, Lee. It would kill my career. We’ve got what we went there for. Now just forget everything you saw.”

The hearse from the crematorium contacts them there in Congo Square. The covered basket’s taken on, and what’s left of Johnny Staats heads away for a better finish than was coming to him.

“G’night, boss,” says Lee. “Anytime you need any other little thing—”

“No,” says Eddie. “I’m getting out of New Orleans.” His hand is like ice when they shake.

He does. He hands Graham back his contract, and a split week later he’s playing New York’s newest, in the frantic Fifties. With a white valet. The Chant, of course, is still featured. He has to; it’s his chief asset, his biggest draw. It introduces him and signs him off, and in between, Judy always dances it for a high-spot. But he can’t get rid of that backache that started the night he first played it. First he goes and tries having his back baked for a couple of hours a day under a violet-ray. No improvement.

Then he has himself examined by the biggest specialist in New York. “Nothing there,” says the big shot. “Absolutely nothing the matter with you: liver, kidneys, blood—everything perfect. It must be all in your own mind.”

“You’re losing weight, Eddie,” Judy says, “you look bad, darling.” His bathroom scales tell him the same thing. Down five pounds a week, sometimes seven, never up an ounce. More experts. X-rays this time, blood analysis, gland treatments, everything from soup to nuts.

Nothing doing. And the dull ache, the lassitude, spreads slowly, first to one arm, then to the other.

He takes specimens of everything he eats, not just one day, but every day for weeks, and has them chemically analyzed. Nothing. And he doesn't have to be told that anyway. He knows that even in New Orleans, way back in the beginning, nothing was ever put into his food. Judy ate from the same tray, drank from the same coffee-pot he did. Nightly she dances herself into a lather, and yet she's the picture of health.

So that leaves nothing but his mind, just as they all say. "But I don't believe it!" he tells himself. "I don't believe that just sticking pins into a wax doll can hurt me—me or anyone!"

So it isn't his mind at all, but some other mind back there in New Orleans, some other mind thinking, wishing, ordering him dead, night and day.

"But it can't be done!" says Eddie. "There's no such thing!"

And yet it's being done; it's happening right under his own eyes. Which leaves only one answer. If going three thousand miles away on dry land didn't help, then going three thousand miles away across the ocean will do the trick. So London next, and the Kit-Kat Club. Down, down, down go the bathroom scales, a little bit each week. The pains spread downward into his thighs. His ribs start showing up here and there. He's dying on his feet. He finds it more comfortable now to walk with a stick—not to be swanky, not to be English—to rest on as he goes along. His shoulders ache each night just from waving that lightweight baton at his crew. He has a music-stand built for himself to lean on, keeps it in front of him, body out of sight of the audience while he's conducting, and droops over it. Sometimes he finishes up a number with his head lower than his shoulders, as though he had a rubber spine.

Finally he goes to Reynolds, famous the world over, the biggest alienist in England. “I want to know whether I’m sane or insane.” He’s under observation for weeks, months; they put him through every known test, and plenty of unknown ones, mental, physical, metabolic. They flash lights in front of his face and watch the pupils of his eyes; they contract to pinheads. They touch the back of his throat with sandpaper; he nearly chokes.

They strap him to a chair that goes around and around and does somersaults at so many revolutions per minute, then ask him to walk across the room; he staggers. Reynolds takes plenty of pounds, hands him a report thick as a telephone book, sums it up for him. “You are as normal, Mr. Bloch, as anyone I have ever handled. You’re so well-balanced you haven’t even got the extra little touch of imagination most actors and musicians have.” So it’s not his own mind, it’s coming from the outside, is it?

The whole thing from beginning to end has taken eighteen months. Trying to outdistance death, with death gaining on him slowly, but surely, all the time. He’s emaciated. There’s only one thing left to do now, while he’s still able to crawl aboard a ship—that’s to get back to where the whole thing started. New York, London, Paris haven’t been able to save him. His only salvation, now, lies in the hands of a decrepit colored man skulking in the Vieux Carre of New Orleans.

He drags himself there, to that same half-ruined house, without a bodyguard, not caring now whether they kill him or not, almost wishing they would and get it over with. But that would be too easy an out, it seems. The gorilla that Lee crippled that night shuffles out to him between two sticks, recognizes him, breathes undying hate into his face, but doesn’t lift a finger to harm him. The spirits are doing that job better than he could ever hope to. Their mark is on this man, woe betide anyone who comes between them and their hellish satisfaction. Eddie Bloch totters up the stairs

unopposed, his back as safe from a knife as if he wore steel armor. Behind him the negro sprawls upon the stairs to lubricate his long-awaited hour of satisfaction with rum—and oblivion.

He finds the old man alone there in the room. The Stone Age and the 20th Century face each other, and the Stone Age has won out. “Take it off me,” says Eddie brokenly. “Give me my life back—I’ll do anything, anything you say!”

“What has been done cannot be undone. Do you think the spirits of the earth and of the air, of fire and water, know the meaning of forgiveness?”

“Intercede for me then. You brought it about. Here’s money, I’ll give you twice as much, all I earn, all I ever hope to earn—”

“You have desecrated the obiah. Death has been on you from that night. All over the world and in the air above the earth you have mocked the spirits with the chant that summons them. Nightly your wife dances it. The only reason she has not shared your doom is because she does not know the meaning of what she does. You do. You were here among us.”

Eddie goes down on his knees, scrapes along the floor after the old man, tries to tug at the garments he wears. “Kill me right now, then, and be done with it. I can’t stand any more—” He bought the gun only that day, was going to do it himself at first, but found he couldn’t. A minute ago he pleaded for his life, now he’s pleading for death. “It’s loaded, all you have to do is shoot. Look! I’ll close my eyes—I’ll write a note and sign it, that I did it myself—”

He tries to thrust it into the witch-doctor’s hand, tries to close the bony, shriveled fingers around it, tries to point it at himself. The old man throws it down, away from him. Cackles gleefully, “Death will come, but differently—slowly, oh, so slowly!” Eddie just lies there flat on his face, sobbing dryly. The old man spits, kicks at him weakly. He pulls himself up somehow, stumbles toward the door. He isn’t

even strong enough to get it open at the first try. It's that little thing that brings it on. Something touches his foot, he looks, stoops for the gun, turns. Thought is quick but the old man's mind is even quicker. Almost before the thought is there, the old man knows what's coming. In a flash, scuttling like a crab, he has shifted around to the other side of the bed, to put something between them. Instantly the situation's reversed, the fear has left Eddie and is on the old man now. He's lost the aggressive. For a minute only, but that minute is all Eddie needs. His mind beams out like a diamond, like a lighthouse through a fog. The gun roars, jolting his weakened body down to his shoes. The old man falls flat across the bed, his head too far over, dangling down over the side of it like an overripe pear. The bed-frame sways gently with his weight for a minute, and then it's over . . .

Eddie stands there, still off-balance from the kick-back. So it was as easy as all that! Where's all his magic now? Strength, will-power flood back through him as if a faucet was suddenly turned on. The little smoke there was can't get out of the sealed-up room, it hangs there in thin layers. Suddenly he's shaking his fist at the dead thing on the bed. "I'm gonna live now! I'm gonna live, see?" He gets the door open, sways for a minute. Then he's feeling his way down the stairs, past the unconscious watchdog, mumbling it over and over but low, "Gonna live now, gonna live!"

The Commissioner mops his face as if he was in the steam room of a Turkish bath. He exhales like an oxygen tank. "Judas, Joseph and Mary, Mr. Bloch, what a story! Wish I hadn't asked you; I won't sleep tonight." Even after the accused has been led from the room, it takes him some time to get over it. The upper right-hand drawer of his desk helps some—just two fingers. So does opening the windows and letting in a lot of sunshine.

Finally he picks up the phone and gets down to business. "Who've you got out there that's absolutely without a nerve

in his body? I mean a guy with so little feeling he could sit on a hatpin and turn it into a paper-clip. Oh yeah, that Cajun, Desjardins, I know him. He's the one goes around striking parlor-matches off the soles of stiffs. Well, send him in here."

"No, stay outside," wheezes Papa Benjamin through the partly-open door to his envoy. "I'se communin' with the obiah and yo' unclean, been drunk all last night and today. Deliver the summons. Reach yo' hand in to me, once fo' every token, yo' knows how many to take."

The crippled negro thrusts his huge paw through the aperture, and from behind the door the papaloi places a severed chicken-claw in his upturned palm. A claw bound with a red rag. The messenger disposes of it about his tattered clothing, thrusts his hand in for another. Twenty times the act is repeated, then he lets his arm hang stiffly at his side. The door starts closing slowly. "Papaloi," whines the figure on the outside of it, "why you hide yo' face from me, is the spirits angry?"

There's a flicker of suspicion in his yellow eyeballs in the dimness, however. Instantly the opening of the door widens. Papa Benjamin's familiar wrinkled face thrusts out at him, malignant eyes crackling like fuses. "Go!" shrills the old man, " 'liver my summons. Is you want me to bring a spirit down on you?" The messenger totters back. The door slams.

The sun goes down and it's night-time in New Orleans. The moon rises, midnight chimes from St. Louis Cathedral, and hardly has the last note died away than a gruesome swampland whistle sounds outside the deathly-still house. A fat Negress, basket on arm, comes trudging up the stairs a moment later, opens the door, goes in to the papaloi, closes it again, traces an invisible mark on it with her forefinger and kisses it. Then she turns and her eyes widen with surprise. Papa Benjamin is in bed, covered up to the neck with filthy rags. The familiar candles are all lit, the bowl for the blood, the sacrificial knife, the magic powders, all the

paraphernalia of the ritual are laid out in readiness, but they are ranged about the bed instead of at the opposite end of the room as usual. The old man's head, however, is held high above the encumbering rags, his beady eyes gaze back at her unflinchingly, the familiar semicircle of white wool rings his crown, his ceremonial mask is at his side. "I am a little tired, my daughter," he tells her. His eyes stray to the tiny wax image of Eddie Bloch under the candles, hairy with pins, and hers follow them.

"A doomed one, nearing his end, came here last night thinking I could be killed like other men. He shot a bullet from a gun at me. I blew my breath at it, it stopped in the air, turned around, and went back in the gun again. But it tired me to blow so hard, strained my voice a little."

A revengeful gleam lights up the woman's broad face. "And he'll die soon, papaloi?"

"Soon," cackles the weazened figure in the bed. The woman gnashes her teeth and hugs herself delightedly. She opens the top of her basket and allows a black hen to escape and flutter about the room.

When all twenty have assembled, men and women, old and young, the drum and the gourds begin to beat, the low wailing starts, the orgy gets under way. Slowly they dance around the three sides of the bed at first, then faster, faster, lashing themselves to a frenzy, tearing at their own and each other's clothes, drawing blood with knives and fingernails, eyes rolling in an ecstasy that colder races cannot know. The sacrifices, feathered and furred, that have been fastened to the two lower posts of the bed, squawk and flutter and fly vertically up and down in a barnyard panic. There is a small monkey among them tonight, clawing, biting, hiding his face in his hands like a frightened child. A bearded negro, nude torso glistening like patent-leather, seizes one of the frantic fowls, yanks it loose from its moorings, and holds it out toward the witch-doctor with

both hands. “We’se thirsty, papaloi, we’se thirsty fo’ the blood of ou’ enemies.”

The others take up the cry. “We’se hung’y, papaloi, fo’ the bones of ou’ enemies!”

Papa Benjamin nods his head in time to the rhythm.

“Sac’fice, papaloi, sac’fice!”

Papa Benjamin doesn’t seem to hear them.

Then back go the rags in a gray wave and out comes the arm at last. Not the gnarled brown toothpick arm of Papa Benjamin, but a bulging arm thick as a piano-leg, cuffed in serge, white at the wrist, ending in a regulation police-revolver with the clip off. The erstwhile witch-doctor’s on his feet at a bound, standing erect atop the bed, back to the wall, slowly fanning his score of human devils with the mouth of his gun, left to right, then right to left again, evenly, unhurriedly. The resonant bellow of a bull comes from his weazened slit of a mouth instead of the papaloi’s cracked falsetto. “Back against that wall there, all of you! Throw down them knives and jiggers!” But they’re slow to react; the swift drop from ecstasy to stupefaction can’t register right away. None of them are overbright anyway or they wouldn’t be here. Mouths hang open, the wailing stops, the drums and gourds fall still, but they’re still packed close about this sudden changeling in their midst, with the familiar shriveled face of Papa Benjamin and the thick-set body, business-suit, of a white man—too close for comfort. Blood-lust and religious mania don’t know fear of a gun. It takes a cool head for that, and the only cool head in the room is the withered cocoanut atop the broad shoulders behind that gun. So he shoots twice, and a woman at one end of the semicircle, the drumbeater, and a man at the other end, the one still holding the sacrificial fowl, drop in their tracks with a double moan. Those in the middle slowly draw back step by step across the room, all eyes on the figure reared up on the bed. An instant’s carelessness, the wavering of an eye, and they’ll be on him in a body. He

reaches with his free hand and rips the dead witch-doctor's features from his face, to breathe better, see better. They dissolve into a crumpled rag before the blacks' terrified eyes, like a stocking-cap coming off someone's head—a mixture of paraffin and fiber, called moulage—a death-mask taken from the corpse's own face, reproducing even the fine lines of the skin and its natural color. Moulage. So the 20th Century has won out after all. And behind them is the grinning, slightly-perspiring, lantern-jawed face of Detective Jacques Desjardins, who doesn't believe in spirits unless they're under a neat little label. And outside the house sounds the twenty-first whistle of the evening, but not a swampland sound this time; a long, cold, keen blast to bring figures out of the shadows and doorways that have waited there patiently all night.

Then the door bursts inward and the police are in the room. The survivors, three of them dangerously wounded, are pushed and carried downstairs to join the crippled door-guard, who has been in custody for the past hour, and single-file, tied together with ropes, they make their way through the long tortuous alley out into Congo Square.

In the early hours of that same morning, just a little more than twenty-four hours after Eddie Bloch first staggered into Police Headquarters with his strange story, the whole thing is cooked, washed and bottled. The Commissioner sits in his office listening attentively to Desjardins.

And spread out on his desk as strange an array of amulets, wax images, bunches of feathers, balsam leaves, ouangas (charms of nail parings, hair clippings, dried blood, powdered roots), green mildewed coins dug up from coffins in graveyards, as that room has ever seen before. All this is state's evidence now, to be carefully labelled and docketed for the use of the prosecuting attorney when the proper time comes. "And this," explains Desjardins, indicating a small dusty bottle, "is methylene blue, the chemist tells me. It's the only modern thing we got out of the place, found it

lying forgotten with a lot of rubbish in a corner that looked like it hadn't been disturbed for years.

What it was doing there or what they wanted with it I don't—"

"Wait a minute," interrupts the commissioner eagerly. "That fits in with something poor Bloch told me last night. He noticed a bluish color under his fingernails and a yellowness to his eyeballs, but only after he'd been initiated that first night.

"This stuff probably has something to do with it, an injection of it must have been given him that night in some way without his knowing it. Don't you get the idea? It floored him just the way they wanted it to. He mistook the signs of it for a give-away that he had colored blood. It was the opening wedge. It broke down his disbelief, started his mental resistance to crumbling. That was all they needed, just to get a foothold in his mind. Mental suggestion did the rest, has been doing it ever since. If you ask me, they pulled the same stunt on Staats originally. I don't believe he had colored blood any more than Bloch has. And as a matter of fact the theory that it shows up in that way generations later is all the bunk anyway, they tell me."

"Well," says Dij, looking at his own grimy nails, "if you're just going to judge by appearances that way, I'm full-blooded Zulu."

His overlord just looks at him, and if he didn't have such a poker face, one might be tempted to read admiration or at least approval into the look. "Must have been a pretty tight spot for a minute with all of them around while you put on your act!"

"Nah, I didn't mind," answers Dij.

Eddie Bloch, the murder charge against him quashed two months ago, and the population of the State Penitentiary increased only this past week by the admission of twenty-three ex-voodoo worshippers for terms varying from two to ten years, steps up on the platform of the Bataclan for a

return engagement. Eddie's pale and washed-out looking, but climbing slowly back up through the hundred-and-twenties again to his former weight. The ovation he gets ought to do anyone's heart good, the way they clap and stamp and stand up and cheer. And at that, his name was kept out of the recently-concluded trial. Desjardins and his mates did all the states-witnessing necessary.

The theme he comes in on now is something sweet and harmless. Then a waiter comes up and hands him a request. Eddie shakes his head. "No, not in our repertoire any more." He goes on leading. Another request comes, and another. Suddenly someone shouts it out at him, and in a second the whole place has taken up the cry. "The Voodoo Chant! Give us the Voodoo Chant!"

His face gets whiter than it is already, but he turns and tries to smile at them and shake his head. They won't quit, the music can't be heard, and he has to tap a lay-off. From all over the place, like a cheering-section at a football game, "We want the Voodoo Chant! We want-!"

Judy's at his side. "What's the matter with 'em anyway?" he asks. "Don't they know what that thing's done to me?"

"Play it, Eddie, don't be foolish," she urges. "Now's the time, break the spell once and for all, prove to yourself that it can't hurt you. If you don't do it now, you'll never get over the idea. It'll stay with you all your life. Go ahead. I'll dance it just like I am."

"Okay," he says.

He taps. It's been quite some time, but he can rely on his outfit. Slow and low like thunder far away, coming nearer. Boom-putta-putta-boom! Judy whirls out behind him, lets out the first preliminary screech, Eeyaeeya!

She hears a commotion in back of her, and stops as suddenly as she began. Eddie Bloch's fallen flat on his face and doesn't move again after that.

They all know somehow. There's an inertness, a finality about it that tells them. The dancers wait a minute, mill

about, then melt away in a hush. Judy Jarvis doesn't scream, doesn't cry, just stands there staring, wondering. That last thought—did it come from inside his own mind just now—or outside? Was it two months on its way, from the other side of the grave, looking for him, looking for him, until it found him tonight when he played the Chant once more and laid his mind open to Africa? No policeman, no detective, no doctor, no scientist, will ever be able to tell her. Did it come from inside or from outside? All she says is: "Stand close to me, boys—real close to me, I'm afraid of the dark."

RED LIBERTY

Katie must have been out of humor to say a thing like that, but it sure rankled. “And that’s why you’re no further than you are,” she went on. ‘Ten years from now you’ll still be a second-grade detective pinching pickpockets. Movies and beer—that’s all you ever think of whenever you have any time to yourself. Why don’t you improve your mind? Why don’t you read a book? Why don’t you go to a museum once in a while and look at the beautiful statues?”

I nearly fell over. “Look at statues!” I gasped. “What for?”

I seemed to have her there for a minute. “Why—why, to see how they’re made,” she said finally, looking bewildered.

There didn’t seem to be much sense to it, but anything to keep peace in the family. I reached for my hat and gave a deep sigh. “You win,” I said. “I’ll try anything once.”

Riding down in the sub I got a bright idea. Instead of wasting a lot of time looking at a flock of little statues I’d look at one big one instead and get the whole thing over with. So I got out at the Battery, forked over thirty-five cents for one round-trip ticket and got on the little ferry that takes you down the bay to the Statue of Liberty. It was the biggest statue around, and if there was any truth to what Katie said, it ought to improve me enough to last for the rest of the year.

There were about ten others making the trip with me, and as soon as everyone was on board, the tub gives a peep with its whistle and starts off, graceful as a hippopotamus.

First the statue was about the size of your thumb. It came gliding over the water getting bigger all the time, until it was tall as an office building. It was pea-green, just like on the postcards. Finally the ferry tied up at a long pier built on piles that stuck out from the island, and everybody got off. There was another crowd there waiting to get on and go back. It seems the trip is only made once every hour.

It was certainly an eyeful once you got close up under it. The stone base alone was six stories high, and after that there was nothing but statue the rest of the way. There was just room enough left over on the island for a little green lawn with cannonballs for markers, a couple of cement paths, and some benches. But on the other wide, away from the city, there were a group of two-story brick houses, lived in by the caretakers I suppose.

Anyway, we went in through a thick, brutal-looking metal door painted black, and down a long stone corridor, and after a couple of turns came to an elevator. A spick-and-span one too, that looked as if it had just been installed. This only went up as far as the top of the pedestal, and after that you had to walk the other seventeen stories. The staircase was a spiral one only wide enough to let one person through at a time and it made tough going, but several times a little platform opened out suddenly on the way up, with an ordinary park bench placed there to rest on. There was always the same fat man sitting heaving on it by the time I got to it, with not much room left over for anybody else. When I say fat, I mean anywheres from two hundred fifty pounds up. I'd noticed him on the boat, with his thin pretty little wife. "Brother," I said the second time I squeezed in next to him on the bench, "pardon me for butting in, but why do it? You must be a glutton for punishment."

His wife had gone on the rest of the way up without waiting for him. He just wheezed for a long time, then finally he got around to answering me. "Brother," he said

with an unhappy air, “she can think up more things for me to do like this. You know the old saying, nobody loves a—”

I couldn’t help liking him right off. “Buck up, Slim,” I said, “they’re all the same. Mine thinks I’m a lowbrow and sends me out looking at statues so I’ll learn something.”

“And have you?” he wanted to know.

“Yep, I’ve learned there’s no place like home,” I told him. “Well, keep your chins up,” I said, and with that I left him and went on up.

At the very top you had to push through a little turnstile, and then you were finally up in the head of the statue. The crown or tiara she wears, with those big spikes sticking out, has windows running from side to side in a half-circle. I picked the nearest one and stuck my head out. You could see for miles. The boats in the harbor were the size of match-boxes. Down below on the lawn the cannonballs looked like raisins in a pudding. Well, I stood there like that until I figured I’d gotten my thirty-five cents’ worth. The rest were starting to drift down again, so I turned to go too.

At the window next to me I noticed the fat man’s pretty little wife standing there alone. He evidently hadn’t been able to make the grade yet and get up there with her. She was amusing herself by scribbling her initials or something on the thick stone facing of the window, which was about a foot deep and wider at the outside than at the inside, the tiara being a semicircle. That was nothing. Most people do that whenever they visit any monument or point of interest. All five of the facings were chock-full of names, initials, dates, addresses, and so on, and as time and the weather slowly effaced the earlier ones there was always room for more. She was using an eyebrow pencil or something for hers though, instead of plain lead, I noticed.

By that time we were alone up there. The others were all clattering down the corrugated-iron staircase again, and the ferry was on its way back from the Battery to pick us up. Much as I would have enjoyed waiting to get an eyeful

of the shape her stout spouse was going to be in when he got up there, I figured I'd had enough. I started down and left her there behind me, chin propped in her hands and staring dreamily out into space, like Juliet waiting at her balcony for a high-sign from Romeo.

You went down by a different staircase than you came up, I mean it was the same spiral but the outside track this time, and there was no partition between, just a handrail. There were lights strung all along the stairs at regular intervals, of course; otherwise the place would have been pitch-dark. Some were just house bulbs; others were small searchlights turned outward against the lining of the statue, which was painted silver. In other words, anyone that was going up while you were coming down had to pass you in full view, almost rub elbows with you. No one did. The whole boatload that had come out with me was down below by now.

When I got down even with the first resting-platform, with only a rail separating me from it, something caught the corner of my eye just as my head was due to go below the platform level. I climbed back up a step or two, dipped under the railing, and looked under the bench, where it lay. Then I saw what it was and reached in and pulled it out. It was just somebody's brown felt hat, which had rolled under the bench.

I turned it upside down and looked in it. Knox—and P.G. were the initials. But more important, it hadn't been left there yesterday or last week, but just now. The sweat on the headband hadn't dried yet, and there was plenty of it—the leather strip was glistening with it. That was enough to tell me whose it was, the fat guy's. He'd been sitting on this bench when I left him—dripping with exertion—and I remembered seeing this very lid in his hand, or one the same color and shape. He'd taken it off and sat holding it in his hand while he mopped his melting brow.

He hadn’t gone on up to where I’d left his wife, for he’d neither arrived while I was still up there nor had I passed him on the way down. It was a cinch he’d given it up as a bad job and gone on down from here, without tackling the last of the seventeen “stories” or twists. Still I couldn’t figure how he could come to forget his hat, leave it behind like this, fagged out or not. Then I thought, “Maybe the poor gink had a heart attack, dizzy spell or something and had to be carried down, that’s how it came to be overlooked.” So I took it with me and went on down to try and locate him and hand it back to him.

I rang when I got to where the elevators started from, and when the car had come up for me I asked the operator: “What happened to that fat guy, know the one I mean? Anything go wrong with him? I picked up his hat just now.”

“He hasn’t come down yet,” he told me. “I’d know him in a minute. He must be still up there.”

“He isn’t up above, I just came from there myself. And he’s the last guy in the world who’d walk down the six stories from here when there’s a car to take him. How do you figure it?”

“Tell you where he might be,” said the attendant. “Outside there on the parapet. They all go out there for a last look through the telescope before they get in the car.”

“Well, wait up here for a minute until I find out. If he shows up tell him I’ve got his hat.”

I went out and made a complete circuit of the place, then doubled back and did it in reverse. Not a soul on it. It was a sort of terrace that ran around the top of the base, protected by a waist-high stone ledge on all four sides. It was lower down than the head of Miss Liberty of course, but still plenty high.

I went back to the elevator operator. “Nothing doing. You sure you didn’t take him down in your car without noticing?”

“Listen,” he said. “When he got on the first time he almost flattened me against the door getting in. I woulda known it the second time. I ain’t seen him since.”

“Are there any lavatories or restrooms on the way up?”

“Naw,” he said, “nothing like that.”

“Then he musta walked down the rest of the way without waiting for you. Take me down to the bottom—”

“If he did, he’s the first one ever did that yet. That’s what the elevators are here for.” He threw the switch. “Say,” he said, and I saw his face light up as if he was almost hoping something would happen to break the monotony of his job, “maybe he—you don’t suppose he—”

I knew what he was driving at. “You’re trying to tell me he took a jump for himself, aren’t you? G’wan, he couldn’t have even raised himself up over that stone ledge out there to do it! And if he had, there’d a been a crowd around him below. Everyone on the island woulda seen him land. I looked down just now. They’re all strolling around down there, addressing postcards, taking it easy waiting for the boat.”

His face dropped again. “They none of ’em try that from here, they always pick bridges instead. Nothing ever happens here.”

“Cheer up, Suicide Johnny,” I told him, “your cage will probably fall down the shaft some day and kill everyone in it.”

When he let me out I made straight for the concession pavilion down near the pier, where most of the ten who had come out with me were hanging around buying postcards and ice-cream cones, waiting for the ferry to pull in. It wasn’t more than fifty yards away by this time, coasting in a big half-circle from the right to get into position, with its engine already cut off.

The fat man wasn’t in the refreshment house—one look inside from the doorway told me that. I asked one or two of the others if they’d seen him since they’d come out of the

statue. Nobody had, although plenty had noticed him going in—especially on the way up—just as I had.

"He must be around some place," one of them suggested indifferently. "Couldn't very well get off the island until the ferry came back for him."

"No kidding?" I remarked brittlely. "And here I am thinking he went up in a puff of smoke!"

I went around to the other side of the base, following a series of cement walks bordered with ornamental cannonballs. No rotund gentleman in sight. I inquired at the dispensary at the back of the island, and even at one or two of the brick cottages the caretakers lived in, thinking he might have stopped in there because of illness or out of curiosity. Nothing doing.

I completed my circuit of the terraced lawn that surrounds the statue and returned to the front of it again. It had dawned on me by now that I was going to a hell of a whole lot of trouble just to return a man's hat to him, but his complete disappearance was an irritant that had me going in spite of myself. It was the size of the man that burned me more than anything. I wouldn't have minded if it had been somebody less conspicuous, probably wouldn't have noticed him in the first place, but to be as big as all that and then to evaporate completely—

The ferry was in when I got back and the passengers were straggling up the long, almost horizontal gangplank. It hadn't brought anybody out with it this trip, as the statue was closed to visitors after 4:30 each day and this was its last round trip. "Turn this in at the lost-and-found for me, will you?" I said, shoving the hat at one of the soldiers on pier-duty as I went by. "I just found it up there."

"Hand it in at the other end, at the Battery," he said. "That's where they come and claim things."

I was so dead-sure of lamping the lid's owner on the ferry, this being its last trip back, that I hung onto it without arguing and went looking for him in the saloon, or whatever

they call the between-decks part of a ferry. Meanwhile the landing platform had been rolled back and we'd started to nose up the bay.

"He's got to be on here," I said to myself. "He's not spending the night back there on the island. And nothing that floats came to take him off between the time we all got off the first time and just now when this thing called back for us." I knew that for a fact, because the ferry only made the run once every hour, on the half-hour, and it was the only one in service. So I went all over the schooner from bow to stern, upstairs, downstairs, inside and out. In the saloon a couple of kids were sitting one on each side of their father, swinging their legs over the edge of the long bench that ran all around it. And a guy who didn't give a hoot about the skyline outside was reading Hellinger in the Mirror. Nobody else.

On the port deck the other half-dozen were sitting in chairs, just like they would on a transatlantic greyhound only without rugs, and one or two were leaning over the rail trying to kid themselves they were on an ocean trip. He wasn't there either. Then when I went around to the starboard deck (only maybe it was the port and the other was starboard, don't expect too much from a guy that was never further away than Coney Island), there was his wife sitting there as big as life, all by herself and the only person on that side of the scow which faced good old Joisey. I walked by her once and took a squint at her without stopping. She never even saw me. She was staring peacefully, even dreamily, out at the bay.

Now, I had no absolute proof that she was his wife, or had made the excursion with him at all. He had mentioned his wife to me, so his wife was along with him, no doubt about that. But each time I had overtaken him on one of the benches inside the statue she had gone up just ahead of him and I had missed seeing her. Then when I got up to the top this particular woman had been up there ahead of me

scrawling her initials. That much I was sure of. She had been at the next observation window to me with that same “come-and-take-me” far-away look that she had now. But it was only by putting two and two together that I had her labeled as his wife; I had no definite evidence of it. So I stopped up at the other end of the narrow little deck and turned and started back toward her.

I don’t care who a guy is or what his job is, it isn’t easy for him to accost a woman sitting minding her own business like that, unless he’s the masher type—which I’m not. “If she gives me a smack in the puss,” I said to myself, “I’m gonna throw this son-of-a-hat in the water and make up my mind I never saw any fat guy; it was just a trick of the lighting effects in the statue!”

I stopped dead in my tracks in front of her and tipped my hat and said: “Pardon me, but I’ve got y’husband’s hat here.” I held it out.

She looked me up and down and a lot of little icicles went tinkling along the deck. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “I haven’t any husband—and I’m not interested in picking one up on a ferryboat in the bay!”

This was enough to sour a saint; it was rubbing it in a little too much. First there’s a fat man and his wife. Then there’s no fat man. And now it seems there’s no wife either. Only a hat.

“I’m no picker-upper,” I growled. “Just let’s get this straight though. On the way over I distinctly noticed you with a very hefty gentleman. You were talking to each other. You were sitting side by side out on this deck-bench. And you both stood up together when it was time to get off. I remember that distinctly, on account of your shapes reminded me of the number 10. Then later I saw the guy by himself in there. And that’s the last; he does a fade-out. Now all I’m trying to do is get this blasted kelly back to—”

The temperature didn’t go up any. “Well, why pick on me?” she said. “Why marry me off to him, and turn me into

his hatcheck girl in the bargain? Who are you, anyway, the census-taker? All right, a fat clown did sit down next to me on the way out and try to take a shine to me. So what? I never saw him before in my life, don't know his name from Adam. You saw me talking to him all right—I told him a thing or two, only I'm not the kind screams for help and makes a scene. And if he stood up at the same time I did and tried to stick close to me, I outdistanced him once we hit those stairs, don't you worry. And if you think you rate any higher than he did just 'cause your stomach goes in instead of out, think again! Next time I go on an excursion I'm bringing a bulldog along—"

"Oh, just one of these strong, silent women! Not a word to say, eh?" I told her. "Well, suppose you give me your name and address just for fun."

She hoisted herself up and took a quick step away. "I'm going to get a cop!" she burst out.

I side-stepped around and got in front of her. "You've got one," I said, and let the badge slide back into my vest pocket again. "Now are you going to tell me what I asked you?"

"You can't compel me to give you my name if I don't want to!" she said hotly. "Who do you think you're dealing with, some fly-by-night chippy? I don't care whether you're a detec—"

Which was true enough, as far as that goes. But she had me steamed up by now. "Either you identify yourself, or you can consider yourself under arrest!" I didn't have a thing on her, and I knew it. I had no way of proving that what she had told me about the fat man wasn't so. True, he had mentioned his wife to me sitting on the bench in the statue, but he hadn't tagged this particular woman or anyone else in the group as being "it." He hadn't even made it clear whether his wife had accompanied him on the excursion. For all I knew she might be sitting at home at this very moment, just as my own was.

Meanwhile, “—never so insulted in my life!” she was boiling, but she was going through the motions of coming across, with angrily shaking hands. She threw back the lid of her pocketbook and fished around inside it. “I didn’t expect a third degree like this,” she snapped, “so I didn’t bring my pedigree with me! However, I’m Alice Colman, Van Raalte Apartments, Tarrytown. Take it or leave it!”

I felt like two cents by now, especially as I noticed her eyes growing shiny with tears. Even if the fat man had met with foul play, which there was no proof of so far, she hadn’t been anywhere near him at the time it happened. She had been away up at the top looking dreamy. I was only doing this because I’d seen them together on the trip out, and she needn’t have made me feel like such a lug. I covered it up by going through with what I was doing, taking out my notebook and jotting down the info. “Miss Alice Colman,” I said out loud, squinting down my pencil.

“I didn’t say that!” she flared. “Oh, let me alone, you dog!” And she whisked herself off down the deck as if she couldn’t stand any more. I could see her shoulders shaking as she went. I let her alone after that, didn’t try to follow her up.

“Well, well, well,” I sighed, “I certainly have the light touch with dolls!” Her last crack, I took it, meant that she was a Mrs. and not a Miss.

If I had any doubts that the fat guy might have turned out to be on the ferry after all, hiding behind a cuspidor or something, and that I had simply missed seeing him until now, they were very soon settled once the tub had tied up at the South Ferry landing. I stationed myself on the lower end of the plank ahead of everyone, and stopped them one by one as they tried to go past. “Police headquarters . . . Name, please . . . Address. Got anything to back it up?” And I killed the inevitable “What’s this for?” each time it came with a terse “None of your business!”

When I was through I had a line on every one who had made the outing with me—at least if anything turned up now I was no longer in the dark. All but the very guy who was missing. And he was still missing. He had definitely not made the trip back on the boat. The Colman person was the last one off, and came sailing by me head in air with the cold remark: “Be sure you follow me—low-down common bully!” I just stood there and looked after her, scratching my head. It was only after she’d gone that I realized she was the only one of the lot who hadn’t backed up her name and address with documentary proof.

But meanwhile there was something else I wanted to see about.

I went around to the ticket office in the ferry building; it was closed, of course. Ours had been the last trip of the day. I hammered on the wicket, and then I went around and pounded on the door. Luckily they were still in there, counting the day’s receipts or something. I recognized the guy that had sold me my own ticket. “Headquarters, it’s all right, lemme in a minute.” And when he had, “Now look. Do you remember selling a ticket down the bay to a fat guy, puffy cheeks like this, blue suit, brown hat, when the last boatful went out?”

“Yeah,” he said, “yeah, I do.”

“How many did he buy? One or two?”

“Two,” he said decidedly. “I been selling ’em all day long, but I can remember that all right because he was lamebrained, couldn’t count straight. He wanted to tell me four-forty change was coming to him out of a finn. I says, ‘Buddy,’ I says, ‘in my country two times thirty-five adds up to—’ ”

“Never mind the trailer,” I squelched. “Did she—did anyone come up to the window with him when he bought them?”

“Naw, he come up to the window alone and bought two tickets. I didn’t see who was with him.”

“Being sore at him, you didn’t take a gander out the window after him after he moved on? Most ticket-sellers would.”

“They were all on line,” he explained. “I didn’t have time, had to wait on the next rubberneck.”

Well, if he’d bought two tickets his wife was with him—he hadn’t bought them just because he was overweight himself, that was a cinch. As for his wife, runner-up to himself when it came to staying out of sight, little Alice Colman was elected for the time being. Which added up to this—I was going back to that island. She could hold for awhile. If nothing had happened to him, then it was none of my business whether she was wife, girl-friend, or total stranger to him. But if something had—I wasn’t forgetting that she was the only person outside myself I’d seen him talking to.

I beat it outside to the ferry again. It was still there, but fixing to go wherever it is they go for the night when they’re not in service. Or maybe it was just going to stay put. But not while I knew it.

A couple of tattooed arms tried to bar my way up the gangplank. “One side,” I said, and the badge was getting a high polish just from rubbing against the serge so much, “I gotta see the captain before he slips off his suspenders!”

“He uses safety-pins,” he corrected me dryly, “but go ahead—” He came out of the saloon just then struggling into a lumber-jacket, evidently going ashore to catch up on his suds.

“Say, y’gotta take me back there,” I burst out. “Here’s what—” And I explained all about the hefty passenger that had gone out and hadn’t come back.

He was one person the badge didn’t mean a thing to; he was used to being boss of the roost. “Go ’way, man, you’re out of your head!” he boomed. ‘This boat’s asleep for tonight, I wouldn’t make another run there for St. Peter himself. If he missed it and got left behind, that’s his tough

luck. He'll just have to wait over until nine in the morning, there are plenty of benches on the island, just like Central P —" and he took the most graceful spiral spit over the rail I had ever seen—and made it.

"But y' don't get what I mean!" I howled, shoving the brown felt in his face. "He didn't just miss it—something's happened to him. Now give your orders. You know what this means, don't you? You're obstructing—"

"I take my orders from the company," he said surlily, looking longingly in the direction of the dives along South Street. "If that piece of tin means anything why don't it get you a police launch?"

But I wasn't going to be a back-room laughing-stock for the rest of the year in case I did get there with a launch and find the fat guy had stayed behind to pick dandelions or something. I went ashore again and had it out with one of the agents in the ferry house, and he in turn had to telephone one of the higher muck-a-mucks and put it up to him, and then sign an order for me to show the captain.

Some reporters had gotten wind that something was up, in the mysterious way that only reporters can, and a couple of them were already hanging around outside when I came out. "What's the excitement?" they wanted to know, licking their chops. "What's it all about?"

"Wotcha doing with two hats?" one of them cracked suspiciously.

"I always carry a spare," I said, "in case the wind blows the first one off."

They looked sort of doubtful, but before they could do anything about it I was back on the ferry and gave orders to keep them off. "Here's your instructions, admiral," I told the captain, who was drooling by this time and biting his nails at the thought of being kept overtime. "I'll buy the first ten rounds," I assured him, "if this turns out to be a wild-goose chase."

“Hrrmph!” he growled, and turned around and hollered an order.

Back we plugged.

“How long you gonna be?” he wanted to know as I loped off at the island.

“When I show up again,” I promised, “I’ll be back.” That old fellow could swear.

The thick, chilly-looking, black metal doors that led into the base were shut by this time. I had to get another permit from an officer on the island, and two soldiers were detailed to come with me. The only one who seemed to get any kick out of the proceedings was Suicide Johnny, who was routed out to run us up in the elevator. He was all grins. At last something was happening to break his monotony. “Gee,” he said, throwing the switch in the car, “maybe he committed *sewercide* by hanging himself up there some place!”

“Nuts,” I growled, “he couldn’t have hoisted himself an inch—not without a derrick. We’ll go up to the top,” I told my two escorts when we got out of the car. “Start in from there and work our way down.” They didn’t say anything, but I could read their minds: “This guy was dropped on his head when he was a kid.”

We climbed all that weary way back again and finally stood there panting. “He never got up this far,” I said when I had my wind back, “because I was up here ahead of him. But I want to take a gander at some of these initials and names scrawled here on the stonework of the windows.”

“Aw, them!” said one of the soldiers contemptuously. “Every chump that ever comes up here since the place was built has a crack at that.”

“That’s just the point,” I said. I had a close look, first of all, at what my chief rooter and admirer Alice Colman had written, at the window next to the one I’d been standing at originally. It didn’t say Alice Colman, it didn’t say any name, but I knew her work. She’d used an eyebrow pencil and the mark it left was dark and greasy, different from the thin,

faint pencil marks of the rest of them. It stood out like a headline on a newspaper.

I turned to one of the bored soldiers. “What’s today’s date?”

“The twenty-third,” he said.

That’s what I’d thought it was too. But Alice Colman seemed to have gotten her dates mixed. She had it down as the twenty-fourth.

Well, that could happen to anyone. But she had the hour right, at least. She’d even put that down—4 o’clock. Some people are like that, though. She’d visited this place at four o’clock and she wanted the world to know.

On top of that, though, came a hitch. She had an address down, and it wasn’t her own. It was just five numbers and a letter, all run together. 254W51. But that wasn’t her own address. She’d given me that on the ferry, and I’d checked on it while I was hanging around in the ferry house waiting for the permit to come back here. Yes, the management of the Van Raalte Apartments had told me long-distance over the phone from Tarrytown, that Mrs. Alice Colman was a tenant of theirs. So she hadn’t lied to me, yet she’d lied to the world at large when she was making her mark on Lady Liberty. There was something that I didn’t get about it.

“Let’s go down,” I told the soldiers, “I want to look at that bench he was sitting on.” By this time they both hated me heartily from the guts outward, I could see, but they turned and led the way.

We never got there, though. About midway between the head and where the bench was—in other words at about where the statue’s shoulder came—there was a gap with a chain across it bearing the placard Public Not Admitted. I had noticed this twice before, the first time I came up and then later when I had gone down to look for him. Maybe the chain had thrown me off, the undisturbed chain stretched across it. And then, too, until you stood directly before it, it looked far smaller and more inaccessible than it actually

was, the way the lights slurred past it and made it seem no more than a fold on the inside of the lady's gigantic metal draperies. This time, though, I stopped and asked them what it was.

"Oh, he ain't up in there!" they assured me instantly. "Nobody's allowed in there. Can't you read what that says? That used to lead up into the arm and torch in the old days. The arm started weakening little by little, so they shut the whole thing off a long time ago. It's boarded up just a little ways past the ch—Hey!" he broke off. "Where you going? You can't do that!"

"I'm going just that little ways between the chain and where the boarding is," I told him, spanning the cable with one leg. "If the arm lasted this long, one more guy ain't going to hurt it, I don't weigh enough. Throw your lights up after me. And don't tell me what I can't do when you see me already at it!"

The thing was a spiral, just like the other staircase that led to the head. Or rather, it started out to be, but at the very first half-turnaround it took, the boarding had already showed up, sealing it from top to bottom. That half-tum, however, cut off their lights, which shone in a straight line like any lights would. A triangle of blackness was left in one corner which they couldn't eliminate, no matter how they maneuvered the torches.

"Come on a little nearer with those things!" I called impatiently. "Come past the chain!"

They wouldn't budge. "Against orders," they called back.

I came down a few steps and reached for a torch myself. "Let me have one of those things. What d'ya think I'm doing, playing hide and seek with you? How we won the last war beats me!" I jumped up again and washed out the stubborn wedge of blackness with the thin beam in my hand.

Sure he was there. And fitted in just as neatly as though the space had been measured off for him ahead of time. In a

sitting position on the turn of the steps, back propped against the boarding, legs drawn up under him to help keep him propped. I touched the side of his neck. He was as cold already as the metal statue that made a tomb for him.

"Got him," I shouted laconically. "Come on up and gimme a hand, you two."

"What's he doing up there?" one of those two clucks wanted to know.

"Waiting for judgment day."

They gasped and came on up, orders or no orders.

I bent down and looked at the backs of his shoes. The leather of both heels was scraped and scarred into a fuzz from lift to ankle. The backs of his trousers were dusty all the way to the knees. "Dragged up by the shoulders," I said, "by just one guy. If there'd been two, one of them would have taken him by the feet, like you're going to do getting him down out of here."

"How could one guy, any guy, haul that baby elephant all the way up there?" one of them wanted to know.

"You'd be surprised what one guy can manage to do if he's scared enough and has to work in a hurry," I assured him. "All right, get started. I'll handle your lights. It wasn't done up here anyway, so let's get down before we all take a header into the ocean, arm and all." It wasn't easy, even for the two of them, to get down with him. Automatically, I figured that eliminated Alice Colman or any other woman as having had any part in it—except as an accessory.

The thing that had done it was lying under him when they got him up off the ground between them—a wicked-looking iron bar wrapped in a stiffened, blood-brown piece of rag. The wound—it was a deadly fracture—was on the side of the head just over the ear. He hadn't bled much, outside of the first splash on the padded weapon itself. The little there was after that had clung to the skin, running down behind the jawbone and into the collar of his shirt, hence nothing

on the ground around the bench where the attack had occurred.

I examined the ground around the latter place. The two little tracks his heels had made as he was dragged backwards toward the hiding-place were there plain as day under my flashlight's beam, without the need of any powder or hocus-pocus of any kind. My only wonder was how I'd muffed seeing them when I stooped down to pick up his hat. But of course I hadn't used my torch then.

"Take him on down the rest of the way," I said. "No use parking with him here—it's gotta be done sooner or later anyway."

They loved the job—yeah they did! They must have lost ten pounds apiece in sweat, getting him down those seventeen stories of narrow, spiral staircase. When they were down at the elevator you could hear their heaving all the way up where I was. When I got down myself—I'd waited on the murder bench until the way was clear, no use dogging their footsteps an inch at a time—Suicide Johnny, with the body tucked into his car and the two guards in a state of collapse alongside of it, was wreathed in smiles. His fondest dream had come true. Something had at last happened. "Gee!" he kept murmuring. "Gee! A moider!"

I had Fatty carried over to the barracks, and an apoplectic-looking guy of Spanish War vintage whose collar was too tight for him came out to see what it was all about.

"Sorry to bother you," I said, "but there's just been a crime committed on your jurisdiction—man murdered up in the statue."

"Who are you, sirrr?" he boomed like a twenty-one gun salute. I felt like I was going to be shot at sunrise for daring to find anything the matter around his diggings.

"Denton, New York Homicide," I told him.

"Are you sure, sirrrr?" the old rooster crowed. He meant about the murder, not who I was. He wasn't going to believe

me until he saw it with his own eyes, so I took him over and showed it to him.

"Now, just where do I stand?" I said, resting my hand on the stiff's knee.

"This, sirr," he orated, "is United States Government property. This is a matter for the Federal inves—"

I'd expected that. "Oh, so I get the air!" I interrupted heatedly. "After I been up and down that blank statue eighty-six times today. O.K., you put who you want on it. I'm going right ahead with it on my own. And we'll see who comes out ahead!" I got as far as the door, then I turned around and fired at him: "I'll even give your guy a head-start, just so you can't accuse me of withholding information. This guy is tagged Colman. He lived until today at the Van Raalte Apartments, Tarrytown, with his wife, who is thin, blond, pretty, blue eyes, about twenty-eight, and very ritzy front. But you won't find her there any more, so you can tell your guy to save his carfare. She didn't do it anyway. But if you want to get hold of her, and the guy that actually did it, I'll tell you where to look for them—"

"Where, sirrr?" he boomed like a great big firecracker.

"Today is Wednesday, isn't it?" I answered detachedly. "Well, send your guy around to Centre Street, say day after tomorrow, that would be Friday. We'll be holding 'em both for you down there by that time. No trouble at all, Field Marshal." He sort of blew up internally, so I got out before he did anything about calling a firing squad.

I ducked into the statue again, for what I hoped was the last time, and decided to make Suicide Johnny useful, since he seemed to be enjoying himself so. "How would you like to help?" I said. "Come on up with me."

When we got all the way up to the head, I took out my pocket notebook and opened it at the page where all the names were, the names I'd collected from the ten (eight really, excluding the two kids with their father) who had made the trip here and back on the ferry. Excluding Colman

himself and his wife (who couldn't have been an actual participant for reasons I've already given) that left six. Excluding two other women who'd been in the group, that boiled it down to four. Now the name, of course, was going to be phony—I mean the name the actual murderer had handed me—that was a pushover. But that didn't matter. All I wanted was to connect the right guy with any name, phony or otherwise, just so I could remember something about what he'd looked like. Any little thing at all.

"You take a pencil," I told Suicide, "and each time I call out a name, you cross off the corresponding one written down there in that book. That's all."

"Gee!" he said. "I'm helping a real detective!"

"My chief," I answered drily, "sometimes has grave doubts about that. Ready? Let's go." I started going over the window-ledges inch by inch. They were crawling with names and initials, but I finally located one that matched one in the notebook. Johnny promptly crossed it out. Then another. Then a triple initial that matched. "Don't cross yet," I warned him, '^just put a check next to that."

Well, when we got through, we had nine of the ten names, women, kids and all. Each and every one of them had scribbled their names as mementoes on the stone work. "Now, which one's left over?" I asked Suicide.

He screwed up his face and read off: "Vincent Scanlon, 55 Amboy Street, Brooklyn, real estate."

"On circumstantial alone, that's my guy."

"Hully mackerel!" said the enraptured Johnny. "Can y'tell just by hearing his name like that?"

"His name ain't Scanlon, he don't live on Amboy Street, and he's not in real estate," I tried to explain. "But he's the only one of the bunch that didn't come up here and scrawl his John Hancock. Me and the fat guy were the last ones coming up the stairs. When I left him on the bench he was still alive. When I got up here myself even his wife was up here ahead of me, and all the others had finished their

signatures and were on their way down again. Therefore, this guy who tags himself Scanlon was the murderer. Don't you understand, he never went all the way to the top. He either came up the stairs behind me and the fat guy, or else if he was ahead of us switched into the opening that leads up into the arm, let everyone else go by, and then crept down again to where the bench was—and did his dirty work the minute the coast was clear."

I took a notebook from him, held it open before me, and did my damndest to try and separate the party that had given me that name from the other ten. I tried to remember some feature about him, some detail, anything at all, and couldn't, no matter how I racked my brains. There had been too many of them at one time, all getting off the ferry at once, all stopping in front of me just for a half-minute or so. He should have been nervous, just coming away from doing a thing like that, should have been pale, tense, jumpy, anything you want to call it—should have given himself away in some way, if not right then, then now that I was thinking back over it. But he either hadn't, or—what was more likely—I was pretty much of a wash-out at my own business. I couldn't even get him by elimination, the way I had gotten his phony name. One or two of the others started to come clear—the father of the two kids, the two other women besides Alice Colman—but not him. I might just as well have written down that name out of my own head for all I could remember of the man who had given it to me.

I took another look at Alice Colman's regards to the statue and wondered why she hadn't put her name down with it, and how she had come to be mixed up on her dates the way she had. And why a different address from her own. Of course the obvious answer was that she knew g.d. well what was taking place on that stairway below at the time, and was too nervous to know what she was doing. But she hadn't acted nervous at all, she had just acted dreamy. So

that probably wasn't the answer at all. And just for luck I transcribed the thing into my notebook exactly as it stood in eyebrow pencil.

4/24/35/4 and then, 254W51. Wrong date, right hour, wrong address, no name.

"I take it all back, Johnny," I said wearily. "Kick me here—and here. The guy did come up here after all—and right on top of what he did too."

"But he didn't write nothing—you looked all over them wind—"

"He didn't come up here to write, he came to read." I pointed at it. "He came to read that. Let's go down. I guess I can keep my promise to General Lafayette down there after all."

When I got ashore I halfheartedly checked Colman at the Tarrytown Apartments once more. No, neither Mr. nor Mrs. had come back yet, they told me after paging them on the house phone. I didn't tell them so, but they might just as well have hung out a to-let sign and gotten ready to rent that apartment all over again. He wasn't coming back any more because he was spending the night at the morgue. And she wasn't coming back any more either—because she had a heavy date at 4. As for Scanlon's Amboy Street address, I didn't even bother with it. Have to use your common sense once in awhile. Instead I asked Information to give me 254 West 51st Street, which was the best I could make out of the tag end of her billet-doux.

"Capital Bus Terminal," a voice answered at the other end.

So that's where they were going to meet, was it? They'd stayed very carefully away from each other on the ferry going back, and ditto once they were ashore in New York. But they were going to blow town together. So it looked like she hadn't had her days mixed after all, she'd known what she was doing when she put tomorrow's date down. "What've you got going out at four?" I said.

“A.M. or P.M.?” said the voice. But that was just the trouble, I didn’t know myself. Yet if I didn’t know, how was he going to know either? I mean Scanlon. The only thing to do was tackle both meridians, one at a time. A.M. came first, so I took that. He spieled off a list a foot long but the only big-time places among them were Boston and Philly. “Make me a reservation on each,” I snapped.

“Mister,” the voice came back patiently, “how can you go two places at once?”

“I’m twins,” I squelched and hung up. Only one more phone call, this time to where I was supposed to live but so seldom did. “I may see you tomorrow. If I came home now I’d only have to set the alarm for three o’clock.”

“I thought it was your day off.”

“I’ve got statues on the brain.”

“You mean you would have if you had a—” she started to say, but I ended that.

I staggered into the bus waiting room at half past three, apparently stewed to the gills, with my hat brim turned down to meet my upturned coat collar. They just missed each other enough to let my nose through, the rest was shadow. I wasn’t one of those drunks that make a show of themselves and attract a lot of attention, I just slumped onto a bench and quietly went to sleep. Nobody gave me a first look, let alone a second one.

I was on the row of benches against the wall, not out in the middle where people could sit behind me. At twenty to four by the clock I suddenly remembered exactly what this guy Scanlon had looked like on the ferry that afternoon. Red hair, little pig-eyes set close together—what difference did it make now, there he was, valise between his legs. He had a newspaper up over his face in a split second, but a split second is plenty long enough to remember a face in.

But I didn’t want him alone, didn’t dare touch him alone until she got there, and where the hell was she? Quarter to, the clock said—ten to—five. Or were they going to keep up

the bluff and leave separately, each at a different time, and only get together at the other end? Maybe that message on the statue hadn't been a date at all, only his instructions. I saw myself in for a trip to Philly, Boston, what-have-you, and without a razor, or an assignment from the chief.

The handful of late-night travelers stirred, got up, moved outside to the bus, got in, with him very much in the middle of them. No sign of her. It was the Boston one. I strolled back and got me a ticket, round-trip. Now all that should happen would be that she should breeze up and take the Philly one—and me without anyone with me to split the assignment!

"Better hurry, stew," said the ticket seller handing me my change, "you're going to miss that bus."

"Mr. Stew to you," I said mechanically, with a desperate look all around the empty waiting room. Suddenly the door of the ladies' restroom flashed open and a slim, sprightly figure dashed by, lightweight valise in hand. She must have been hiding in there for hours, long before he got here.

"Wait a minute!" she started to screech to the driver the minute she hit the open. "Wait a minute! Let me get on!" She just made it, the door banged, and the thing started.

There was only one thing for me to do. I cut diagonally across the lot, and when the driver tried to make the turn that would take him up Fifty-first Street I was wavering in front of his headlights. Wavering but not budging. "Wash'ya hurry?" I protested. His horn racketed, then he jammed on his brakes, stuck his head out the side, and showed just how many words he knew that he hadn't learned in Sunday School.

"Open up," I said, dropping the drunk act and flashing my badge. "You don't come from such nice people. And just like that"—I climbed aboard—"you're short three passengers. Me—and this gentleman here—and, let's see, oh yeah, this little lady trying so hard to duck down behind the seat.

Stand up, sister, and get a new kind of bracelet on your lily-white wrist."

Somebody or other screamed and went into a faint at the sight of the gun, but I got them both safely off and waved the awe-stricken driver on his way.

"And now," I said as the red tail lights burned down Eighth Avenue and disappeared, "are you two going to come quietly or do I have to try out a recipe for making goulash on you?"

"What was in it for you?" I asked her at Headquarters. "This Romeo of yours is no Gable for looks."

"Say lissen," she said scornfully, accepting a cigarette, "if you were hog-tied to something that weighed two hundred ninety pounds and couldn't even take off his own shoes, but made three grand a month, and banked it in your name, and someone came along that knew how to make a lady's heart go pit-a-pat, you'd a done the same thing too!"

I went home and said: "Well, I've gotta hand it to you. I looked at a statue like you told me to, and it sure didn't hurt my record any." But I didn't tell which statue or why. "What's more," I said, "we're going down to Washington and back over the week-end."

"Why Washington?" my wife wanted to know.

"Cause they've got the biggest of the lot down there, called the Washington Monument. And a lotta guys that think they're good, called Federal dicks, hang out there and need help."

CLIP-JOINT

The taxi-driver slowed down invitingly, reached behind him, and threw the door accommodatingly open almost before the man's arm had gone up to hail him. He said, "Yessir! Good evening!", a courtesy he wasn't in the habit of addressing to every customer. Skip Rogers ducked his head and got in. He took a tuck in each trouser just below the knee, leaned back against the upholstery, and sighed expansively. The uncommonly polite driver reached around a second time and closed the door for him. You wouldn't have thought it was New York at all but for the serial number on the cab's license plates.

He was well-dressed, Skip was; maybe that had something to do with it. The taxi-driver had already had his eye on him from as far away as the corner. He had noted him as a possibility. A man as well-dressed as that wouldn't be very likely to walk when he wanted to go some place—and this man seemed to want to go some place, to want to go some place badly, without knowing just where. Which was just the way the driver liked them to be. In Skip's case it was more than a mere matter of clothes. He had an air about him; he knew how to carry them. On someone else the dark blue chesterfield, the white piqué scarf, the slanted derby would have been just so many articles of wearing apparel; on him they were badges of distinction, insignia of swank. That clothes make the man has been said often enough, but that the man sometimes makes his

clothes seem what they are is equally true. It was in Skip's case. The driver considered himself a good judge of character. Here was someone for whom the best was none too good; here was someone who wanted a party, money no object, but didn't quite know how to connect with one. In other words, here was someone who was just what the driver was looking for, made to order.

The taxi-driver turned around in his seat, willingness to oblige written all over his weasel-like face, and said: "Yessir, boss! Where to?" Skip hadn't given him any address yet. If he had, of course, it would have been a different story.

Skip wrinkled his brow in perplexity.

"Suppose you help me out?" he said. "I used to know someone who lived in that house you saw me standing in front of, but—no soap. Guess Annie doesn't live there any more. Now I'm all dressed up and no place to go. Eleven o'clock's too early to go home. Maybe you know of some place where I can get a drink—in the right company?" Then he added quickly: "Now don't get me wrong. I don't mean what you think. I mean just what I say: a couple of drinks, a lot of laughs, and somebody not too hard on the eyes sitting across the table from me. Oh, I know there's plenty of places like that in town, but just when you want to remember the addresses, you can't."

The driver had a hard time keeping a straight face. Was this a pushover? Asking for it, mind you! Coming right out and asking for it! Didn't even have to waste time building it up to him. Who said there wasn't a Santa Claus? However, he decided it wouldn't pay to seem too eager, liable to frighten a good thing off that way and spoil everything. He would go about this carefully.

For a minute he pretended to be at a loss himself. He scratched the back of his head in cleverly simulated cogitation as if he were racking his brains. Then finally he drawled, as his machine moved slowly along and his meter moved quickly upwards, "Let's see, I ought to know of a

place like that—” He was, he told himself meanwhile, getting real good at this sort of thing; maybe he should have been an actor. Still, he didn’t want to overdo it; keep the guy waiting too long, the sucker might cool off, change his mind. So he took one hand from the wheel and snapped his fingers triumphantly as if it had just then occurred to him. “I got it now!” he said. “I know a real nice place up on Seventy-second. Come to think of it, I took a fellow there only last night.”

“What’s it like?” the man in back of him wanted to know.

“It’s sort of private, know what I mean? But that’s all right; I can take you up and introduce you. It’s not a loose joint or anything like that—it’s just a sort of little club. They don’t like too many people to go there at one time because there ain’t room enough for them, but outside of that everything’s on the up and up. If you don’t like to sit by yourself, why they’ll introduce you to one of their little hostesses—everything perfectly proper and the way it should be.” He paused. Then, just to show how immaterial the whole thing was to him one way or the other, he added: “At least so they tell me. I’m a working man myself, don’t get much time to relax.” With a superb negligence he questioned: “What d’ye say? Want to go up there?”

“Sure, why not?” his passenger acquiesced. But there was a happy ring to his voice that showed how eager he had become to visit this paradise the driver had described to him.

“I’ve sold him,” thought the man at the wheel. “Sold him out!”

When they had arrived, by means of a roundabout route that gave the meter a thorough work-out, the driver hopped out and held the door open just as if he were a private chauffeur.

“Sorry I took you out of your way like that,” he apologized insincerely, “but I wasn’t sure of the number myself until we got here just now.” Skip however paid him without demur

and even threw in a tip for good measure. He was, the driver told himself, getting to be a good picker, a very good picker. “It’s on the second floor,” he said. “I’ll go up with you. I’ll tell ’em you’re a friend of mine.”

It was a rather run-down looking apartment house they had stopped in front of, of pre-war vintage. It boasted an elevator, however, and orange electric lights in the lobby. It had undoubtedly seen better days. The driver ushered Skip in, and the latter missed seeing the knowing look that was exchanged between his guide and the sleepy colored youth who ran the elevator. It was a look that plainly said, “You know and I know but he doesn’t know.”

They got off at the second floor and went toward the back along a cheap musty corridor paved with white mosaics, most of which had become loosened and rattled as one stepped on them. The taxi-driver stopped in front of a door numbered 2– and rang the bell. He gave two short rings and one long one, then whistled a little.

A chain rattled on the other side of the door, a bolt was thrown back, and the door was opened just an inch, no more. “It’s Marty,” said the taxi-driver in a low voice, whereupon the door opened the rest of the way and revealed a pasty-faced individual in what is known to hoi polloi as a tuxedo. He had a look that would have turned milk sour, but the minute he saw that Marty was not alone, he put on a great show of cordiality and good-fellowship and aplomb.

“Hello, Marty, old boy,” he said, “glad to see you! Where y’been keeping yourself ? Come on in and have a drink!” But his eyes were on Skip Rogers the whole time he spoke.

“No thanks,” said Marty. “I gotta get back to my cab and earn an honest living. But this is a friend of mine, I want you to treat him right. See that he has a good time.”

The orang-outang in the dinner jacket beamed. “Any friend of Marty’s is a friend of mine,” he proclaimed. “Step right in,” and motioned Skip in with a sweep of his arm.

Then he attempted to close the door after him, but the taxi-driver's foot had somehow become wedged in front of it and held it open.

"Not so fast," the latter snarled under his breath. "How about my commission? What do you think I'm doing this for—my health?" And he held out his paw palm upward. A five-dollar bill came out of the trouser pocket of the tuxedo and found its way to the outstretched hand. The foot, however, stayed where it was. "What're y'trying to do, hold out on me?" Marty wanted to know. "This is a real live one I brought you this time." A murderous look passed between them, but two single dollars joined the five. After which Marty removed his foot, the door closed, and the chain and bolt went back in place with a venomous clash.

He stood still for a moment, folding and refolding his ill-gotten gains until the seven dollars had become a wedge not much bigger than a postage-stamp. He then held it to his lips for a second in what looked suspiciously like a kiss and carefully tucked it away in his clothing. "And now back to the warpath!" he grinned cheerfully, and turned away from the ominous-looking door.

When the taxi-driver got to the end of the hall, the elevator was still up, waiting for him the way it always did at times like these. The operator looked as sleepy as before, only now he was holding out a beige palm as if feeling for rain. The steerer tried to ignore it, but it followed him into the cage, and the car wouldn't go down.

"Does I git ma usual rake-off or does I start tawking nex' time you brings one in?" drawled the drowsy African.

"All right, all right!" snarled the steerer and unwillingly fished a fifty-cent piece out of his pocket, holding back the rest of its contents with one hand. The car went down in blissful silence after that.

By this time the companionship-seeking young man who was the innocent cause of all this high finance was already at one of the little tables for two up in 2–, and the gorgeous

redhead sitting across from him in the fluffy green dress was looking trustfully up at the waiter and cooing: “—and a very weak one for me, Frank.” A wink went with the words. Then she smiled sweetly at her new acquaintance. “Just for sociability’s sake, you know. I hardly ever drink, you understand. But you go right ahead; don’t let me stop you.”

She took time off to glance appraisingly at the cut of his suit and the careless ease with which he wore it, as one to the manner born. He looked better-groomed than ever now that he held a square of green pasteboard instead of his coat, hat, and scarf. Just how expensive that bit of pasteboard was he didn’t know yet. A cute little brunette in a doll-apron, who could have pulled your teeth and made you like it, had given it to him on his way in just now and then gone off somewhere with his things. He could just as well have said good-by to them. They were already on their way out to a “fence.” The man who had opened the door had tactfully disappeared too after introducing him to “Miss Gordon.” Everything was peaches and cream; it was what you might call the lull before the storm.

He and the redhead were alone in the room except for one other couple, a blonde and her table-companion. The latter had already reached the stage of squashing his esses and dropping his t’s, as well as part of every drink he tried to pick up. The room had originally been intended for the living-room of the apartment, back when it was meant to be lived in and not used for assault, battery, and highway robbery. Some cheaply flamboyant drapes hid the exact location of the windows if there were any. A midget space had been left clear for dancing. The radio droned lullingly on, a mere blur of sound in the background, “—hands across the table, when the lights are lo-ow.” The whole set-up was an aphrodisiac, meant to awaken passion which these vultures fed on. The loose joints that Skip Rogers had so carefully stayed away from tonight were honest and upright compared to this place.

The waiter would come to the door and look in whenever the re-orders of drinks began to slow up; he seemed to give them about five minutes apiece. He didn't have to do that very often though; the two "hostesses" were there to see to that. He was a six footer like the man who ran the place, and husky as an ape. He brought Skip and "Miss Gordon" their two drinks, the strong one and the weak one, and went away again. The redhead simpered cherubically. Rogers seemed to meet with her approval.

"Here's looking at you!" she said gayly and picked up her glass. If he had looked closely, he would have seen that the amount that passed her lips was scarcely enough to moisten the rouge that lay on them. His tasted like benzine, only not so smooth.

"Where you from, Miss Gordon?" he asked her suddenly.

"Just call me Rose," she begged him and moved her chair over a little closer. Before she could commence her life story, however, something going on at the other table had caught Skip's eye and sent a chill through him. From that point on, although he seemed absorbed in what she was telling him, he actually heard not a single word she was saying. For the rather plastered middle-aged gentleman who was sitting with the blonde seemed to have gotten into difficulties of some kind. The waiter was bending over him. The individual in the tuxedo had also come in from somewhere and was standing menacingly on the other side of him. The stew kept pushing away a small slip of paper, and they kept shoving it back at him. The blonde got up and made the radio a little louder to drown out the angry voices. Rose plucked Rogers by the coat sleeve and dragged his straying attention back to herself.

"Don't notice what's going on over there," she suggested tactfully. "Some people can't hold their liquor, that's all." And she began to talk sweet but fast.

The next time Rogers found time to look over in that direction, there was no longer any middle-aged gentleman

in the room at all, and the waiter was softly closing the door he had just passed through. It wasn't the door by which you came in, either. From somewhere further back in the flat came the crash of a chair being overturned and a muffled cry that sounded something like "Let me out of here!" But Rose kept chattering away for all she was worth so it was hard for Skip to tell.

His face took on a stony, set look as if he was using it for a mask behind which he was doing a lot of quick thinking. The fact she wasn't getting across penetrated to Rose presently, and she stopped her chatter.

"What's the matter, honey?" she said caressingly, reaching for one of his hands. "Am I boring you?"

He seemed to make up his mind to something all at once. He leaned toward her across the table.

"I should say not," he protested. "You've got me spellbound." With one hand he raised her fingers lingeringly to his lips. With the other, hidden by the caress, he switched the two new drinks the waiter had brought in a minute ago. "I could go for a girl like you!" he vowed, star-gazing into her mascaraed eyes. They sipped. But now it was he who was talking fast and sweet and low. "I walked in here tonight never dreaming there'd be a number like you off the hook." She didn't have time to notice the shellac she was imbibing and she was only human anyway; they didn't often come as young and good looking as this—not in her racket. She could feel Mickey Mouses running up and down her spine. "All my life I've wanted to meet somebody as lovely as you are–" And the radio: *"Speak to me of love, Tell me the things that I'm longing to hear—"*

"Oh, go wan," she protested, but a dreamy look had come into her eyes just the same. Not for nothing was she red-headed; her own blood was double-crossing her. They sipped again. All he was getting was rancid ginger ale; she was getting the works.

“Always had more money than I knew what to do with, always had everything I wanted, but somehow I never met the right girl—until tonight!” he was going on.

She pricked up her ears at that. Money? Everything he wanted?

“On the level, who are you?” A hiccough marred the intensity of her new-found interest in him, but it was there just the same.

“You’ve heard of Robbins & Rogers, haven’t you?”

She nodded owlishly. “Sure, thass those restaurants where you put in a nickel and—plop! Out comes a sandwich.”

“Well, there you are.” He spread his hands.

She pointed an awe-stricken finger and covered her mouth with her other hand. “Then you—you must be the old guy’s son or something! Rogers’ son!”

He dropped his eyes modestly. “Why go into that? All that matters is I’m completely sold on you; nothing would be too good for you, if you’d only let me—”

He leaned entreatingly forward again and began exploring her fingertips with his lips. They tasted of nail-polish, but it was an improvement over the liquor.

She was doing a lot of quick thinking now on her own account. A millionaire’s son had fallen for her! It was the chance of a lifetime, might never happen again. If she let anything happen to him here tonight, where would she be? He’d be through with her, never look at her again. All she’d get out of it would be a lousy ten per cent commission. On the other hand, if she got him out of this jam, saved him for herself, who could tell what it might lead to? She’d be a fool not to think of herself first, and the hell with her employers!

“Wait a minute—wait a minute. I gotta think!” she said to him, and held his head in her hands.

He smiled a little out of the corner of his mouth, but she didn’t see that. He went right ahead singing his love-song close to her ear: “—diamonds and orchids and a mink coat

and a penthouse way up in the air to which nobody but me would have the key. There'd be nothing too good for my baby! And at night—you'd have love!"

She rumpled her blazing hair and smote herself distractedly on the forehead.

"I gotta get you outta here! I gotta think of number one. Sh-h—not so loud, don't let 'em hear you or we're sunk!"

"Spoken like a lady," he agreed humorously. "You're—you're just an angel in an evening gown."

She had sobered up all at once. She glanced furtively around over her shoulder.

"Nurse your drink; make it last," she said out of the corner of her mouth. "You're in the red enough as it is. I've got to think of an out for you—for both of us. You shouldn'ta come here. Do you know what this place is?"

"I knew the minute I came in," he said calmly, "but it was too late to do anything about it by that time. What could I do?"

"Here's the set-up," she hissed, her shoulder touching his. "They're going to clip you a century apiece for every drink the two of us have had. You say no to them and you get the beating of your life. They hold you in the back of the flat until your check has a chance to go through at the bank in the morning. Then they give you knock-out drops and you come to riding around in a taxi somewhere. It's no use trying to catch up with them after you've come out of the repair shop; we change addresses about once a week." She clenched her fist and brought it down on the table-top. "They're not going to make a dent in my baby's bankroll, not when I've got all those fancy trimmings coming to me! Once they find out who you really are, they'll clip you twice as much. They won't leave you anything but your shorts—"

"You've been peeking," he observed dryly. He almost seemed to be enjoying himself, but she failed to see any humor in it.

“Tear up any cards or means of identification you’ve got on you, quick! If worse comes to worst, we can say you’re just a poor hash-slinger at one of your father’s restaurants, out on a spree; you haven’t a dime; you borrowed the clothes from a friend. But I can think of a better way still, a way that we won’t have to do any explaining.” She rose from the table. “I’m going inside and get my—my powder-puff.” She gave him a wink. “You sit tight here, keep everything under control until I get back. Don’t get into any argument because you’re no match for them. They carry blackjacks and brass knuckles.” He saluted her with two fingers, and she disappeared out the back way. Skip sat there grinning at his own thoughts, which seemed to afford him considerable amusement. “The old oil,” he remarked to himself. “The same old oil gets all of them.”

The waiter stuck his head in and glanced meaningfully at the two half-empty glasses. Skip gave him no encouragement. He sauntered over and leaned both hands heavily on the table. Skip stared up at him coldly. He may have been amused by the antics of Rose Gordon, but he didn’t seem to find this funny.

“Who sent for you?” he demanded brittlely.

“You drinkin’ any more?” rumbled the waiter.

“Who wants to know?” countered Skip, starting to breathe faster.

“Then suppose you pay off. We’re closing up—”

“Fair enough,” said Skip, dangerously calm. “How much do I owe you?”

The Caliban of a waiter didn’t bother jotting anything down. “Three hundred and fifty dollars,” he announced matter-of-factly, his pig-eyes boring into Skip’s.

Skip Rogers drew out a crumpled five-dollar bill. “Bring me four dollars change,” he ordered contemptuously, “and consider yourself damn lucky!”

The waiter didn’t waste any more time. He simply turned his head and whistled warningly over his shoulder. Instantly

the man in the tuxedo appeared in the doorway. He was coatless now and rolling up his shirt-sleeves preparatory to going to work. Behind him was another gorilla, appearing on the scene now for the first time. They both made for the table, nice and slow, nice and easy, as though there was no hurry about this at all. Skip's chair went over backwards with a bang and he was on his feet, facing the three of them. The waiter swung at him, a blow that would have felled an ox. Skip ducked it nimbly and came back like a flash with a less powerful but better aimed jab that landed on the Frankenstein's nose. Blood spurted and he gave an animal roar of fury.

"Here I go!" thought Skip philosophically as the other two spread out fan-shape on either side of him.

Suddenly Rose Gordon's voice rang out sharply from the doorway, harsh and strident maybe but sweeter than the song of Lorelei at such a time.

"Turn around! Get away from him, all of you! This is one guy you don't touch! Hand over the key to the front door, Shorty, and hurry up about it!" She had her hat and coat on and she was holding a small revolver in her hand, waving it at the three of them. Her eyes were menacing slits. No one looking at her could have doubted that she would have used it without hesitation. The three of them slowly backed away from Skip Rogers, hands at shoulder-level. The one called Shorty drew out a door-key and tossed it down on the floor. "Grab that," she ordered Skip. "I'll hold 'em until you get the door open!"

"Ladies first," he countered. "I'll do the holding. You unlock and wait for me down on the street."

She passed the gun to him and slipped out, the key in her hand. "We'll get you, baby! You'll be sorry for this!" the erstwhile manager breathed virulently after her as she went. The sound of a most undignified but effective "raspberry" or Bronx cheer came drifting back from the hallway.

When Skip joined her on the sidewalk in front of the house five minutes later, he had somebody else with him, the unfortunate middle-aged gentleman who had been sitting with the blonde earlier in the evening. His collar was torn, he had a black eye, and he was almost dazed by his sudden release. Skip shoved him into a taxicab, then hailed another for his rescuer and himself.

"I'm going home with you tonight," he told her matter-of-factly. "They may try to come after you and—well, I owe you that much anyway."

If his words were strangely un-loverlike, she didn't seem to notice. She snuggled down contentedly against his shoulder and sighed. She was visioning herself in a bathtubful of eau de Cologne in a penthouse twenty stories above the street, with him pacing impatiently back and forth outside her boudoir.

When she woke up in the morning, he was gone and it seemed hard to believe that he had ever been in the dingy furnished room with her. She looked around it, and she knew she was getting out right then. Not only because there were better things in store for her but also because it was dangerous to stay there alone; her former employers were liable to look her up at any moment. She packed the few things she had and told her landlady with an air of noblesse oblige that she could keep the balance of the week's rent.

"I'm moving to Park Avenue," she said. "I don't know the exact location yet, but it'll be somewhere along there, don't worry!" Skip hadn't left any note for her but that didn't matter; she knew where to find him. It didn't even occur to her that there was anything strange about it. He'd gone home to change his clothes, that was all; you couldn't expect a rich man's son like him to stay in the same rumpled clothes after being out all night.

She reached the main Robbins & Rogers restaurant, a few blocks from where she had formerly lived, just a little

after the breakfast-rush was over. She marched in, suitcase in hand. She was being very tactful about this; it wouldn't have been ladylike to march right up to where he lived—at least not that early in the morning. Besides, for all she knew he mightn't be exactly anxious to have his people know anything about her; she'd been around enough to know how those things worked. Also she wanted to give him time enough to make the arrangements for the penthouse; he would have to sign the lease for it and so forth. The rest of the shopping—for the car, mink coat, furniture, et cetera—they could do together later on. So she had lots of time. Meanwhile she would tie on the feed-bag at his old man's expense, here in this place. He didn't know it yet, but she was practically his daughter-in-law already.

She set her suitcase down beside an empty table in spite of the sign that warned Not Responsible for Personal Property. Then she stalked, swaggered you might say, over to the steam counter and ran a contemplative eye along its display of dishes as though she already owned it. "Fry two, sunny side up," she commanded across the counter. "Two, bottoms up," echoed the counterman to the short-order cook. "You can bring them to me," she added haughtily, "over to that table, there." If she was going to have a penthouse and a dinge to manicure her dogs, she might as well get used to being waited on right now. Huh! The owner's son's sweetie should carry her own food to the table? Not by a long sight!

"Sorry, lady, gotta pick 'em up yourself, this is self-service —" the counterman started to remonstrate. She didn't stand there arguing about it. He didn't know who she was, that was all.

"See that you don't keep me waiting!" was all she said, and she turned, went back to her table, sat down, and began to fan herself indolently with a paper napkin.

"These yours?" At the sound of his voice she whirled around on her chair as though she had been bitten.

“Skip!” she started to exclaim joyously, and then stopped short. Her mouth dropped open and stayed that way. She just sat and stared up at him. He was holding her platter of eggs all right, and he was wearing a soiled, crummy white jacket—the same service-jacket all the helpers and bus-boys wore in the Robbins & Rogers restaurants.

“I saw you come in,” he said. “I’m not supposed to do this. If they catch me at it, they’ll fire me, but you wanted table-service and it’s table-service you’re getting.”

“Wha—what’re you doing—dressed up like a hash-slinger?” she gulped. She just slumped down in her chair and stared up at him like a fish gasping for air.

“Funny,” he observed, “but that was what you wanted me to tell them last night, wasn’t it? Well, it so happens that I am. They wouldn’t have believed you, but it would have been the truth. I was dressed up in somebody else’s clothes and was shooting a whole month’s wages on a one-night spree. Is it my fault I look like a million bucks every time I put on a clean shirt?”

Her voice rose hysterically. “But you told me—” she shrieked furiously. “You made me believe—you promised me —!”

He looked at her sorrowfully but with an undertone of humor. “Is that all you cared about—what I promised you, what you thought you could get out of me? Or was it me, myself, you liked? Because I haven’t changed. I’m the same guy who whispered in your ear last night. But I’m glad I found out if that’s the kind you are.”

She was nearly choking on her rage. “Why, you small-time, petty-larceny, no-account—Do you think I’d waste five minutes of my time—”

He sighed, but whether with regret or relief is problematical. “Well,” he assured her, “I can’t treat you to a mink coat or a penthouse on my wages but I can do this much for you—have these on me; it’s my treat!” He put

down the platter of eggs at an angle and the yolks splashed out in all directions.

“Show this lady out,” he remarked to the other employees who came running up, “and don’t spare the shoving.”

When she had gone, howling imprecations, and her suitcase had been sent flying after her, Skip Rogers started to unbutton his white service-jacket. He turned to the manager, standing beside him wringing his hands, and said:

“Here you are; give this back to whoever I borrowed it from. And whatever you do, don’t mention this little masquerade to Dad. He might think I really want to go to work here!”

THE CORPSE AND THE KID

Larry didn’t even know his father was in the house until he met him coming down the stairs. It was a little after five and he’d just come in from the beach. “Hello, Dad,” he said, and held his hand out in welcome. “You didn’t tell us you were coming down from New York tonight!” Then he said: “Gee, you look white! Been working too hard?”

Larry idolized his father and worried continually about the way he kept slaving to provide for and indulge his family. Not that they weren’t comfortably well off now—but the doctor had told the elder Weeks that with that heart of his—It was only a matter of months now.

Mr. Weeks didn’t answer, nor did he take his son’s outstretched hand. Instead he sat down suddenly in the middle of the staircase and hid his face behind his own hands. “Don’t go upstairs, kid!” he groaned hollowly. “Keep away from there!”

Larry did just the opposite. His own face grown white in dread premonition, he leaped past his father and ran on up. He turned down the cottage’s short upper hallway and threw open the door at the end of it and looked in. It was the first room he’d come to. The right room.

She lay partly across the bed with her head hanging down above the floor and her light brown hair sweeping the carpet. One arm was twisted behind her back; the other one flailed out stiff and straight, reaching desperately for the help that had never come. She was his father’s wife,

Larry's stepmother. The dread he had felt on the stairs became a certainty now as he looked in. He had expected something like this sooner or later.

He turned her over, lifted her up, tried to rouse her by shaking her, by working her lower jaw back and forth with his hand. It was too late. Her eyes stared at him unblinkingly, her head rolled around like a rubber ball. Her neck had been broken. There were livid purple marks on her throat where fingers had pressed inward.

Larry let her drop back again like a rag doll, left the room and closed the door behind him. He stumbled down the hall to the head of the stairs. His father was still sitting there halfway down, his head bowed low over his knees. Larry slumped down beside him. After a while he put one hand on his father's shoulder, then let it slip off again. "I'm with you," he said.

His father lifted his head. "She gone?"

Larry nodded.

"I knew she must be," his father said. "I heard it crack." He shuddered and covered his ears, as though he were afraid of hearing it over again.

"She asked for it and she got it," Larry remarked bitterly.

His father looked up sharply. "You knew?"

"All the time. He used to come down week-ends and she'd meet him at the Berkeley-Carteret."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"She was your wife," Larry said. "Wouldn't I have looked great."

On a little table down at the foot of the stairs the telephone started to ring, and they both stiffened and their pale faces grew even paler. They turned and looked at each other without a word while it went on shattering the ominous stillness of the house with its loud pealing.

"I'll get it," Larry said suddenly. "I know all the answers." He got up and went down to it, while his father gazed after him fearfully. He waited a minute to brace himself, then

swiftly unhooked the receiver. “Hello,” he said tensely. Then with a quick let-down of relief, “No, she hasn’t come back from the beach yet.” He exchanged a glance with his father, halfway up the stairs. “Why don’t you pick her up there instead of calling for her here at the house? You know where to find her. She won’t be back for hours yet, and you’d only have to hang around here waiting.” Then he added: “No, I don’t mean to be inhospitable, only I thought it would save time. ’Bye.” He puffed his cheeks and blew out his breath with relief as he hung up. A couple of crystal drops oozed out on his forehead. “Helen’s boy-friend,” he said, turning to the man on the stairs. Helen was his sister. “If he does what I told him, it’ll give us a couple of hours at least.”

The older man spoke without lifting his head at all. “What’s the use? Better phone the police and get it over with.”

Larry said: “No.” Then he yelled it at the top of his voice. “No, I tell you! You’re my father—I can’t, I won’t let you! She wasn’t worth your life! You know what the doctors said, you haven’t much time anyway—Oh, God.” He went close and jabbed his knee at Weeks to bring him to. “Pull yourself together. We’ve got to get her out of here. I don’t care where it happened, only it didn’t happen here—it happened some place else.”

Twenty-one years of energy pulled forty-two years of apathy to its feet by the shoulders. “You—you were in New York. You are in New York right now, do you get me? You didn’t come down here, just as none of us expected you to.” He began to shake his father, to help the words and the idea that was behind them to sink in. “Did anyone see you on the train, at the depot just now, or coming into the house? Anyone who knows you by sight? Think hard, try to remember, will you, Dad?”

Weeks ran his hand across his forehead. “Coming in, no,” he said. “The street was dead, they were all down at the

beach or on the boardwalk. The depot I'm not sure about, some of the redcaps might know me by sight—"

"But they only see you one day every week. They might get mixed up after a day or two in remembering just the exact day. We gotta take a chance. And make sure they see you tomorrow when you do come down, that'll cover today. Talk to one of them, lose something, stumble and get helped up, anything at all. Now about the train. The conductor must know you by sight—"

Weeks' face brightened all of a sudden, as the idea began to catch on, take hold of him. The self-preservation instinct isn't easily suppressed. He grasped his son by the lapel of his coat. "Larry," he said eagerly, "I just remembered—my commutation ticket—"

Larry's face paled again. "And I," he groaned, "forgot all about that. The date'll be punched—we can't get around that—"

"No, wait a minute. Just today—something that never happened before all summer—my mind was haywire I guess on account of what I'd found out—but when I got to Penn Station I found I didn't have it with me, I'd left it at the office. I had to buy an ordinary ticket to get down here—"

"Then it's a push-over!" exclaimed Larry. "It's a Godsend. It'd be a crime not to take advantage of a break like that. Doesn't it convince you what the best thing to do is? If I were superstitious I'd call it—" He stopped short. "Wait a minute, round-trip I hope? Or will you have to step up and buy a return ticket at this end?"

"It's here," panted Weeks, fumbling in his coat. "I was burning so, I didn't even notice—" He dragged it out and they both gave a simultaneous sigh of relief. "Swell," said Larry. "That unpunched commutation ticket is going to be an A-one alibi in itself. Hang onto it whatever you do. But we'll fix it all up brown. Can you get hold of someone in the city to pass the evening with you—or better still two or three friends?"

“I can get in touch with Fred German. He always rolls up a gang of stay-outs as he goes along.”

“Go to a show with ’em, bend the elbow, get a little lit, stay with them as late as you possibly can manage it. And before you leave them—not after but before, so they all can see and hear you—call me long-distance down here. That means your name’ll go down on the company’s records from that end. I’ll have your cue ready for you by that time. If she’s not dead yet, then the rotgut made you sentimental and you wanted to talk to your family, that’s all. But if I have everything under control by that time, then I’ll have bad news for you then and there. You can stage a cloudburst in front of them and continue under your own speed from that point on. But until that happens, watch your step. Keep the soft pedal on. Don’t be jerky and nervous and punchy. Don’t give ’em an idea you’ve got anything on your mind. The better you know people, the better they can tell when something’s wrong with you. Now all that is your job. Mine”—he drew in his breath—“is upstairs. Got your hat?” He took out his watch. “Get back to the station, the six o’clock pulls out in ten minutes. They’re starting to drift back from the beach, so go to

Charlton Street, one over, and keep your head down. Don’t look at anyone. Thank God she wasn’t much on getting acquainted with her neighbors—” He was leading him toward the door as he spoke. “What’re you going to do?” asked Weeks with bated voice.

“I don’t know,” said Larry, “but I don’t want an audience for it, whatever it is. All I need is darkness, and thinking how swell you’ve been to me all my life—and I can do the rest, I’ll pull through. Stand behind the door a minute till I take a squint.” He opened the door, sauntered out on the bungalow doorstep, and looked casually up in one direction, then down in the other, as though seeking a breath of air. Then suddenly he was back in again, pushing his father irresistibly before him. “Hurry up, not a living soul in sight.

It may not be this way again for the rest of the evening. They all sit on their porches after dark—”

Weeks’ body suddenly stiffened, held back. “No, I can’t do it, can’t let you! What am I thinking of anyway, letting my own son hold the bag for me? If they nab you doing this they’ll hang it on you—”

“Do you want to die at Trenton?” Larry asked him fiercely. The answer was on Weeks’ face, would have been on anyone’s face. “Then lemme do it my way!” They gripped hands for a second. Something like a sob sounded in Weeks’ throat. Then he was over the threshold and Larry was pushing the door silently after him.

Just before it met the frame Weeks pivoted abruptly, jumped back, and rammed his foot into the opening. There was a new urgency in his voice. “Helen. I see her coming! She just turned the corner!”

“Get back in!” snapped Larry. “Can’t make it now. Her eyes are too good, she’ll spot you even from a distance.” He closed the door on the two of them. “He with her?”

“No.”

“Then they missed connections. I’ll send her right out again after him.” He swore viciously. “If you’re not out of here in five minutes, you don’t make that train—and the later you get back the riskier it gets. As it is, you have three hours you can’t account for. Here—the clothes closet—be ready to light out the first chance you get. It’s just a step to the door.”

Weeks, pulling the door of the hall closet after him, murmured: “Don’t you think the kid would—”

All Larry said was: “She was pretty chummy with Doris.”

Her key was already jiggling in the front door. Larry seemed to be coming toward it as she got it open and they met face to face. She was in her bathing suit. He’d overlooked that when he’d spoken to her boy friend. He swore again, silently this time.

“Who was that came to the door just now, before I got here?” she asked.

“Me,” he said curtly. “Who’d you think?”

“I know, I saw you, but I thought I saw someone else too, a minute later. It looked like two people from where I was.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” he snapped. “Whatta ya been drinking?”

“Oh, grouchy again.” She started for the stairs. “Doris back yet?”

“No,” he said firmly.

“Good, then I can swipe some of her face powder while she’s out.” She ran lightly up the stairs. He went cold for a minute, then he passed her like a bullet passing an arrow. He was standing in front of the door with his back to it when she turned down the upstairs corridor. “What’s the matter with you?” she asked dryly. “Feel playful?” She tried to elbow him aside.

“Lay off,” he said huskily. “She raised Cain just before she went out about your helping yourself to her things, said she wants it stopped.” He got the key out of the door behind his back and dropped it into his back pocket.

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “That isn’t like her at all. I’m going to ask her to her face when she comes ba—” She rattled the doorknob unsuccessfully, gave him a surprised look.

“See, what’d I tell you?” he murmured. “She must have locked it and taken the key with her.” He moved down the hall again, as if going to his own room.

“If it was already locked,” she called after him, “why did you jump up here in such a hurry to keep me out?”

He had an answer for that one though, too. “I didn’t want you to find out. It’s hell when trouble starts between the women of a family.”

“Maybe I’m crazy,” she said, “but I have the funniest feeling that there’s something going on around here today —everything’s suddenly different from what it is other days.

What was the idea freezing Gordon out when he tried to call for me?”

She had stopped before her own door, which was next to their stepmother’s. He was nearer the stair-well than she was, almost directly over it. From below came the faint double click of a door as it opened then shut again. Even he could hardly hear it, she certainly couldn’t. The front door—he’d made it. Larry straight-armed himself against the stair railing and let a lot of air out of his lungs. He was trembling in strange places, at the wrists and in back of his knees. It was his job now. He was scared sick of it, but he was going to do it.

Without turning his head he knew she was standing there up the hall, watching him, waiting. What the hell was she waiting for? Oh yes, she’d asked him a question, she was waiting for the answer. That was it. Absently he gave it to her. “You weren’t here, I only told him where to find you.” She went into her room and banged the door shut.

And with that sound something suddenly exploded in his brain. The connecting bathroom, between her room and Doris’s! She could get in through there! Not only could but most certainly would, out of sheer stubbornness now, because she thought Doris was trying to keep her out. Women were that way. And when she did—there in full view upon the bed, what he had seen, what his own loyalty had been strong enough to condone, but what might prove too much for hers. He couldn’t take the chance. His father’s life was at stake, he couldn’t gamble with that. It had to be a sure thing—

He dove back to that door again and whipped the key from his pocket. He got the door open as quietly as he could, but he was in too much of a hurry and it was too close to her own room to be an altogether soundless operation. Then when he was in, with the twisted body in full view, he saw what had covered him. She was in the bathroom already, but she had the water roaring into the

washbasin and that kept her from hearing. But the door between was already open about a foot, must have been that way all afternoon. Just one look was all that was needed, just one look in without even opening it any more than it already was. She hadn't given that look yet. He could be sure of that because her scream would have told him, but any minute now, any fraction of a second—He could see her in the mirror. She had the straps of her bathing suit down and was rinsing her face with cold water.

There was no time to get the body out of the room altogether. He didn't dare try. That much movement, the mere lifting and carrying of it, would surely attract her attention. And the long hall outside—where could he take it? The thought of trying deftly to compose and rearrange it where it lay, into the semblance of taking a nap, came to him for a moment and was rejected too. There wasn't time enough for that, and anyway he'd already told her she was out. All this in the two or three stealthy cat-like steps that took him from the door to the side of the bed.

As he reached it he already knew what the only possible thing to do was, for the time being. Even to get it into the clothes closet was out of the question. It meant crossing the room with it, and then clothes hangers have a way of rattling and clicking.

He dropped to his knees, crouched below the level of the bed on the side away from the bathroom, pulled the corpse toward him by one wrist and one ankle, and as it dropped off the side, his own body broke its fall. It dropped heavily athwart his thighs. The way the arms and legs retained their posture betokened rigor already, but made it easier to handle if anything. From where it was, across his lap, two good shoves got it under the bed and he left it there. It was a big enough bed to conceal it completely, unless you got down on the floor where he was.

Under and beyond the bed, on a level with his eyes, he could see the threshold of the bathroom. While he looked,

and before there was any chance to scurry across the room to the hall door, Helen's feet and ankles came into view. They paused there for a moment, toes pointed his way, and he quickly flattened himself out, chin on floor. She was looking in. But she couldn't see under the bed, nor beyond it to the other side where he was, without bending over. And only old maids, he thought with a dismal chuckle, look under beds the first thing when they come into a room.

He held his breath. Maybe she'd go away again, now that she'd glanced in. But she didn't. The bare ankles in house-slippers crossed the threshold into the room. They came directly over toward him, growing bigger, like in a nightmare, as they drew nearer. They stopped on the other side of the bed from him, so close that her knees must be touching it. And one slipper was an inch away from Doris's rigidly outstretched hand. Oh my God, he thought, if she looks down at the floor—or if she comes around to this side!

What did she want there by the bed, what did she see, what was she looking at? Was there blood on it? No, there couldn't be, no skin had been broken, only her neck. Had something belonging to the dead woman been left on the bed, something he'd overlooked, a ring maybe or a necklace?

The bedclothes on his side brushed his face suddenly, moved upward a little. The danger signal went all over his body like an electric shock, until he understood. Oh, that was it! In dislodging the body he'd dragged them down a little. Woman-like she was smoothing the covers out again, tugging them back in place. Her feet shifted down toward the foot a little, then back toward the head again, as she completed her task. Momentarily he expected to see one of them go in too far and come down on the dead flesh of that upturned palm. Momentarily he expected her to come around to his side. Or even see him over the top of the bed, if she leaned too far across it. He lived hours in those few seconds. But she didn't do any of those things.

The feet turned, showed him their heels, and started back across the room growing smaller again. He was too prostrated even to sigh, he just lay there with his mouth open like a fish. She didn't go out, though. The feet skipped the opening to the bathroom and stopped before Doris's dresser over to one side. Helping herself to the face powder. But now she had a mirror in front of her, damn it! And he knew what mirrors were. If, for instance, it was tilted at a slight angle, it would show her the floor behind her—better than she could see it herself. Like a periscope in reverse, it might even reveal what lay under the bed, what her own unaided eyes would never have shown her.

He heard the thud of Doris's powder-box as she put it down again. He waited for the scream that would surely come as she raised her eyes to the quicksilver before her. He lay there tense, as rigid as that other form next to him even if a little warmer. He wondered why he didn't get it over with by jumping up and showing himself, saying, "Yes, I'm here—and look what's beside me!" But he didn't. The time to do that had been when she first came in downstairs. That time was past now. There was no going back.

And then just when he'd quit hoping, there was a little shuffling sound and her feet had carried her back over the threshold and out of the room, and he was alone with the dead.

He couldn't get up for a while—even though he knew that right now was the best time, while she was busy dressing in her own room, to get out of there. He felt weak all over. When he finally did totter upright it wasn't to the outside door that he went but to the one to the bathroom.

He carefully eased it shut and locked it on his side. Let her suspect what she wanted, she wasn't going to get back in there again until the grisly evidence was out of the way! And that would have to wait until she was out of the house. He cursed her bitterly, and her pal Gordon even more so, for unknowingly adding to his troubles like this. He even

cursed the dead woman for not dissolving into thin air once she was dead. He cursed everyone but the man who was by now speeding back to New York and safety; he was loyal to him to the last breath in his body. He went out into the hall and once more locked the dead woman's door behind him, once more extracted the key.

Just as he got in the clear once more, the phone started downstairs. It wasn't New York yet, too early. The train hadn't even gotten there yet. Helen stuck her head out of her room and called: "If it's Gordon, tell him I'm ready to leave now, not to be so impatient!" But it wasn't Gordon. It was an older voice, asking for Doris. The masculine "hello" Larry gave it seemed to leave it at a loss. Larry caught right on; he did some quick thinking. She'd been ready to leave an hour ago, she'd been going to this voice, and had never gotten there because death had stopped her in her own room. Still, an hour isn't much to a pretty woman—or to the man who's smitten with her.

Larry thought savagely, "It was your party. You're going to pay for it!" He tried to make his voice sound boyish, cordial. "She's gone out," he said with a cheerful ring, "but she left a message in case anyone called up for her. Only I don't know if you're the right party—"

"Who is this speaking?" said the voice suspiciously.

"I'm Helen's boyfriend." That ought to be all right. He must know by now that Doris had been pretty thick with Helen, that therefore any friends of the latter would be neutral, not hostile like himself. The voice was still cagey though. "How is it you're there alone?"

"I'm not. Helen's here with me, but she's upstairs dressing. Can't come to the phone, so she asked me to give the message—"

"What is it? This is the right party," the voice bit in.

"Well, Mrs. Weeks was called out this afternoon. Some people dropped in from the city and she couldn't get away from them. She said if anyone called, to say she'd gone to

the Pine Tree Inn for dinner. You know where that is?" Why wouldn't he? Larry himself had seen the two of them dancing there more than once, and had promptly backed out again in a hurry each time.

But the voice wasn't committing itself. "I think so—it's a little way out on the road to Lakewood, isn't it?"

"You can't miss it," said Larry pointedly. "It's got a great big sign that lights up the road."

The voice caught on. "Oh, then she's going to wai—Then she'll be there?"

"These people are only passing through, they're not staying. She'll be free at about nine thirty. You see they're not bringing her back, so she thought if you wanted to pick her up with your car out there—Otherwise she'd have to phone for a taxi and wait until it got out there."

"Yeah, I could do that," said the voice hesitantly. "Y'sure she said she'll be—free by nine thirty?" Alone, was the word he wanted to use, Larry knew.

"That's the time Helen told me to say," he reassured. "Oh, and I nearly forgot—" Like hell he had! It was more important than everything else put together, but it had to be dished out carefully so as not to awaken suspicion. "She said you don't have to drive right up to the place if you don't feel like it, you can sound your horn from that clump of pines down the road. You can wait there. She'll come out to you." He would go for that idea, Larry felt, if only to avoid getting stuck with any possible bill she might have run up in the roadhouse. That clump of pines wasn't new to him anyway. Larry'd already seen his car berthed in it while they were inside dancing—all to get out of paying the extra fifty cents the inn charged for parking. He'd known whose it was because he'd seen them both go back to it once to smoke a cigarette out under the stars.

He heard Helen coming down the stairs, dressed at last and ready to clear out, yet he didn't dare break the connection too abruptly.

“Who you talking to?” she said in her clear, shrill voice and stopped beside him. But he’d counted on her saying something, and the mouthpiece was already buried against his shirt-front by the time she spoke. Her voice couldn’t reach it.

“Sweetie of mine,” he said limply. “Have a heart, don’t listen—” His eyes stared tensely at her. While she stood there he couldn’t uncover the thing and speak into it himself. One peep from her and the voice at the other end would ask to speak to her, and she wasn’t in on the set-up. On the other hand he had to keep talking, couldn’t just stand there like that. Cold feet can be awfully catching, even over a wire.

“All right, son,” the voice sounded into his ear. “I’ll do that. You sure you got the message straight now?”

“Looks like you’ve got a bad case of it,” said Helen derisively.” Y our eyes are staring out of your head. I wish you could see yourself—” But she moved away, started for the front door.

“Absolutely. Just like I told you,” he said into the instrument.

“All right, thanks a lot,” the voice came back. There was a click at the other end. He felt himself caving in at his middle.

“Give her my love,” Helen was saying from the open doorway.

“There’s a fresh dame here sends you her love, honey,” he said into the dead phone. “But she’s not as pretty as you are.”

As his sister banged the front door after her, the fake grin left his face with it. He parked the phone and leaned his head weakly against the wall for a minute or two. He’d been through too much in just one hour, too much to take without leaning against something. And there was lots to come yet, he knew. Plenty.

He was alone in the house now with the body of a murdered woman. That didn't frighten him. It was getting out of there that worried him—with a double row of porches to buck in either direction, porches jammed with the rocking-chair brigade on sentinel duty. Yet out it must go, and not cut up small in any valise either. That body had a date with its own murder. It had to travel to get there, and it had to travel whole. Though at this very minute it was already as dead as it would ever be, its murder was still several hours off and a good distance away. Nine thirty, in a clump of trees near Pine Tree Inn, just as a starting-point. Details could come later. The important thing was to get it away from this house, where no murder had ever taken place, and have it meet up with its murderer, who didn't know that was what he was yet, and wasn't expecting to kill.

Let him worry about getting rid of it after that! Let him find out how much harder it is to shake off the embrace of dead arms than it is of living ones! Let him try to explain what he was doing with it in a lonely clump of trees at the side of the road, at that hour and that far from town—and see if he'd be believed! That is, if he had guts enough to do the only thing there was for him to do—raise a holler, report it then and there, brazen it out, let himself in for it. But he wouldn't, he was in too deep himself. He'd lose his head like a thousand others had before him. He'd leave it where it was and beat it like the very devil to save his own skin. Or else he'd take it with him and try to dump it somewhere, cover it somehow. Anything to shake himself free of it. And once he did that, woe betide him!

The eyes of the living were going to be on hand tonight, at just the wrong time for him—just when he was pulling out of that clump of trees, or just as he went flashing past the noon-bright glare in front of the inn on the road away from Asbury, to get rid of her in the dark open country somewhere beyond.

She would be reported missing the first thing in the morning, or even before—when his father phoned—Larry would see to that. Not many people had seen them dancing together and lapping their Martinis together and smoking cigarettes in a parked car together—but just enough of them had to do the damage. A waiter here, a gas-station attendant there, a bellboy somewhere else. Larry'd know just which ones to get.

He said to himself what he'd said when he answered the man's phone call. "It was your party; you're gonna pay for it, not Dad. She's gonna be around your neck tonight choking you, like he choked her!"

Only a minute had gone by since Helen had banged the front door after her. Larry didn't move, he was still standing there leaning his head against the wall. She might come back, she might find out she'd forgotten something. He gave her time to get as far as the Boardwalk, two blocks over. Once she got that far she wouldn't come back any more, even if she had forgotten something. She'd be out until twelve now with Gordon. Three minutes went by—five. She'd hit the Boardwalk now.

He took his head away from the wall but he didn't move. He took out a cigarette and lit it. He had all the time in the world and he wanted that last silvery gleam of twilight out of the sky before he got going. It was a lot safer here in the house with her than out in the open under those pine trees. He smoked the cigarette down to its last inch, slowly not nervously. He'd needed that. Now he felt better, felt up to what was ahead of him. He took a tuck in his belt and moved away from the wall. Anyone who had seen him would have called him just a lazy young fellow slouching around the house on a summer evening.

He wasn't bothering with any fake alibi for himself. His father had a peach and that was all he cared about. If through some unforeseen slip-up the thing boomeranged back to their own doorstep in spite of everything, then he'd

take it on—himself. He didn't give a rap, as long as it wasn't fastened on his father. His own alibi, if worst came to worst, would be simply the truth—that he'd been in the house here the whole time. And, he told himself wisely, when you don't bother tinkering with an alibi is usually when you don't need one anyway.

He pulled down all the shades on all the windows. Then he lit just one light, so he could see on the stairs. From the street it would look like no one was home and a night-light had been left burning. Then he went upstairs and got her out from under the bed.

He was surprised at how little she weighed. The first thing he did was carry her downstairs and stretch her on the floor, over to one side of the stairs. To go out she had to leave by the ground floor anyway.

Then he sat down next to her, on the lowest step of the stairs, and for a long time nothing else happened. He was thinking. The quarter hour chimed from somewhere outside. Eight fifteen that was. He still had loads of time. But he'd better be starting soon now, the Pine Tree Inn wasn't any five minutes from here. The thing was—how to go about it.

It was right there under his eyes the whole time, while he'd been racking his brains out. A spark from his cigarette did it—he'd lit another one. It fell down next to her, and he had to put his foot on it to make it go out. That made him notice the rug she was lying on. About eight by ten it was, a lightweight bright-colored summer rug. He got up and beat it over to the phone directory and looked under Carpet Cleaners.

He called a number, then another, then another, then another. Finally he got a tumble from someone called Saroukian. "How late do you stay open tonight?"

They closed at six, but they'd call for the article the first thing in the morning.

“Well, look,” he said, “if I bring it over myself tonight, won’t there be someone there to take it in? I’ll just leave it with you tonight, and you don’t need to start work on it until you’re ready.”

They evidently lived right in back of, or right over, their cleaning shop. At first they tried to argue him out of it. Finally they told him he could bring it around and ring the bell, but they wouldn’t be responsible for it.

“That’s O.K.,” he said. “I won’t have time in the morning and it’s gotta be attended to.” He hung up and went over to get it ready for them.

He moved her over right into the middle of it, the long way. Then he got his fountain pen out, shoved back the plunger, and wrecked the border with it until there was no more ink in the thing. It took ink beautifully, that rug. He went and got some good strong twine, and he rolled the rug around her tight as a corset and tied it at both ends, at about where her ankles were and at about where her broken neck was. It bulged a little in the middle, so he tied it there too and evened it out. When he got through it wasn’t much thicker than a length of sewer pipe. Her loosened hair was still spilling out at one end though, and there was another round opening down where her feet were. He shoved the hair all back in on top of her head where it belonged, and got two small cushions off the sofa and wedged one in at each end, rammed it down with all his might. They could stand cleaning too, just like the rug. That was the beauty of a bloodless murder, you weren’t afraid to leave anything at the cleaner’s. He hoisted the long pillar up onto his shoulder to try it out. It wasn’t too heavy, he could make it. No heavier than carrying a light-weight canoe.

He put it down again and went upstairs to the room where it had happened, and lit up and looked around for the last time. Under the bed and on top of it and all over, to make sure nothing had been overlooked. There wasn’t a

speck of anything. He went to her jewel case and rummaged through it. Most of the gadgets just had initials, but there was a wrist-watch there that had her name in full on the inside of the case. He slipped that in his pocket. He also took a powder compact, and slipped a small snapshot of herself she'd had taken in an automatic machine under the lid, just for luck. He wanted to make it as easy for them as he could.

He put out the lights and went downstairs. He opened the front door wide and went back in again. "From now on," he told himself, "I don't think; I let my reflexes work for me!" He picked the long cylinder up with both arms, got it to the porch, and propped it upright against the side of the door for a minute while he closed the door after him. Then he heaved it up onto his right shoulder and kept it in place with one upraised arm, and that was all there was to it. It dipped a little at both ends, but any rolled-up rug would have. Cleopatra had gone to meet Caesar like this, he remembered. The present occupant was going to keep a blind date with her murderer—three or four hours after her own death.

Someone on the porch of the next cottage was strumming Here Comes Cookie on a ukulele as he stepped down to the sidewalk level with the body transverse to his own. He started up the street with it, with his head to one side to give it room on his shoulder. He came to the first street-light and its snowy glare picked him out for a minute, then handed him back to the gloom. He wasn't walking fast, just trudging along. He was doing just what he'd said he'd do: not thinking about it, letting his reflexes work for him. He wasn't nervous and he wasn't frightened, therefore he didn't look nervous and he didn't look frightened.

“This is a rug,” he kept repeating. “I’m taking it to the cleaners. People taking rugs to the cleaners don’t go along scared of their shadows.”

A rocking chair squeaked on one of the wooden platforms and a woman’s nasal voice said: “Good evening, Larry. What on earth are you doing, trying to reduce?”

He showed his teeth in the gloom. “Gotta get this rug to the cleaners.”

“My stars, at this hour?” she queried.

“I’ll catch it if I don’t,” he said. “I was filling my fountain pen just now and I got ink all over it.” He had deliberately stopped for a moment, set the thing down, shifted it to his other shoulder. He gave her another flash of his teeth. “See you later,” he said, and was on his way again.

She gave a comfortable motherly laugh. “Nice young fellow,” he heard her say under her breath to someone beside her. “But that stepmother of his—” The sibilant whispers faded out behind him.

So Doris was already getting a bad name among the summer residents—good. “Go to it!” he thought. “You’ll have more to talk about in a little while.”

Every porch was tenanted. It was like running the gauntlet. But he wasn’t running, just strolling past like on any other summer evening. He saw two glowing cigarette ends coming toward him along an unlighted stretch of the sidewalk. As they passed under the next light he identified one—a girl he knew, a beach acquaintance, and her escort. He’d have to stop. He would have stopped if he only had a rug with him, so he’d have to stop now. The timing wasn’t quite right though. Instead of coming up to them in one of the black stretches between lights, the three of them met face to face in one of the glaring white patches right at the foot of a street lamp.

“Hello, old-timer.”

“Hello, babe.” He tilted his burden forward, caught it with both arms, and eased it perpendicularly to the

pavement.

"Johnny, this is Larry." Then she said: "What in the world have you got there?"

"Rug," he said. "I just got ink all over it and I thought I could get it taken out before I get bawled out."

"Oh, they'll charge like the dickens for that," she said helpfully. "Lemme look, maybe I could do it for you, we've got a can of wonderful stuff over at our house." She put her hand toward the top opening and felt one of the wedged-in cushions.

He could feel his hair going up. "Nah, I don't want to undo it," he said. "I'll never get it together again if I do." He didn't, however, make the mistake of pushing her hand away, or immediately trying to tip the thing back on his shoulders again. He was too busy getting his windpipe open.

"What's that in the middle there?" she said, poking her hand at the cushion.

"Sofa pillows," he said. "They got all spotted, too." He didn't follow the direction of her eyes in time.

"How come you didn't get it all over your hands?" she said innocently.

"I was holding the pen out in front of me," he said, "and it squirted all over everything." He didn't let a twitch get past his cuff and shake the hand she was looking at, although there were plenty of them stored up waiting to go to work.

Her escort came to his aid; he didn't like it because Larry'd called her "babe."

"Come on, I thought you wanted to go to the movies—"

He started to pull her away.

Larry tapped his pockets with his free hand; all he felt was Doris's wrist-watch. "One of you got a cigarette?" he asked. "I came out without mine." The escort supplied him, also the match. Larry wanted them to break away first. They'd put him through too much, he couldn't afford to seem anxious to get rid of them.

“My, your face is just dripping!” said the girl, as the orange glare swept across it.

Larry said: “You try toting this on a warm night and see how it feels.”

“’Bye,” she called back, and they moved off into the shadows.

He stood there and blew a long cloud of smoke to get into gear again. That was the closest yet, he thought. If I got away with that, I can get away with anything.

He got back under the thing again and trudged on, cigarette in mouth. The houses began to thin out; the paved middle of the street began to turn into the road that led out toward Pine Tree Inn, shorn of its two sidewalks. But it was still a long hike off, he wasn’t even halfway there yet. He was hugging the side of the roadway now, salt marshes spiked with reeds on all sides of him as far as the eye could reach. A car or two went whizzing by. He could have gotten rid of her easy enough along here by just dropping her into the ooze. But that wasn’t the answer, that wouldn’t be making him pay for his party.

There was another thing to be considered though. Those occasional cars tearing past. Their headlights soaked him each time. It had been riskier back further where the houses were, maybe, but it hadn’t looked so strange to be carrying a rug there. The surroundings stood for it. It was a peculiar thing to be doing this far out. The biggest risk of all might be the safest in the end; anything was better than attracting the attention of each separate driver as he sped by. A big rumbling noise came up slowly behind him, and he turned and thumbed it with his free hand. The reflexes would look out for him, he hoped, like they had so far.

The truck slowed down and came to a stop a foot or two ahead; it only had a single driver. “Get in,” he said facetiously. “Going camping?” But it had been a rug back further, so it was still going to be a rug now, and not a tent or anything. Switching stories didn’t pay. Only instead of

going to the cleaners it would have to be coming from there now; there weren't any cottages around Pine Tree Inn.

"Nah," Larry said. "I gotta get this rug out to Pine Tree Inn, for the manager's office. Somebody got sick all over it and he had to send it in to be cleaned. Now he's raising hell, can't wait till tomorrow, wants it back right tonight."

He handed it up to the driver and the man stood it upright against the double seat. Larry followed it in and sat down beside it, holding it in place with his body. It shook all over when the truck got going and that wasn't any too good for the way it was rolled up. Nor could he jump down right in front of the inn with it, in the glare of all the lights and under the eyes of the parking attendants.

"Who do you work for?" said the driver after a while.

"Saroukian, an Armenian firm."

"What's the matter, ain't they even got their own delivery truck?"

"Nah, we used to," said Larry professionally, "but we gave it up. Business been bad."

The ground grew higher as they got back inland; the marshes gave way to isolated thickets and clumps of trees. The truck ate up the road. "Got the time?" said Larry. "I'm supposed to get it there by nine thirty."

"It's about nine now," said the driver. "Quarter to when I started." Then he looked over at Larry across the obstacle between them. "Who d'ya think you're kidding?" he said suddenly.

Larry froze. "I don't get you."

"You ain't delivering that nowhere. Whatever it is, it's hot. You swiped it. You're taking it somewhere to sell it."

"How do you figure that?" said Larry, and curled his arm around it protectively.

"I wasn't born yestidday," sneered the driver.

Larry suddenly hauled it over his way, across his own lap, and gave it a shove with his whole body that sent it hurtling out the side of the truck. It dropped by the roadside and

rolled over a couple of times. He got out on the step to go after it. “Thanks for the lift,” he said. “I’ll be leaving you here.”

“All right, bud, if that’s how you feel about it,” agreed the driver. “Hell, it’s not my look-out, I wasn’t going to take it away from you—.” Without slowing up he reached out and gave Larry a shove that sent him flying sideways out into the night. His red tail-lights went twinkling merrily up the road and disappeared in the dark.

Larry had fortunately cleared the asphalt roadbed and landed in the soft turf alongside. None too soft at that, but nothing was broken, his palms and knees were just skinned a little. He picked himself up and went back to where the rug was. Before he bent for it he looked around. And then his swearing stopped. Even this hadn’t gone wrong, had come out right, very much right. He was so close to the inn that the reflection of its lights could be seen above the treetops off to one side. And the clump of pines would be even nearer, a five-minute walk from where he was. All that driver had done was save him the necessity of getting out in front of it and giving himself away.

But now, as he stooped over his grisly burden, he was horrified to see that one of the cords had parted, that a pillow had fallen to the road and that the body had slid down till the forehead and eyes showed beneath the blond hair that cascaded over the roadway. Larry looked up as a pair of approaching headlights floated around a distant corner. Hurriedly he worked the body back into position, shielding it with his own form from any curious glances that might be directed at him from the oncoming car. He had managed to get the pillow stuffed back in position and was retying the burst cord as the car whizzed by without even a pause of interest. Larry heaved a sigh of relief and, shouldering the load, got going again. This time he kept away from the side of the road, going deeper and deeper

among the trees. It made the going tougher, but he wasn’t coming up the front way if he could help it.

The glare from the roadhouse grew stronger and kept him from losing his bearings. After a while a whisper of dance music came floating to him through the trees, and he knew he was there. He edged back a little closer toward the road again, until he could see the circular clearing in the pines just ahead of him. It was just big enough to hold a single car, but there wasn’t any car in it. He sank down out of sight with what he’d carried all the way out here, and got to work undoing the cords that bound it. By the time he was through, the rug and the two pillows were tightly rolled up again and shoved out of the way, and the body of the woman who had died at five that afternoon lay beside him. He just squatted there on the ground next to it, waiting. In life, he knew, Doris had never been the kind of woman who was stood up; he wondered if she would be in death.

When it felt like half the night was gone—actually only about twenty minutes had passed—a sudden flash of blinding light exploded among the trees as a car turned into the nearby clearing from the road. He was glad he hadn’t gone any nearer to it than he had. As it was he had to duck his head, chin almost touching the ground, for the far-flung headlight beams to pass harmlessly above him. They missed him by only two good feet. The lights swept around in a big arc as the car half turned, then they snapped out and the engine died. He couldn’t see anything for a minute, but neither could whoever was in that car. Nothing more happened after that. When his eyes readjusted themselves he knew by its outline that it was the right car. Then there was a spurt of orange as the occupant lit a cigarette, and that gave his face away. Same face Larry had seen with Doris. It was the right man, too.

Larry stayed where he was, didn’t move an inch. To do so would only have made every twig and pine needle around him snap and rustle. He couldn’t do anything anyway while

the man stayed there at the wheel; the first move would have to come from him. True, he might get tired waiting and light out again—but Larry didn't think he would. Not after coming all the way out here to get her. No one likes to be made a fool of, not even by a pretty woman. When she didn't show up he'd probably boil over, climb out and go up to the inn himself to see what was keeping her. It became a case of seeing which one of them would get tired waiting first. Larry knew it wasn't going to be himself.

The cushions of the roadster creaked as the man shifted his hips around. Larry could see the red dot of his cigarette through the trees, and even get a whiff of the smoke now and then. He folded his lapels close over his shirt-front and held them that way so the white wouldn't gleam out and give him away. The red dot went out. The leather creaked again. The man was getting restless now. About ten minutes had passed. The creakings became more frequent.

All of a sudden there was a loud honking blast, repeated three times. Larry jumped and nearly passed out. He was giving her the horn, trying to attract her attention. Then the door of the car cracked open, slammed shut again, and he was standing on the ground, swearing audibly. Larry got the head of the corpse up off the ground and held it on his lap, waiting. About a minute more now.

Scuffling, crackling footsteps moved away from the car and out onto the road. He stood there looking down it toward the inn. Larry couldn't see him but the silence told him that. No sign of her coming toward him. Then the soft scrape of shoe-leather came from the asphalt, moving away toward the inn. He was going up to the entrance to take a look in. Larry waited long enough to let him get out of earshot. Then he reared up, caught the body under the arms, and began to struggle toward the car with it, half carrying and half dragging it. The car was a roadster and Larry had known for a long time what he was going to do.

The underbrush crackled and sang out, but the music playing at the inn would cover that.

When he got up to the car Larry let the body go for a minute and climbed up and got the rumble-seat open. It was capacious, but he had a hard time getting the stiffened form into it. He put her in feet first, and she stuck out like a jack-in-the-box. Then he climbed up after her, bent her over double, and shoved her down underneath. He dug the wrist-watch with her name on it out of his pocket and tossed it in after her. Then he closed the rumble-seat and she was gone.

"You're set for your last joy-ride, Doris," he muttered. He would have locked the rumble, to delay discovery as long as possible, if he had had the key. He took the powder-compact with her snapshot under the lid and dropped it on the ground in back of the car. Let him deny that he'd been here with her! Then he moved off under the trees and was lost to sight.

A few minutes later he showed up at the door of the inn, as though he'd just come out from inside. The doorman was just returning to his post, as though someone had called him out to the roadway to question him. Larry saw a figure moving down the road toward the clump of pines he'd just come from. "What was his grief?" he asked, as though he'd overheard the whole thing.

"Got stood up," the doorman grinned. He went back inside and Larry went down to the edge of the road. The headlights suddenly flared out in the middle of the pines and an engine whined as it warmed up. A minute later the roadster came out into the open backwards, straightened itself. It stayed where it was a moment. A taxi came up to the inn and disgorged a party of six. Larry got in. "Back to town," he said, "and slow up going past that car down there."

The man in the roadster, as they came abreast of it, was tilting a whiskey bottle to his lips. Larry leaned out the

window of the cab and called: “Need any help? Or are you too cheap to go in and buy yourself a chaser?”

The solitary drinker stopped long enough to give Larry a four-letter word describing what he could do with himself, then resumed. “Step on it,” Larry told the driver. “I’m expecting a phone call.”

When he let himself into the house once more, something stopped him before he was even over the threshold. Something was wrong here. He hadn’t left that many lights turned on, he’d only left one dim one burning, and now—He pulled himself together, closed the door, and went forward. Then as he turned into the living room he recoiled. He came face to face with his father, who’d just gotten up out of a chair.

Weeks looked very tired, all in, but not frightened any more. “I took the next train back,” he said quietly. “I’d come to my senses by the time I got there. What kind of a heel do you take me for anyway? I couldn’t go through with it, let you shoulder the blame that way.” Larry just hung his head. “My God, and I’ve been through all that,” he groaned, “for nothing!” Then he looked up quickly. “You haven’t phoned in yet, or anything—have you?”

“No. I was waiting for you to come back. I thought maybe you’d walk over to the station-house with me. I’m not much of a hero,” he admitted. Then he straightened up. “No use arguing about it, my mind’s made up. If you won’t come with me, then I’ll go alone.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Larry bitterly. “Might as well—I made a mess of it anyway. I see that now! It never would have held together. The whole thing came out wrong. I left the rug I carried her in, there under the trees. A dozen people saw me with it. I showed myself at the inn. I even told the taxi driver I was expecting a phone call. That alone would have damaged your alibi. How was I supposed to know you were going to call, if it wasn’t a set-up? And last of all my prints are all over her powder-compact and her

wrist-watch. A big help I turned out to be!" He gave a crooked smile. "Let's go. And do me a favor, kick me every step of the way getting there, will you?" When they got to the steps of the headquarters building, they stopped and looked at each other. Larry rested his hand on his father's shoulder for a minute. "Wait here, why don't you?" he said in a choked voice. "I'll go in and break it for you. That'll be the easiest way." He went in alone.

The sergeant on duty looked across the desk. "Well, young feller, what's your trouble?"

"The name is Weeks," said Larry, "and it's about Doris Weeks, my stepmother—"

The sergeant shook his head as though he pitied him. "Came to report her missing, is that it?" And before Larry could answer the mystifying question, "Recognize this?" He was looking at the wrist-watch he'd dropped into the rumble seat less than an hour ago.

Larry's face froze. "That's hers," he managed to say.

"Yeah," agreed the sergeant, "the name's on it. That's the only thing we had to go by." He dropped his eyes. "She's pretty badly hurt, young feller," he said unwillingly.

"She's dead!" Larry exclaimed, gripping the edge of the desk with both hands.

The sergeant seemed to mistake it for apprehension and not the statement of a known fact. "Yeah," he sighed, "she is. I didn't want to tell you too suddenly, but you may as well know. Car smash-up only half an hour ago. Guy with her must have been driving stewed or without lights. Anyway a truck hit them and they turned over. He was thrown clear but he died instantly of a broken neck. She was caught under the car, and it caught fire, and—well, there wasn't very much to go by after it was over except this wrist-watch, which fell out on the roadway in some way—"

Larry said: "My father's outside, I guess I'd better tell him what you told me—" and he went weaving crazily out the doorway.

“It sure must be tough,” thought the sergeant, “to come and find out a thing like that!”

NO KICK COMING

They were walking home in silence together. He takes all the kick out of everything, she thought, by the way he does things. If he would only give more snap, more suddenness, to what he does!

She knew, almost word for word, step by step, and move by move, what the wind-up of their evening was going to be like. At the last corner before her house he would say, “Did you have a good time?” Then when they were at the door, he would say: “Well, here we are. See you night after tomorrow.” Always that unnecessary “Here we are!” As though they could be any place else but where they were!

As though he had ever failed to call for her every other night in the week!

Then for a dramatic climax, he would follow her just inside the doorway, strike a match so that she could fit her key in without any trouble, and after the door was open and the match blown out ask: “May I kiss you?” Once, to her intense surprise, he had varied this by saying “Mind if I kiss you?” But two nights later he had gone back to his original wording again and never changed it after that. Why, oh why, did he have to ask like that each time and rob the kiss of all its kick? She shook her head as she walked along beside him. It wasn’t, no, it wasn’t very thrilling, that was all.

They arrived at the last street corner. Here it came now, always at this same spot, right where the electric lamp-post was standing. “Did you have a good time?”

“Very,” she answered patiently.

They stopped at the door. Say it! she thought irritably. Say it and get it over with!

He didn’t fail to. “Well, here we are,” he said. And then, “See you night after tomorrow.” She just smiled drearily at him and turned to go in. He came after her and struck a match and held it while she put her key in the door. Then “May I kiss you?” he murmured. It made the whole thing as tame as a handshake. She held up her face, coolly, briefly, and then slipped in and shut the door after her.

Inside the flat she flung her purse down with a violent, explosive gesture. Immediately the light flashed on and her roommate sat up in bed suddenly.

“Hello, Ivy,” she said. “You woke me up. What time is it?”

“It’s the usual time,” said Ivy sullenly. “Not a minute later, not a minute sooner. Everything’s run according to a schedule with him, you see.”

“Have a good time with Walter?” her roommate yawned.

“Oh, gorgeous!” snapped Ivy.

“You don’t sound like it. What happened? Did you have a quarrel?”

“A quarrel would be something at least,” Ivy exclaimed, running a comb repeatedly through her hair in what looked like a vicious attempt at scalping herself. “He hasn’t even got spirit enough to quarrel with me.” This was said complainingly rather than admiringly.

“Why, Ivy!” the roommate admonished, sinking back on the pillow and ruffling her hair in time with Ivy’s frantic combing. “He loves you. What more do you want? A steady, reliable fellow who’s devoted to you and intends settling down with you. You have no kick coming!”

“That’s just it,” agreed Ivy dismally. “I certainly have no kick coming!” She abruptly snapped the light out.

The next day, in a starched muslin frock and a peaked white cap to go with the surroundings, she waited on tables. The final touch of old Holland, the wooden shoes, had fortunately been omitted as conflicting with the necessary rapidity of movement. In this atmosphere, redolent of such native Dutch dishes as griddle-cakes and shredded wheat, the long hours slipped past her. The evening of the second day was one of Walter's Saturdays. A picture show on Tuesdays and Thursdays, dancing on Saturdays. That was as immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. That they should go to a picture on Saturday, for instance, and dance together on one of the other two nights, why there was much more likelihood of the sun shining at midnight or snow falling in August than of that ever happening! Instead of feeling the way girls do a month or so before they get married, she thought rebelliously, I feel the way they do years afterward—all disinterested and blah! She was meanwhile preparing herself in a listless way to be ready at half-past eight, the hour when he would call for her, with no excitement and no anticipation.

All the faces would be the same, the tunes would be the same, for he always took her to the same place. And at the very same spot on the floor, where that thick post was set, he would go out of step again trying to get past it. It was difficult to recall, it seemed so long ago now, that she had once laughed about this, saying: "We'll have to have that removed!" And that a week later, when the same thing happened, she said: "Here's our old friend Mr. Post." Now she no longer said a word. It was—well, just a part of Walter; it had to be taken for granted along with everything else that he stood for: good-hearted, reliable, devoted to her; altogether a calendar of virtues. But a calendar without a red-letter day for her. Her friend came in at eight, home from toil.

"You certainly are," she remarked with a glance at the familiar pale-blue Saturday night dress, "getting your

money's worth out of that thing. Aren't you afraid Walter will get tired of seeing you in it so much?"

"It's just the other way round," Ivy corrected her. "I wear it each time as a special favor to him; he's asked me to time and again, doesn't like me in new things. That night I wore the other one for a change, his face dropped and he said something about having to get used to me all over again."

"Well," observed her friend enviously, "he's just about ideal. You don't have to worry about what to wear to go out with him. Are you lucky!"

"So I've been told," Ivy agreed desperately.

Eight-thirty came, then went again. Thirty seconds past, then a whole minute, then two—and for the first time in months the doorbell didn't give its familiar ring. He had never been as unpunctual as this before.

"I honestly believe," Ivy said hopefully, as though discovering a new trait to be admired in him, "he's going to be all of five or ten minutes late. And yet it can't be possible; it must be our clock that's fast."

"I'm not put out," she was saying a quarter of an hour later. "At least for once he's done something to break the awful monotony. It's a habit should be encouraged."

The telephone rang. It was Walter. He had been unavoidably detained. He was apologetic, almost abjectly so in fact. He was on his way now.

"Instead of your coming all the way up here," she suggested, "I'll wait for you at the place instead. That'll save time."

When she came back to the room, she remarked, "I'm going to do something I've wanted to do for months."

"What?" asked her friend, slightly alarmed.

"I'm going down there alone to that place, ahead of him, and find out what it feels like to dance with somebody else for a change."

"Ivy," her roommate remonstrated, "you're just doing this because you're peeved at him. You don't really want to go

down there without an escort—”

“Don’t I!” said Ivy. “Don’t I? If you only knew! Listen,” she said intensely. “I have an enemy down there, and tonight is my chance to get even. Don’t get frightened,” she added as her friend’s eyes widened. “It’s only a post, but tonight for once in my life I’m going to get past that post without having a hitch thrown into my dancing!” Then she flung the door open and departed, leaving her roommate to close it after her with a puzzled look on her face.

Ivy bought her own way into the dance hall and seated herself in the first vacant armchair she came to. “No,” she said almost at once, over her shoulder, and then “No” again, and still a third time “No” with an added “Thank you” by way of afterthought. She hadn’t come there to indulge in flirtation; those who had noticed her on former occasions in the company of Walter and now approached with a doubtful, furtive air about them wouldn’t do at all.

“He’s got to come up and stand right before me, whoever he is,” she told herself, “not sneak up sideways hoping no one will notice.”

Her glance wandered across the sleek floor to the opposite side of the room. There’s someone, she thought, who would do nicely. Almost as though he had heard her, he started over, then and there, neither hurriedly nor yet slowly, cutting directly across the vacant floor with an air of assurance that was all to his credit. I shouldn’t have looked over at him, Ivy thought remorsefully, now that it was too late. She turned her face away. Even when she knew that he was standing there, she pretended not to see him.

“The next?” he said in a resonant voice.

“What would you have done if I had refused?” she asked curiously once they were out on the floor.

“Just what I’m doing now,” he said. “Dance with you anyway.”

“With somebody else, you mean?”

“With you, I said,” he corrected. “When I want to dance with someone bad enough to ask them, I dance with them!”

“Well!” she said, a bit rashly. “This is something, anyway! I have no kick coming so far.”

The famous post bore down on them. Instinctively she bunched herself together, waiting for the misstep that was to come. There was no misstep. Expertly he detoured in a half circle, and it receded harmlessly in back of them. There, she thought triumphantly. I’ve accomplished what I set out to do tonight—now I’ll leave him as soon as the music stops and wait for Walter.

She did leave him as soon as the music stopped, and the next time it stopped, and the time after that too. In fact, each and every time it stopped, she left him to wait for Walter, and each time it began, no matter how inconspicuous and out-of-the-way a refuge she had chosen for herself, he found her and dragged her out into the open again. She said “No” and “No more tonight, thanks,” and found herself dancing with him anyway.

“You’ve been saying for nearly an hour now,” he objected, “that you expect your friend any minute. Well, he isn’t here yet.” He came to an abrupt decision. “Come on, let’s go,” he ordered. “I didn’t dance with you all evening to turn you over to someone else! I’m taking you home myself.”

“Leave here with you?” she gasped. “Why, I should say—”

”Come on, no use arguing about it,” he repeated impatiently, and taking her by the elbow lifted her to her feet.

After all, she decided, it was no more than Walter deserved for being so late. He’d kept her waiting here for him for nearly an hour. “You’d make a good kidnaper,” she told him tartly. But at the same time she inconsistently let him lead her toward the entrance and out of the place. It

was rather nice for a change to have your mind made up for you. It put the blame for whatever you did on the other person and not on yourself. It made you feel carefree and irresponsible.

"Well," she said ungraciously as they reached the street, "now that you've had your way, what next?" And shot him a look that was meant to be cold and disapproving.

"We'll go and get something to eat," he said.

"No we won't," she said immediately. "I'm not hungry."

"I am," he told her, "so we'll get something to eat."

"Didn't I just tell you—?" she began. By the time she was through telling him, they were already seated at a table somewhere.

"And a chicken sandwich for the lady," he informed the waiter.

"Nothing of the kind!" Ivy corrected bitingly. "I'm not having a thing."

"And like I just told you, a chicken sandwich for the lady."

The man nodded and went to get the order; he seemed to have no doubt as to which voice of the two was the deciding one.

"He can bring it," said the irate Ivy, "but that doesn't mean I'm going to eat it!"

Somewhat later, after she had replaced her fork on the empty plate, they stood up to go. "He thinks he's good," she told herself knowingly. "I simply changed my mind, that was all."

On the way to her house they passed a jewelry store, the same one Walter always stopped to look at whenever he brought her by there.

"Wait a minute. Let's see what they've got here," he said. But he didn't have as much trouble as Walter did making up his mind, he did not bother calculating how long it would take at the rate of five dollars down and five a week or anything like that. All he did was point to the very biggest

diamond ring on the tray and say: “There’s a beaut. Want me to get you that?”

“Are you crazy or something?” she gasped. “We’ve only seen each other tonight for the first time!”

He looked at her in surprise. “What’s wrong about that?” he wanted to know. “Isn’t that the way to do things, right on the dot? I happen to like you!”

That was the way she had always felt about it herself—make life a breathless, thrilling thing. But this was going too far.

“Not so fast, slow down,” she said coldly.

“Why, we’re just cut out for each other.” But she had turned resolutely away from the window and wasn’t listening any more. “I’m going to get that for you,” he said briskly, coming after her, “that one I just showed you.”

“Better forget it,” she smiled. “It’s priced too high.”

“When I want something,” he said stubbornly, “I go ahead and get it!”

They passed the lamp-post on the corner.

“I enjoyed myself tonight,” she said suddenly, without being asked.

All he said was “What’d you expect?” as though that was to be taken for granted; it was needless to mention a thing like that.

“But, Ivy,” her friend asked when she let her in a few minutes later, “what on earth possessed you to pound on the door the way you just did? Didn’t you have your key with you?”

“Yes,” gasped Ivy, “but I didn’t have time to use it. It’s a good thing you came to the door when you did!”

“That’s not like you at all,” her friend persisted. “And poor Walter has been ringing up constantly all evening long saying he couldn’t locate you—”

“Walter?” said Ivy with an effort. “Oh, yes—I forgot.”

She had a mid-afternoon station at the Old Dutch Corner the next day. As she was walking along leisurely toward the restaurant in the two o'clock sunshine, something made her stop and stare in surprise. There was the familiar jewelry shop, but quite a change had come over it. Two boards, crossed to form an X, protected the place where the glass showcase had been until now. And where the glass showcase had been, there were just splinters and jagged ends sticking out of the frame, with the sidewalk below it well iced with innumerable fragments of broken glass. A policeman on guard before the doorway kept advising loiterers to move on and not stand there.

Which advice Ivy took herself only when she found herself being addressed in person. Held up! she thought, continuing reluctantly on her way. I wonder what Walter will say when he hears about it? Then suddenly a horrible intuition that had nothing whatever to do with Walter flashed through her mind and was quickly dismissed. "I'm imagining things," she told herself. "He wouldn't dare."

She entered the Old Dutch Corner, made her way to the back, and descended the narrow stairs that led down to the waitresses' locker-room. When she came up again, she was in the muslin frock and peaked cap. "The six tables along the wall in back," the manager directed her. "And fill the sugar bowls. People have been putting wet spoons in them all morning." Into the fray she plunged for the next five or six hours. Endless hours of serving tomato-juice, finger-bowls, and all that went in between. Until ten came, and she was through.

She had just scratched off her last meal-check and was turning to go downstairs and take off her uniform when a new customer pushed through the revolving doors. She groaned inwardly and waited to see if he would sit at her station. That would mean another half-hour. But he didn't select any table at all. Instead he leaned intimately across the cashier's desk. She glanced over in surprise, thinking

he must have a pretty bad cold the way his scarf was thrown up over his chin. Then she saw the cashier raise his hands; his face was white and drawn. He stayed that way without moving, while the customer reached over and did something to the drawer on the inside of the counter where the money was kept.

After that things began to happen too quickly for Ivy to grasp what it was all about. The blast of a whistle sounded faintly outside on the street somewhere. The two or three diners in the place stood up excitedly, craning their necks; a chair fell over backwards. A voice, the voice of that man up front, barked out: “Just stay where you are, all of you!” The revolving door began to spin violently around, and two policemen could be seen flattened against it in a hurry to get in from the outside. On top of all this there was a crashing, shattering noise, as though a giant firecracker had gone off, only much louder than that even, followed by a sound of scampering feet going toward the back, where there was a delivery-exit on the side-street. But by now Ivy was crouching down under a table, her head bunched between her shoulders, as a precaution against whatever might come next.

There were, however, no further explosions like the first one; instead everyone in the place began talking at once, and there was an incessant rushing from front to back and back to front. “He got out the back way!” she heard someone say. She straightened up and ventured out into the open once more. The whole front of the restaurant was boiling with excitement. The night-manager, greatly upset, was conferring with one of the policemen.

“They oughta know better than to build a place with two entrances these days,” the policeman was saying disgustedly.

“Mr. Simms,” ventured Ivy timidly, “may I go home now?”

“Don’t annoy me at a time like this!” Mr. Simms exclaimed abruptly. “Go ahead if your time’s up.”

She hurried to the back room and down the steps to the locker-room. She quickly opened the locker with her key, took her street-dress off the hook, pulled the Dutch cap from her head, and then sat down momentarily on the long bench to rest her feet and get her breath back. It was then that, glancing into the mirror before her on the wall, she saw his reflection for the first time. He had wedged himself into the corner between the wall and the end locker and couldn't be seen as you opened the door. She froze from head to foot.

"Wait a minute. Keep your head," his voice said. "You know me." And he came out and stood there and, of all things, smiled nonchalantly at her.

"You!" she squeaked. "You—last night!" They stood looking at each other, she up at him and he down at her. It never occurred to her, somehow, to scream for help. After all, when you have danced and eaten a sandwich with a person, you don't usually scream for help the very next time you see him. "I should have known there was a catch in it somewhere," she declared bitterly. "So this is what you are and what you do! And now I suppose you think I'm going to help you get away or something—?"

He kept right on smiling at her; he even seated himself negligently astride the bench, opposite to her. "Go ahead," he invited with a sweep of his arm. "Call them in." He said this with complete indifference. She felt, somehow, that he really meant it; he wasn't just bluffing. "I didn't even know you worked here," he went on. "If you think I'd trade on your liking for me to get myself out of this jam, you're all wrong."

"My liking for you?" she exploded violently. "You'll find out in a minute just how much I like you! You—you criminal!" She leaped up and took a step toward the door, a determined and furious one. Then there was loud knocking and confused voices from outside. "Don't come in. I'm undressed!" she shrieked wildly, and threw her whole

weight against the door to hold it. Over her shoulder she saw that reckless fool still grinning at her, his eyes on the uniform that clothed her from neck to calf. She couldn't help admiring his nerve; maybe that was what made her do what she did.

"There's no one in there but you, is there, Ivy?" the manager's voice called in.

She evaded the question. "How could there be, Mr. Simms?" she shouted back. "I'll be out in five minutes!"

The confusion of voices melted away on the other side of the locked door.

"Such a lot of trouble," he grinned, "to save a criminal!"

"You certainly don't deserve it!" she admitted bitterly. "I don't know what's the matter with me, anyway! Now get out of here before they find you!"

He came up behind her. "All right, let's go," he agreed. "I'll turn my back while you're changing."

"Me, you mean?" she said in a barely audible voice. "Go with you!" And froze in consternation.

"Life is short and sweet; that's the way to live it. Here, slip this on." And that very large diamond ring he had pointed out to her last night behind the glass showcase passed into the palm of her hand. "We'll pick up a car outside, send it back tomorrow C.O.D. We'll make our getaway into Jersey or Connecticut, and what happened upstairs tonight won't happen any more if you don't want it to."

"But it would always be hanging over us. It would only spoil everything," she said. "The only thing I like about you is your suddenness—your courage. Only why couldn't it have been something on the square, like saving a child from fire? Right is right and wrong is wrong." She shook her head. "Hurry up and get away if you can," she pleaded, clenching her hands. "I don't want to have to call them in here!"

He simply saluted her with two fingers at his temple. He opened the door an inch or two with infinite precaution and stood there listening. He crept as far as the stairs to reconnoiter and then looked back at her. He winked. He could think of winking at a time like this!

“They’re all up front at the other end of the restaurant,” he reported elatedly. “Now’s my chance. Watch me go out the back way!” The last thing she heard him say was: “Too bad I have to leave you behind, baby. We were made for each other.” Then he slipped from sight and was gone.

She stood there waiting, listening. No disturbing sounds came back to her. He had gotten away. It was over. She gave a peculiar sigh. If only she had had the courage! What was life after all? If you were going to be afraid of it, you were better off dead. Suddenly she found her street-coat wrapped around her uniform, found herself racing up those stairs after him. A skyrocket seemed to have exploded within her, brilliant, flashing; stars were in her eyes.

“Wait!” she gasped. “Wait! Life can’t pass me by; it mustn’t! Wait, I’m coming!”

Out the back way, from the lighted restaurant into the dark street she sped. Halfway down toward the corner the red tail-light of a car lurched out of a line of parked machines. Instinctively she felt that he was in it, knew he must be. She didn’t even know his name, didn’t know what to call him. Life has no time in its headlong rush. Her despairing scream rent the quiet night air.

“Wait, wait for me! Take me with you!”

The car didn’t stop. He wasn’t the kind would stop, ever. Instead it went crashing into reverse and heeled backwards toward her. The door swung open; his arm reached out to take her—to take what he wanted out of life. She found the running-board with one foot and before she could even get in next to him they were careening madly down the street and the city and the world went flashing by, left far behind. Out in the darkness somewhere in back of them came the

eerie wail of a police siren. He only laughed, and even in the act of swerving crazily from side to side, so that any minute threatened to be their last, turned to her and their lips met in the bitter sweetness of a kiss stolen on borrowed time.

"Again!" she pleaded. "Again! We may never have time for another—" The windshield cracked and there was a powdered seam in it directly between their two heads—or where their two heads had been only an instant before.

"Crouch down low, darling," he grinned, "and away we go! A miss is as good as a mile!" She slipped down to the floor and rested her head against his knee and never took her eyes from his face after that. From time to time in their long mad flight through darkness he would reach down and stroke her hair with one hand and say: "How does it feel to be alive?" She knew what he meant; he didn't mean because of the bullets—he meant to be alive in this new way, the way she had always longed to live; the way that was to be her way from now on.

The sleepy-eyed clerk in the little upstate hotel pushed the register toward them at three in the morning, and Eddinger turned to her and kissed her before he signed it. A recklessly happy kiss, an exulting kiss at having outwitted death one more time. The clerk had never seen two people with such shining eyes; he wondered disapprovingly if they'd been drinking. Mr. and Mrs. Smith the book recorded.

"The best you've got," he told the clerk, and carelessly tossed a crumpled bill on the desk.

"You don't have to pay your bill until you leave," said the clerk. Eddinger looked at Ivy and they both laughed, as though they shared some private joke between them.

"You'd better take it now," he said. "There's no telling—" When the door upstairs had closed upon them and they

were alone, they flew into each other's arms like two wild birds in a storm. Stolen time! Every moment was stolen time. Every minute might be the last. That perhaps saved the situation from cheapness, tawdriness; that made it more than just a one-night stand in a country hotel with Mr. and Mrs. Smith on the register. Though she was inexperienced as far as those things went, Ivy somehow knew the difference just as any woman would have. He wasn't just playing with her; whatever his past had been, he was as sincere tonight as she was. No one could have feigned the real admiration, the basic respect, that showed amidst all the wildness of his kisses. The broken inchoate murmurs he poured into her ears came from the heart; they lacked the smoothness of hypocrisy.

"My kind of a girl, found my kind of a girl at last! You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"No—all my life I've been waiting—you don't know what this means, do you? If you put your head on my shoulder tonight in this room, it means forever, for always. If not, say so now."

"From now on is the word," he said. "It may end in five minutes—it may last for fifty years."

"With this kiss," she breathed, "I thee wed." Darkness suddenly flooded the room. Strangest of wedding-nights, a revolver in a holster slung across the foot of their marriage bed, neither of them daring to undress, every footfall in the corridor past their door a sudden menace.

When it finally came, just before dawn, there was no warning, not even a stealthy footfall outside. A sudden surging rush of many bodies that buckled their door and almost burst it in. The chest of drawers barricading it alone kept it in place. And then the thundering summons that Ivy heard now for the first time and the last. "Open in the name

of the law!” They had leaped spasmodically apart, torn from each other’s arms like a pair of puppets dangling on strings. The gun was already in his hand, aimed at the door, ready, as he swept her toward the wall with one arm.

“Into the closet, sweet, and flat on the floor! Hell’s going to break!”

“We know you’re in there, Eddinger; open or we’ll shoot!”

Vainly she clawed at the knob of the closet-door. “It’s locked, Ed. I can’t get in!” He took a single step toward it, swerved his gun for a minute toward the keyhole, and fired. It shattered into a dozen metal fragments and the door was open.

“Get in and keep it shut!” Then he dropped flat on his stomach and was smiling as the first thundering volley came crashing through the room door from outside.

That was the last thing she saw—his smile in the face of death. She shrank back into the closet and pulled the door shut after her. Then suddenly she found that there was no wall at her back. It was not a closet at all, it was the next room—that had been the connecting door between that he had blasted open for her. The noise from the room she had just left was deafening for a minute, and then the silence that followed was even more deafening.

“Got him, I guess,” said a voice from out in the hall in the midst of the sudden stillness. And a moan escaped from her:

“No—oh, no!”

There was a sudden crash and they had broken in the door. Her heart had stopped beating as she put her ear to the connecting door.

“Got him all right,” said the same voice. “Full of holes as a Swiss cheese.”

She turned and staggered blindly out into the hall from the room where she had taken refuge and found other guests creeping out of their rooms one by one and no one noticed her in the crowd. As she stumbled downstairs and

out into the night, all she could see before her was a smile—his smile in the face of death.

Half an hour later and a mile away, a big milk truck lumbering toward New York came to a stop beside her.

"Want a lift?" offered the driver. "Something happen to you? Been hurt?"

The girl who had been stumbling along the side of the darkened road took his hand and climbed in next to him.

"Yes, I have," she answered in a quiet voice. "Right here." And she placed her hand over her heart for a moment.

Her roommate said: "Oh, you had me frightened! I didn't know what had happened to you! You look as though you've been out in a storm. Your hair's all—"

"Yes," said Ivy. "A strong wind caught me up, a wind called life, for just an hour or so. Then it passed on and left a dead calm."

Her roommate wasn't much on riddles; she changed the subject.

"I see they finally killed that awful Eddinger," she said. "It's in all the papers. I'm certainly glad they did, too!"

"Some women," said Ivy with the ghost of a smile, "would stick to a man like that to the bitter end."

"By the way, Walter dropped around to see you last night. He waited hours for you to come home. He left a message for you. He told me to tell you he made the first payment on a ring yesterday. He said you'd know what that meant."

"I do," said Ivy bleakly.

"But," protested her friend, "why are you so downcast about it? You should consider yourself lucky. A steady, reliable fellow who thinks the world of you, wants to settle down. You have no kick coming."

“You’re right,” agreed Ivy dismally. “I certainly have no kick coming.” But she didn’t mean it in quite the same way.

FLOWER IN HIS BUTTONHOLE

“Sometimes she thinks she’s found her hero,
But it’s a queer romance;
All that you need is a ticket—
Come on, big boy, ten cents a dance!”

Every evening at half-past eight she climbed a long flight of stairs on Broadway. Not on one of the side-streets, but right on Broadway itself. When she got to the top, she always said, “Hello, big boy!” She had learned that expression. “Big boy” was usually leaning an elbow on the shelf of the ticket-seller’s window, with one eye on his watch and one on the stairs. He was the manager. As a rule he condescended to nod when she said this. Once or twice he had even gone so far as to grunt in reply. She had gone in by now, anyway; through a pair of swinging glass doors that flashed closed after her. There was a big empty room before her, with a dark shiny floor and a row of windows curtained in pink and a platform for the musicians. She didn’t stop to look at any of this; it was nothing to her. She walked toward a curtained alcove at the back, and as she walked she was already stripping off her hat and coat for action. Sometimes when she felt particularly good and some other girl was there to watch her, and there weren’t any men around, she would push her hat far to the back of her head and let her

coat slip down her back to her elbows and give a comical shuffle across the floor with her feet spread out. This was supposed to be an imitation of Chaplin. When she hadn't felt so good, she had entered trailing her coat along the floor after her, just like a child with a broken kite.

In the curtained alcove there were a mirror and some chairs, and there were hooks for coats and hats. No hangers, but just hooks fastened to a board. Hers was the one on the end, and she'd penciled her name under it—Faith. As she was hanging up her things, the brisk tap-tap of high heels sounded across the polished floor outside, punctuated by the swish of the swinging glass doors. She smiled faintly. She knew that walk.

A few moments later the curtain was tossed back and her friend Trixie entered the alcove. With Trixie came a large quantity of red hair, a smaller quantity of Chypre, rebottled at the five-and-ten, a fair share of the town's good looks, and an encouraging feeling that the world wasn't such a bad place to live in, after all.

"Here already?" she remarked. "Not sick or anything, are you?"

"What brings you so early?" Faith asked.

"That's what Simon Legree just asked me at the door. He cracked his whip and handed me this: 'I'm thinking of firing you for being on time.' 'Oh, yeah?' I said."

Faith laughed. "I know; I heard you. So did the traffic cop up at Columbus Circle probably."

Trixie planted her hand dramatically upon her chest.

"Me?" she said in surprise. "I never speak above a whisper!" Others came in until all of them were there. A preliminary tuning-up sounded outside. It had very little chance of topping the amount of conversation going on in the dressing room, however. They were all talking at once. Half of them were lined up before the mirror powdering their noses, while the rest clustered just in back of them, waiting to get at it. Someone lighted a cigarette and it was

promptly snatched away from her and stepped on. “As though it isn’t stuffy enough already!”

“Now, now, don’t shove! Mamma’s nearly through.” This from Trixie, who was in the front line and intended staying there until she was satisfied with her appearance, no matter what the cost. Faith insinuated herself at her shoulder and Trixie promptly made room for her at the expense of the girl on the other side. One’s friend always came first in a crisis of this sort.

“New?” remarked Faith, looking straight into the glass. She could see it there.

“Yeah, green,” replied Trixie. This latter fact was self-evident. Startlingly so, in fact. Beside the gleaming emeraldine hue of Trixie’s, the mild green of Faith’s own frock paled into nothingness.

At any other time Faith would most likely have retorted: “No kidding? I thought it was red.” Tonight, however, she appeared vaguely troubled by the fact that Trixie’s dress was the color of her own. “I hope he doesn’t get mixed up,” she said, as though communing with herself.

“Who?” Trixie asked sharply.

Faith, absorbed in some weighty problem of her own, allowed the question to pass unheeded. “If I had known, I would have picked another color.” She tapped her lower lip reflectively. “But I only have green and blue, and Adelaide is always in blue.”

Trixie’s curiosity, never very weak, had been aroused by this soliloquy. She tapped her friend commandingly on the shoulder.

“Would y’ mind telling me what you’re talking about? Or is it too sacred for words?”

Faith seemed willing enough to comply. “Come on over in the corner,” she said, and added provocatively: “This is just between the two of us. I’m not broadcasting it.”

Smoke and flame could not have kept Trixie from following her after hearing that. She extricated herself with

some difficulty from her place before the mirror, not without arousing considerable sarcastic comment.

"Well, well, well! So the Statue of Liberty has moved at last!"

"Are you quitting for good? Or is it just a little vacation you're taking?"

"Look, there's moss growing where she was standing!"

"Ladies, ladies," remonstrated Trixie with an injured air, elbowing her way through them, "you forget who I am." She joined Faith and faced her expectantly.

"Well, you see," Faith explained in a guarded undertone, "I have a date with someone on the floor outside, and I've never seen him before."

"What'd you do, advertise in the papers?"

"Do you remember what I told you one night about someone calling me up by mistake and asking if it was a Chinese hand-laundry?"

"Sure I do!" giggled Trixie delightedly. "And you were feeling clownish that night and said it was, only the management had changed hands and it was now being run by Americans, and begged him to send his wash around and give you a trial!"

"Well, I never told you the rest of it, what happened after that," Faith went on breathlessly. Once started she decided to tell all.

"Oh, was there more to it?" Trixie arched her brows. "I kind of thought so."

"Well, the next day he sent all his wash around, even his socks, and you never saw such holes! The landlady found it in the vestibule and she was going to throw it out, so I told her it was for me and I took it upstairs—"

"Oh, this is swell!" Trixie squealed zestfully.

"Well, when I saw all those shirts with the buttons off, I hated to send the things back to him the way they were, and I thought about it and thought about it until finally—"

“Don’t tell me you went ahead and did it yourself !” the horrified Trixie forestalled her, palms lifted. “You did!” she went on, scrutinizing her friend’s flushed face more closely. “I can tell by your expression.” Then she added dolefully, as one who laments an evil tendency in somebody else, “You always were sort of domestic.”

The repentant Faith gazed at the floor in embarrassment, confessing her fault.

“I mended the socks and things in my spare time,” she admitted in a small voice. “It was an awful lot of trouble, but it was awfully soothing. I felt just like I was married.”

“Only you don’t get paid for it then,” Trixie reminded her callously.

“Then I pressed the whole batch with a flatiron the lady downstairs lent me.”

Trixie covered her eyes in great grief. “Say it isn’t true, pal; say it isn’t true!”

“But I had an accident. The iron got too hot or something and I smelt smoke and when I looked, his best shirt had a big piece eaten out of it—”

“Served him right, the big chiseler,” observed Trixie.

“How was he to know?” protested the victim. “He thought I was really a laundry. He called up and was very angry, of course. I didn’t blame him. So I told him I would pay for the shirt, but after a while he said that it didn’t matter. He never sent me any more wash, but from then on he used to ring up about once a week and say ‘How’s the Faith and Charity Hand Laundry getting along?’ That was the name I had made up for it in the beginning. He was never fresh or anything over the phone—know what I mean?—and he had such a nice voice that it got so I liked it when he rang up. And tonight he’s going to be out there—” she nodded toward the dance floor, already crawling with couples “—wearing a white flower in his coat so that I’ll know him when I see him. And I told him I’d have on a green dress.” She sighed and clasped her hands.

The white flower had arrested Trixie's attention, it seemed.

"Maybe he's a floorwalker," she remarked apprehensively.

At this juncture a large and none too aromatic cigar thrust its way between the curtains of the alcove and a voice just in back of it inquired truculently:

"What do you two think you're doing in there, holding a wake?"

"We're making mud pies; love to have you join us," Trixie replied instantly, without even turning her head. At this rebuff the cigar was withdrawn. Trixie had a way with her that even kept managers in their place. "Come on, babe," she said, "let's go outside and jump through our paper hoops." Unexpectedly chucking her friend under the chin, she remarked, "I'm wearing a green dress too but don't worry. If he picks me out by mistake, I'll bring him over to you. Lots of luck and bigger and better laundries." Then she sallied forth, shimmying slightly in time to the music.

When Faith came out after her, the glass prisms were spinning around in the ceiling, sending down a shower of sparks, and under them in the dim light couples glided silently over the floor like shadows. She stood still and shut her eyes for a second. She was making a wish, half audibly:

"Make him so that I can like him, will you? Not fresh or wise or anything—"

Her eyes flew open abruptly. Someone had touched her to attract her attention. She gave a single hopeful glance; then her hopes were indefinitely postponed. She reached out mechanically, took the ticket, tore it across, and returned half of it, keeping the rest herself. The dance was on.

An hour and a half went by. Over each strange shoulder Faith's eyes busily, expectantly roved the room. Looking for a very small thing, looking for a small white flower, as out of place there as a bird or a ray of sunlight. For the fast, "hot" pieces they used magenta lights; for the slow "sweet" ones blue and green lights mixed, causing a sort of dreamy twilight to fill the ballroom as though it were a grotto or undersea cavern. Incidentally, also causing green dresses to appear blue, and vice versa.

She brushed by Trixie, the latter damsel favoring her with grimaces of spiritual anguish to indicate that her partner was a trial to her. Trixie seemed to have a strange attraction for the meek, the halt, and the aged, likewise those who were in need of special instruction, which consisted in leading them to a far corner of the room and endlessly repeating, "One, two, three! Now just watch my feet. One, two, three. That's it!" This was highly lucrative but pretty much of a strain on Trixie. As they swayed close to one another, Faith found time to murmur anxiously:

"See anybody?"

"Not yet," Trixie assured her. "Cheer up, sugar," she added hearteningly. "Not you," she informed her partner coldly. "I was speaking to my friend."

The lights went up, then down again. Half-past eleven and no sign of him. Time seemed to drag so tonight. She had taken these same gliding steps a thousand times before, or maybe a million. Dancing was supposed to be fun. But not when you earn your living at it. Sometimes she wished she would never have to listen to another saxophone again as long as she lived. She also found herself praying that she was invisible, so that no one would come near her for at least half an hour. But someone did almost at once. And stood there grinning foolishly and holding out his ticket.

"What's the joke?" she inquired frostily, as she took it and tore it in two.

“These darned lights,” he said. “They blur everything up. What color dress is that you’re wearing?” The greenish-blue lights had gone on just before he came over to her, drowning out the shade of her dress.

Her eyes had flown automatically to his lapel but it was barren; there was nothing there. She felt like saying “Oh, go away!” What was he to her, anyway? Still, it was quite a coincidence, his asking her about her dress like that. Maybe he had lost the flower, or forgotten to buy one.

So she decided to play safe and not reveal herself until she had found out a little something about him.

“Blue,” she lied. And then, “What made you ask that?”

“Just curiosity,” he answered.

“Is there—er—any particular color you were looking for?” she wanted to know.

“Originally, yes,” he said smoothly, “but I changed my mind as soon as I saw you.” So he was as fickle as all that, was he? Well, she was glad she’d found out in time. He wasn’t the type for her, all right. He just didn’t click somehow, that was all. But the chief thing was to get away from him before the lights went up again and revealed her in her green dress. Otherwise she was stuck for the night.

Then, at the crucial moment, assistance came to her. She happened to look over his shoulder and catch Trixie’s eye and she read unmistakably in it that Trixie had a message for her.

The two couples drew closer, the men still imagining they were leading and not realizing that their footsteps were being guided for them. When they had come up to each other, Trixie nodded vigorously.

“Got him for you,” she breathed huskily. “Right here!” All Faith could see was the back of his head and the fairly broad shoulders that cut Trixie off below the chin. She had to take Trixie’s word for it about the flower part of it. “Meet me down at the refreshment-stand as soon as this is over,” Trixie instructed her in clear ringing tones, and was wafted

away. The muscular gentleman stationed in the middle of the floor for the purpose of preserving order and decorum frowned unfavorably upon her as she went by.

"How many more times, Red," he remarked ungrammatically, "have I gotta tell you to quit talkin' on the boss's time?"

"You've got about a dozen to go," Trixie informed him insouciantly. "After that maybe I'll listen to you. And if you don't mind, it's Miss Red to you."

The music stopped at last. Faith had counted each tinny note that came out of the saxophone and thought it would never end, but now the lights went up and she saw Trixie and the man waiting for her down at the end of the room. However, there was an obstacle to be overcome before she could get over to them.

Her present partner stared down at her figure in surprise.

"Why," he stammered, "why, that's a green dress you're wearing! I didn't notice—"

"Yes, it is," Faith interrupted hastily, beginning to back away from him, "but not nearly as green as the one my friend is wearing. See her down there? Much better dancer than I am. Wait, I'll send her over to you." Then she walked away and left him standing there with his mouth open as though he had wanted to say something and hadn't had time.

As she walked toward them, doing her best to be casual about it, all she had eyes for was a little dot of white in the distance; a carnation that had already shed several of its petals, nestling against the coat of the very tall, very likable young man standing beside Trixie. When Faith came up to them Trixie said: "Look what I've got for you," and with a gesture somewhat like that of a referee: "Now remember, Marquis of Queensberry rules and no hitting in the clinches. Anything else I can do for you? Just say the word."

Faith glanced back over her shoulder. “Him,” she said unfeelingly. “He’s sort of sticky and might come around again.”

Trixie appeared to understand perfectly what was expected of her. “A pleasure,” she announced, and started over toward him, a young lady attired so unmistakably in green that even the color-blind would have had to take cognizance of it.

Faith’s new-found hero smiled at her, and she smiled back at him, bashfully. “I guess it’s you,” she breathed almost inaudibly.

“It isn’t my brother,” he answered. “Well, shall we dance?” he went on.

“Must we?” she smiled.

So they didn’t dance. Each time the music sounded, she took another ticket from him and tore it up in full view of the manager. “Anyway, it saves the wax floor,” she laughed. They sat together in one of the little stalls provided with tables that overlooked Broadway, a wax-paper cup of untasted orangeade standing in front of each of them.

“I knew you’d be like this,” she said softly after a while. “Something told me. You see, I play hunches, and I’ve never yet been wrong.”

He seemed glad to hear her say that and yet at the same time more than a little surprised.

“You mean before you even laid eyes on me you knew what I was going to be like?”

“Why, yes,” she said. “I could tell by your voice.”

“My voice?” He seemed completely taken back.

“Over the telephone, silly,” she explained. “How else?”

He was about to say something to that, but just then the young man with the slide trombone stood up in his seat and emitted noises that drowned out everything else.

Faith was more used to these sudden blasts of melody, if they could be called that, than he was.

“Funny place, isn’t it,” she laughed, “to sit and try to carry on a conversation with any one?”

“Then let’s go to some other place, shall we?” he suggested eagerly. “Someplace where we can be by ourselves and really talk to one another.”

This was not the first time anyone had suggested her going out with him. It was the first time, however, that she would go. This was different, this was all right. It had to be, or there wasn’t any sun anywhere, there weren’t any blue skies, there wasn’t any love, there wasn’t anything good and decent in the whole wide world. She knew she couldn’t be wrong; there was just one man who would and could love her the way she wanted to be loved—and this was the man. She’d waited a long time but he’d come. She was perfectly willing to go with him wherever he suggested.

“You’ll have to buy two dollars’ worth of tickets if you want to take me out before the session’s over,” she said. She blushed while she said it. He missed seeing that; he missed seeing a miracle on Broadway—the blush of a taxi-dancer. She blushed because—well, everyone knew what it meant when a customer took one of the hostesses out. Only this time they were wrong; it didn’t mean that. Let them think what they wanted to. She knew better.

“I won’t be a minute,” she said, and went to get her hat and coat. She found Trixie recuperating in the alcove, one leg crossed high above the other, mournfully rubbing her instep.

“Did the stretcher-bearers get here yet?” Trixie wanted to know. “I’m going to try arnica first, and if that doesn’t work, Christian Science. Well, how are you two getting along?” was the next thing she asked, getting up and ludicrously pretending to limp toward the mirror.

“I’m going out with him,” Faith said, starry-eyed.

Trixie, that peerless judge of the heart’s emotion, darted a swift keen glance at her.

“So you’ve fallen at last!” She acted sort of worried, Faith thought. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” she went on. “Listen, kid. I’m your friend. I’m the only one here that knows for a fact what the others don’t want to believe about you—that you’re straight, not like the rest of us. The only reason you’ve gotten away with it is that it never entered the heads of all the guys that hang around here that there could be such an animal as a virgin dancing in a dime-mill; otherwise you would have taken the count long ago. Many a time, without you knowing it, I’ve steered the manager himself away from you by telling him that you were the private property of a guy that went around carrying two guns and wouldn’t think anything of turning this place into a shooting-gallery if anyone made a pass at you. Don’t ask me why, or what I get out of it. Maybe I’m not so tough underneath. Maybe I keep thinking how I was just like you five or six years ago, and I don’t want the same thing to happen to you that did to me.” She bent her fingers and looked down at her five bright red nails. When she raised her eyes, they were all wet and shiny.

“Honey,” she went on quietly, “there’s nothing so lovely in the whole wide world as an on-the-level kid. Stay that way. I don’t know why, but just stay that way! Maybe it makes the tough grind a little easier for me to know you’re like you are.”

“But I am staying that way,” protested Faith. “Don’t you see? He’s not like the others. I know. I know! For months he’s been talking to me on the telephone and never said anything he shouldn’t, never tried to see me, never tried to suggest anything out of the way. He’s the one, the one I’ve been waiting for, I tell you! I couldn’t pass this by. It would never come again.” She choked. “I’m sick of dancing night after night, sick of being pawed and kneed, sick of running the gauntlet downstairs at the door to get home alone each night. He’s so sweet! Oh, I knew he was waiting for me

someplace or other along the way. It all seems too good to be true."

"That's the trouble; it probably is," said Trixie dismally. She laughed but without much enjoyment. Her cynicism, briefly discarded, had returned. "Wet your finger like this and run it down the side of his face; if it's rough and scratchy—and if he talks way down deep in his throat and, and if he's got on a collar and tie and big flat shoes—go home alone. I wouldn't trust anything in pants as far as I could throw that big bass drum out there!"

"They aren't all on the make," protested Faith impatiently. "They aren't all like that—"

"No," agreed Trixie, "but those that aren't haven't been born yet or they're dead already. So you won't listen to me?"

"No, I won't listen, because for once you're wrong."

"Then my advice to you," murmured Trixie, "is to keep your fingers crossed and don't walk under ladders!" And she gripped Faith's arm for a moment, then seeing it was useless, dropped the subject. "Incidentally, who do you think is waiting around outside to take me home? That dark horse you steered me into tonight. Remember him?"

"Is he pretty awful?" Faith asked vaguely. She hardly remembered him any more by now. Just someone who had asked her what color her dress was and hadn't worn a flower in his coat.

"Awful or not," promised Trixie vengefully, "he's going to be taken for a sleigh-ride he'll never forget. I'm going to lead him to that chop suey joint that has a fire-escape right outside the ladies' room—know the one I mean? I'm going to eat my fill of fried noodles, and then when he thinks it's about time to get some return on his investment, I'm going to leave him for a minute and go powder my nose. Long after I'm home asleep in my little beddsie-weddsie, he'll still be sitting there waiting for me to come out."

Faith laughed as she turned to go.

“One of these times one of them is going to come around here the night after and give you a black eye.”

“None of ’em has yet,” Trixie called after her. “They wouldn’t want anyone to know what a fool I made out of them.” But as the curtains fell back in place and Faith was gone, her face sobered up again. She stared moodily into the glass. It won’t work out, she thought. It never has since Broadway stopped being a cow-path, and it won’t tonight. I know what’s going to happen just as though I was there in her place. That kid’s in for a tough time of it tonight. And tomorrow at this time, just another busted heart—just another little tramp like the rest of us, wiggling at a dime a throw. She shook her fist at the saxophone blaring its summons outside. “Coming, damn you, coming!” she growled.

Faith went up to where the man stood waiting with that carnation in his lapel and gave him a happy smile and said: “I’m ready.” Strangely enough she wasn’t tired any more, even though she’d danced miles already tonight. He offered her his arm, the way a sweetheart should, a lover should, and side by side they went down the stairs. He and Faith—Faith of the appropriate name, who had always believed a night like this would come, when there would be someone waiting to take her home, someone special, someone she could look up to and respect, admire and adore. Oh, this was the way to go home all right! The snakes were all coiled up at the door as usual, but tonight she passed through them unscathed, unafraid, head in air. No winks, no leers tonight, no wise remarks, no clutching hands to buck, no one to follow her and try to find out where she lived. She could feel their stares following her as she walked along beside him, could almost but not quite catch what they were saying to one another in whispered undertones.

Maybe it would have been better if she had heard, but she didn't know that.

She wouldn't have listened anyway, any more than she had to Trixie.

They walked a block or two along glaring midnight Broadway; it was Broadway's "noon" hour, and instead of one sun there were hundreds to light their way. She gave him another confident smile.

"Everything seems so different tonight. I almost like the lights and crowd—walking through them with you. Do you understand that?"

He didn't seem to. "Shall we hop a taxi?" he said.

"What! And have you throw away your good money? I should say not!" He gave her a peculiar look as though he couldn't believe his ears. "Because I know how it is," she assured him. "I have to work hard enough for my money. Why should we be extravagant? If I like anybody, I like them for themselves and not just for how much they can spend. Chase."

"Chase?" he said blankly.

"Well, that's your name, isn't it? You said it was over the phone. That was the name you gave me when you sent your wash that time."

"Oh—er—yeah," he said lamely. "I forgot for a minute. I wondered how you knew. Yeah, when I sent my wash, that's right." And he eased his neck around inside his collar. They passed one of the glaring all-night Broadway delicatessen-restaurants. It seemed to give him an inspiration. "As long as you want to be economical," he suggested, "suppose I stop in and get some sandwiches and ginger ale and we take 'em around to your room and have a little party by ourselves. We can get better acquainted that way."

She halted momentarily and her eyes sought his. "You're sure you haven't any wrong impression about me?" she asked doubtfully. Trixie's warning returned to her. He was a man after all—and she worked in a dance-hall.

“You trust me, don’t you?” was all he said. “You don’t think I—” Had Trixie been present she would have sighed impatiently and asked her friend: “What did you expect him to say, you little fool? They all say that. It doesn’t cost them anything. You didn’t think he’d come out openly and say, sure, I’m on the make, did you?” But Trixie wasn’t there; Faith was on her own now.

“You won’t let me down,” she said. It wasn’t a statement; it was a plea. “All right, go ahead; I’ll wait here for you. And never mind the ginger ale. I’ll make us some coffee to go with the sandwiches. I make very good coffee; wait’ll you see!” she said happily. She stood there by the curb while he went in, and she tapped her toe and hummed a little song, she felt so swell. There were a million stars hanging low over Broadway while she waited there for her love. “What did you do, buy out the store?” she laughed when he came back to her burdened with brown-paper parcels, and insisted on sharing them with him.

A brownstone house split up into furnished rooms way over west on one of the Fifties. She struggled with her latch-key and they went in. A flight of stairs painted white, a dim little apricot bulb at each landing, a door on the top floor front.

“Don’t mind the way it looks,” she said, snapping on the light. “Here, we’ll leave the door open like this.”

“Nah,” he said tersely. “Too much of a draft.” And took a step back to close it.

“But that wouldn’t look good,” she said unsuspectingly. “I don’t want to get in any trouble here—”

Almost at once, as though summoned by her remark, a hard-faced, middle-aged woman appeared in the open doorway without any warning sound of footsteps whatever. “Could I see you a minute, Miss Moore?” she remarked, staring vacantly over their heads.

“No, it’s me you wanna see,” the man said, and he stepped out into the hall and partly closed the door after

him. “Here, forget it,” he murmured and slipped something into her hand. “You know how it is. The kid works late and don’t get much chance to talk to her friends.”

“Oh, I know how it is,” agreed the landlady with a shrug. “She can talk to her heart’s content—only keep the door closed and don’t kick up any row. I—er—knew this was coming sooner or later; she’s held out longer than I gave her credit for. Matter of fact,” she confessed, carefully tucking what he’d given her into the recesses of her wrapper, “I’ve had a bet on for quite a while with one of the other tenants that she’d give in.” She chuckled. “I stand to collect ten dollars on you two tonight.”

He nudged her in the ribs with typical Broadway camaraderie. “It’s in the bag,” he said behind the back of his hand. Her laughter went trailing down the hallway. He turned and went back into the lighted room. Faith was emptying the contents of the paper bags onto two rather chipped plates.

“Landlady says it’s gotta stay closed,” he told her, and fitted the door tightly into place behind him. The triangle of yellow light that had splashed out into the hall narrowed, disappeared, leaving only darkness. A key turned slyly in the lock. It couldn’t have been heard unless one’s ear was up against the keyhole.

“Only trouble with these little chinkie cups without handles,” Trixie was saying, “is you’re liable to swallow one whole if you’re not careful.” She eyed hers comically, then put it down. “Whew! Is there chow mein coming out of my ears? If there isn’t, there should be, I’m up to here.” He laughed a little. “You’re sort of a bashful guy, aren’t you?” she went on. “Didn’t know they came like that any more.”

“Am I?” he said. “I thought you knew that by now.” He stared down at the tablecloth. “You know,” he said abruptly,

“you’re not exactly a shrinking violet by any means. I don’t mean I expected you to bring along your Bible or anything —”

“Don’t have to,” she flipped. “I know the whole thing by heart. Read a chapter every night in a different hotel room.”

To her surprise he scowled at that. “Quit talking that way,” he ordered almost roughly. “Somebody’s going to come along some day and take you at your word.”

“Am I to infer that you’re not going to?” she wanted to know. She loved to bait them even when she knew she was going to give them the slip.

But he didn’t seem to have much of a sense of humor.

“What do you think?” he asked her. “Have I been acting phoney with you up to now?”

“No,” she admitted, “but you can’t always go by that. Still waters run deep, you know.”

He flung his napkin down irritably and signaled for the check. Trixie collected her things and prepared to put her disappearing act into execution. “I’ll be right with you,” she said, “just go back there a minute and powder my nose—”

“Don’t bother making yourself beautiful,” he said suddenly. “Not for me, anyway. We’re not going any place together. I’ll just take you downstairs and put you in a taxi at the door—”

“What is this?” she cried in amazement. “Am I getting the bum’s rush?”

“That’s what I want to know,” he told her. “We got our wires crossed, I guess, that’s all. No offense, but you’re not my type at all. You had me fooled completely until I met you tonight. You weren’t this way at all, all these months over the wire. I had you figured entirely different. So suppose we just call all bets off and chalk it up to experience.” The waiter brought his change and he pocketed it. “Coming?” he said without even looking at her.

But Trixie had suddenly stopped kidding. She was a little white under her rouge and staring at him with unblinking intensity.

"Let's get this straight," she said in a hoarse voice. "You—you had a blind date on the floor of that shimmy-palace tonight, with—with a girl in a green dress. Am I right?"

"Why the post mortem? You know that as well as I do."

She was almost incapable of speech. She pointed at the lapel of his jacket.

"Flower," she said incoherent1y. "You were supposed to —"

"I did have one," he said shortly. "Must have dropped it coming up the stairs. I'm not used to wearing them anyway. What's the difference? I ran into you, didn't I—for all the good it did?"

She shaded her eyes with one hand for a minute. Faith flashed through her mind. My God! she thought. My God! That kid went off with the wrong—. She whipped her hand across the table and seized his wrist convulsively.

"Will you do something for me?" she panted.

"I thought so," he said wearily. "It's right in character." And reached for his inside pocket. "How much—Your little brother's sick of course and has to have an operation."

There was no time to explain. She cleared the misunderstanding out of the way by slapping his hand aside impatiently. The gesture would have been funny at any other time but this.

"No; you don't get me! All I'm asking you to do is—sit tight, will you for a minute, until I come back. Please don't leave this table—please!" She jumped up and ran toward the back instead of the main entrance. She knew that if he saw her leave, go out into the street, he'd never stay there and wait; he wasn't interested enough in her for that. He wouldn't believe she was coming back and he'd get up and go—and she'd never be able to find him again. There was no time to tell him where she was going and what she was

trying to do—and even if there had been, he wouldn't have believed her, so foul was the impression he had of her by now. She fled toward the dressing-room at the back, wailing over her shoulder: "Wait for me, now! Wait for me!"

If only she could tip off Faith in time, let her know that she was with the wrong man! She remembered him vaguely now; she had danced with him first herself. Too good-looking to be trustworthy, and just the type who would be able to put one over on a kid like that. And no good, he had n.g. written all over him for those who could read. That was why she'd put up such a beef about it in the dressing-room when Faith had told her she was going with him. She'd known instinctively but hadn't known how to get it across to Faith.

The good old fire-escape window was wide open, the way it always was, to give a little circulation of air to the stuffy place. She climbed through it, the way she had so very many times before—but for a different reason this time. The colored woman in attendance looked up from her newspaper. She knew Trixie by sight and wasn't at all concerned.

"Whut, again?" she drawled. "Thass the third time this week for you, ain't it? Happy landing!" she waved.

"Leave it open. I'm coming back in again in a little while, I hope," Trixie explained. She started down the side of the building, dropped lightly to her feet in a narrow cement alley below, skirted a couple of garbage cans, and came out on Broadway looking fresh as a daisy. "Taxi!" she shouted and dived in head first. "West Fifty-first, hurry up!"

"What did you close the door for?" Faith rebuked mildly. The man didn't answer but the smile he gave her spoke for itself. Something about that smile chilled her a little; the first premonition of something ominous struck at her, but

she wouldn’t admit it even to herself. She was just imagining things. She mustn’t begin finding fault this early in the game. When they got to know one another better, little things like this wouldn’t alarm her; she’d understand him.

She turned to prepare the sandwiches. The two arms that dropped over her shoulders and coiled around her like snakes a moment later were anything but imaginary. Their grip hampered her breath, and sudden stark fright dissipated what was left of it. She tried not to lose her head.

“Don’t!” she said, and even tried to force a friendly laugh. “It’s late—I want to get going on these sandwiches.”

“You and your sandwiches!” he muttered thickly close to her ear. Then in a louder voice, “I ain’t in the sandwich mood. Skip it.” His lips were like hot pincers on the cool back of her neck, forcing her head down. Kisses that almost bit, they were so fervent. Panic descended like a blinding curtain; she struggled and writhed in such sheer animal terror for a moment that he released her without meaning to. She whirled and faced him, her face gone white. What was he trying to do, make something furtive, shameful, out of this love she had so freely given him? He mustn’t; she wouldn’t let him; she hadn’t given it for that; it wasn’t that kind of love! The suddenness of the transformation he had undergone shocked her to the marrow.

She had entered this room a few minutes ago with a sweetheart, a sweetheart whose image she had built up in her heart over a period of months; now she suddenly, hideously, found herself behind a closed door with a gorilla. The image began to rock, to sway. There was still time to save it, the misunderstanding could still be cleared up, but if once it toppled, shattered, then she had nothing left.

She struggled frantically to preserve it, prop it up. She tried to beat the barrier that he was building between them like a brick wall, that rose until it all but hid him from her.

“You don’t want me to think you’re like all of them, do you? You—you shouldn’t act like that,” she panted. “I wouldn’t have let you come up here with me. Don’t you remember, on the street I asked you not to misunder—”

He wouldn’t let her finish. “What are you trying to do, hold out? Where are your wings, sister, and where’s your halo? Two nickels rents you where you work, and now you’re trying to act hard-to-get!” She shrank back; her eyes were so big they suddenly seemed to cover her whole face. He took a step after her, caught her by the wrist. “Who d’ya think you’re kidding?” he said brutally. “Come over here!” She saw his other hand go back, groping for the light switch.

“No!” she pleaded agonizedly. “No! Don’t let it turn out like this!” But the plea was no longer to him; it was to the vault high above the two of them. “I’ve waited so long for you; you’ve been with me night and day—”

“And in the morning you’ll wonder who the hell I was and what the hell I looked like!”

He said that!

He didn’t hear the crash within her, as the image crumbled to dust and left her—nothing. She was so limp all at once, so like a rag, that his arms dropped as though she had slapped him. His ardor cooled; there was something here he couldn’t understand; it chilled him. He reached for his hat, dented it, and slapped it on. He was going. There were too many other fish in the sea. He chucked her briefly under the chin.

“You’re a lovely kid and all that—but what a disposition!”

She gave a moan so low it could scarcely be heard. She staggered to retain her balance.

“No high-jinks,” he warned her. “I’ve got the landlady eating out of my hand—” He watched her, waiting for the scream that he felt sure was coming. He was going to clip her one across the mouth and shut her up. It had worked

lots of times before. But no scream came. She just stood there shivering.

"All right, all right," he grunted sourly. "If you didn't learn the facts of life at that place where you work, better buy yourself a book and study up on 'em." The real horror of the situation lay in that. She couldn't make him understand what he was doing to her, turning everything sordid, killing everything in her. There was no heart there for her to touch no matter how hard she tried; nothing there for her to appeal to. They didn't speak the same language at all.

"Get out!" she said hoarsely. The shivering had become almost epilepsy. "Get out, I say, get out!"

He saluted her grimly by flicking his index finger at his temple. The door closed after him. A moment later the empty sandwich-plate shattered against it. Then the other one. She was beside herself. She kept saying "Get out!" over and over long after he was gone. Then the sobs came, dry sobs like hiccoughs, like the rustling of dead leaves on a windy day. They brought no relief; they stopped again.

She was still dressed in the tawdry satin thing she wore at work, that she'd come home in tonight. She bent close to the glass, made a horrid scar with lipstick over her mouth as though she was going out again. She was, but not by the door, not to dance any more. She threw up the window as wide as it would go, looked out, looked down on Fifty-first Street four stories below. Everything was dark, the sky was dark, the street was dark, the world was dark, her soul was dark. What was that she had said to herself ? No sun anywhere, no blue skies, no love, nothing good and decent anywhere in the world—if this went wrong. Well, it had.

She slipped sidewise across the sill, brought her legs over, took her hand off the window-sash above her head. She felt like a little girl dabbling her feet in cool water on a very hot day. That cool water was eternity; when she slipped into it altogether, it would refresh her, wash her clean.

A piercing scream welled up from the dark street. Someone had seen her, sitting on a fourth-floor window-ledge in a dance frock at four in the morning.

“Faith! Fa-a-aith!” It was like a nail-head scratching glass. She looked down. A cab was parked at the door of the house and Trixie was standing there directly under her. You could hear everything she said—how strange! “No—wait, wait! Don’t jump! Just give me a minute; let me tell you some—”

Faith only shook her head and smiled down at her. The light coming from the window behind her showed the smile. She’ll go in, try to run up the stairs, thought Faith; then I’ll do it before she gets up here.

But Trixie craftily stayed where she was, directly under her, and cleverly changed her plea. “Don’t! You’ll hit me; you’ll kill me! Don’t. You’ll fall on top of me!”

“Then get out of the way!” warned Faith. Arms suddenly whipped around her from in back, around her slim waist, around her throat, pulled her back into the room. The door stood open. The landlady and a male tenant held her between them, slamming down the window.

“Now you quit carrying on, young lady, or I’ll call the police!” warned the landlady tersely.

“Why couldn’t you mind your own business?” Faith sobbed. Trixie came hurtling in, collapsed into a chair as though it was she who had just been rescued.

“Thank God you two heard me!” she panted. “I was afraid to budge away from there.” And then to Faith, ferociously: “What’s the idea? You trying to frighten the wits out of everyone?” She thumbed the other two to the door. “She’ll be all right. Just let me talk to her. I’ve come to take her some place.” And when they had gone: “Now, honey, listen to me very closely and pay attention to what I say.”

It wasn’t long after that the two passed the other pair still lingering at the front door to talk over what had happened. The taxi Trixie had come in was still waiting there. Trixie

ushered Faith into it; the latter was docile now but still acted as though she were sleep-walking.

"Where you going with her?" whispered the landlady curiously.

"You won't believe me," answered Trixie, "but I'm taking her to a chop-suey joint."

The landlady nearly fell over. "These dance-hall girls!" she bleated. "Well, see that she stays there; she can't stay in my house any more."

"She won't have to!" snapped Trixie, banging the cab door. "She'll probably have a little flat of her own in Flatbush before the week's out and be darning her husband's socks a mile a minute! Let that hold you, poison-face!"

They walked into the Chinese restaurant a few minutes later, a very frightened girl with her arm around a very dazed one. Trixie was the frightened one. Then she saw him still there at the table and she wasn't frightened any more. He was a gentleman to the end; he'd intended ditching as soon as they left, but he'd had the decency not to leave without her, was still waiting there for her. So many things could have gone wrong; one of the waiters could have tipped him off that she, Trixie, always left like that and never came back. But he hadn't asked and he hadn't been told, so he was still there. God had smiled down on a little taxi-dancer tonight.

"Go over there, darling," she urged tenderly. "See him? That's him. Go over there—you've got a little back happiness coming to you; go over there and collect."

"But what'll I say?" whispered Faith.

"You don't have to say anything; just look at him, and he'll look at you—and you'll both know. They tell me," Trixie added wistfully, "that love is like that. They tell me that love is—pretty swell. I wouldn't know personally." She gave Faith a little push forward and then she turned and walked slowly out to Broadway again—alone.

DEAD ON HER FEET

“And another thing I’ve got against these non-stop shindigs,” orated the chief to his slightly bored listeners, “is they let minors get in ’em and dance for days until they wind up in a hospital with the D.T.’s, when the whole thing’s been fixed ahead of time and they haven’t got a chance of copping the prize anyway. Here’s a Missus Mollie McGuire been calling up every hour on the half-hour all day long, and bawling the eardrums off me because her daughter Toodles ain’t been home in over a week and she wants this guy Pasternack arrested. So you go over there and tell Joe Pasternack I’ll give him until tomorrow morning to fold up his contest and send his entries home. And tell him for me he can shove all his big and little silver loving-cups—”

For the first time his audience looked interested, even expectant, as they waited to hear what it was Mr. P. could do with his loving-cups, hoping for the best.

“—back in their packing-cases,” concluded the chief chastely, if somewhat disappointingly. “He ain’t going to need ’em any more. He has promoted his last marathon in this neck of the woods.”

There was a pause while nobody stirred. “Well, what are you all standing there looking at me for?” demanded the chief testily. “You, Donnelly, you’re nearest the door. Get going.”

Donnelly gave him an injured look. “Me, Chief? Why, I’ve got a red-hot lead on that payroll thing you were so hipped

about. If I don’t keep after it it’ll cool off on me.”

“All right, then you, Stevens!”

“Why, I’m due in Yonkers right now,” protested Stevens virtuously.

“Machine-gun Rosie has been seen around again and I want to have a little talk with her—”

“That leaves you, Doyle,” snapped the merciless chief.

“Gee, Chief,” whined Doyle plaintively, “gimme a break, can’t you? My wife is expecting—” Very much under his breath ho added: “—me home early tonight.”

“Congratulations,” scowled the chief, who had missed hearing the last part of it. He glowered at them. “I get it!” he roared. “It’s below your dignity, ain’t it! It’s too petty-larceny for you! Anything less than the St. Valentine’s Day massacre ain’t worth going out after, is that it? You figure it’s a detail for a bluecoat, don’t you?” His open palm hit the desk-top with a sound like a firecracker going off. Purple became the dominant color of his complexion. “I’ll put you all back where you started, watching pickpockets in the subway! I’ll take some of the high-falutinness out of you! I’ll —I’ll—” The only surprising thing about it was that foam did not appear at his mouth.

It may have been that the chiefs bark was worse than his bite. At any rate no great amount of apprehension was shown by the culprits before him. One of them cleared his throat inoffensively. “By the way, Chief, I understand that rookie, Smith, has been swiping bananas from Tony on the comer again, and getting the squad a bad name after you told him to pay for them.”

The chief took pause and considered this point.

The others seemed to get the idea at once. “They tell me he darned near wrecked a Chinese laundry because the Chinks tried to pass him somebody else’s shirts. You could hear the screeching for miles.” Doyle put the artistic finishing touch. “I overheard him say he wouldn’t be seen dead wearing the kind of socks you do. He was asking me

did I think you had lost an election bet or just didn't know any better."

The chief had become dangerously quiet all at once. A faint drumming sound from somewhere on the desk told what he was doing with his fingers. "Oh, he did, did he?" he remarked, very slowly and very ominously.

At this most unfortunate of all possible moments the door blew open and in breezed the maligned one in person. He looked very tired and at the same time enthusiastic, if the combination can be imagined. Red rimmed his eyes, blue shadowed his jaws, but he had a triumphant look on his face, the look of a man who has done his job well and expects a kind word. "Well, Chief," he burst out, "it's over! I got both of'em. Just brought 'em in. They're in the back room right now—"

An oppressive silence greeted him. Frost seemed to be in the air. He blinked and glanced at his three pals for enlightenment.

The silence didn't last long, however. The chief cleared his throat. "Hrrrmph. Zat so?" he said with deceptive mildness. "Well now, Smitty, as long as your engine's warm and you're hitting on all six, just run over to Joe Pasternack's marathon dance and put the skids under it. It's been going on in that old armory on the west side—"

Smitty's face had become a picture of despair. He glanced mutely at the clock on the wall. The clock said four—a.m., not p.m. The chief, not being a naturally hard-hearted man, took time off to glance down at his own socks, as if to steel himself for this bit of cruelty. It seemed to work beautifully. "An election bet!" he muttered cryptically to himself, and came up redder than ever.

"Gee, Chief," pleaded the rookie, "I haven't even had time to shave since yesterday morning." In the background unseen nudgings and silent strangulation were rampant.

"You ain't taking part in it, you're putting the lid on it," the chief reminded him morosely. "First you buy your way in

just like anyone else and size it up good and plenty, see if there's anything against it on moral grounds. Then you dig out one Toodles McGuire from under, and don't let her stall you she's of age either. Her old lady says she's sixteen and she ought to know. Smack her and send her home. You seal everything up tight and tell Pasternack and whoever else is backing this thing with him it's all off. And don't go 'way. You stay with him and make sure he refunds any money that's coming to anybody and shuts up shop good and proper. If he tries to squawk about there ain't no ordinance against marathons, just lemme know. We can find an ordinance against anything if we go back far enough in the books—"

Smitty shifted his hat from northeast to southwest and started reluctantly toward the great outdoors once more. "Anything screwy like this that comes up, I'm always It," he was heard to mutter rebelliously. "Nice job, shooing a dancing contest. I'll probably get bombarded with powder-puffs—"

The chief reached suddenly for the heavy brass inkwell on his desk, whether to sign some report or to let Smitty have it, Smitty didn't wait to find out. He ducked hurriedly out the door.

"Ah, me," sighed the chief profoundly, "what a bunch of crumbs. Why didn't I listen to me old man and join the fire department instead!"

Young Mr. Smith, muttering bad language all the way, had himself driven over to the unused armory where the peculiar enterprise was taking place. "Sixty cents," said the taxi-driver.

Smitty took out a little pocket account-book and wrote down Taxi-fare—$1.20. "Send me out after nothing at four in the morning, will he!" he commented. After which he felt a lot better.

There was a box-office outside the entrance but now it was dark and untenanted. Smitty pushed through the

unlocked doors and found a combination porter and doorman, a gentleman of color, seated on the inside, who gave him a stub of pink pasteboard in exchange for fifty-five cents, then promptly took the stub back again and tore it in half. “Boy,” he remarked affably, “you is either up pow’ful early or up awful late.”

“I just is plain up,” remarked Smitty, and looked around him.

It was an hour before daylight and there were a dozen people left in the armory, which was built to hold two thousand. Six of them were dancing, but you wouldn’t have known it by looking at them. It had been going on nine days. There was no one watching them any more. The last of the paid admissions had gone home hours ago, even the drunks and the Park Avenue stay-outs. All the big snow-white arc lights hanging from the rafters had been put out, except one in the middle, to save expenses. Pasternack wasn’t in this for his health. The one remaining light, spitting and sizzling way up overhead, and sending down violet and white rays that you could see with the naked eye, made everything look ghostly, unreal. A phonograph fitted with an amplifier was grinding away at one end of the big hall, tearing a dance-tune to pieces, giving it the beating of its life. Each time the needle got to the end of the record it was swept back to the beginning by a sort of stencil fitted over the turn-table.

Six scarecrows, three men and three girls, clung ludicrously together in pairs out in the middle of the floor. They were not dancing and they were not walking, they were tottering by now, barely moving enough to keep from standing still. Each of the men bore a number on his back. 3, 8, and 14 the numbers were. They were the “lucky” couples who had outlasted all the others, the scores who had started with them at the bang of a gun a week and two days ago. There wasn’t even a coat or vest left among the three men—or a necktie. Two of them had replaced their

shoes with carpet-slippers to ease their aching feet. The third had on a pair of canvas sneakers.

One of the girls had a wet handkerchief plastered across her forehead. Another had changed into a chorus-girl's practice outfit—shorts and a blouse. The third was a slip of a thing, a mere child, her head hanging limply down over her partner's shoulder, her eyes glazed with exhaustion.

Smitty watched her for a moment. There wasn't a curve in her whole body. If there was anyone here under age, it was she. She must be Toodles McGuire, killing herself for a plated loving-cup, a line in the newspapers, a contract to dance in some cheap honky-tonk, and a thousand dollars that she wasn't going to get anyway—according to the chief. He was probably right, reflected Smitty. There wasn't a thousand dollars in the whole set-up, much less three prizes on a sliding scale. Pasternack would probably pocket whatever profits there were and blow, letting the fame-struck suckers whistle. Cor-ner-lizards and dance-hall belles like these couldn't even scrape together enough to bring suit. Now was as good a time as any to stop the lousy racket.

Smitty sauntered over to the bleachers where four of the remaining six the armory housed just then were seated and sprawled in various attitudes. He looked them over. One was an aged crone who acted as matron to the female participants during the brief five-minute rest-periods that came every half-hour. She had come out of her retirement for the time being, a towel of dubious cleanliness slung over her arm, and was absorbed in the working-out of a crossword puzzle, mumbling to herself all the while. She had climbed halfway up the reviewing stand to secure privacy for her occupation.

Two or three rows below her lounged a greasy-looking counterman from some one-arm lunchroom, guarding a tray that held a covered tin pail of steaming coffee and a

stack of wax-paper cups. One of the rest periods was evidently approaching and he was ready to cash in on it.

The third spectator was a girl in a dance dress, her face twisted with pain. Judging by her unkempt appearance and the scornful bitter look in her eyes as she watched the remaining dancers, she had only just recently disqualified herself. She had one stockingless foot up before her and was rubbing the swollen instep with alcohol and cursing softly under her breath.

The fourth and last of the onlookers (the fifth being the darky at the door) was too busy with his arithmetic even to look up when Smitty parked before him. He was in his shirt-sleeves and wore blue elastic armbands and a green celluloid eye-shade. A soggy-looking stogie protruded from his mouth. A watch, a megaphone, a whistle, and a blank-cartridge pistol lay beside him on the bench. He appeared to be computing the day's receipts in a pocket notebook, making them up out of his head as he went along. "Get out of my light," he remarked ungraciously as Smitty's shadow fell athwart him.

"You Pasternack?" Smitty wanted to know, not moving an inch. "Naw, he's in his office taking a nap."

"Well, get him out here, I've got news for him."

"He don't wanna hear it," said the pleasant party on the bench. Smitty turned over his lapel, then let it curl back again. "Oh, the lor," commented the auditor, and two tens left the day's receipts and were left high and dry in Smitty's right hand. "Buy yourself a drop of schnapps," he said without even looking up. "Stop in and ask for me tomorrow when there's more in the kitty—"

Smitty plucked the nearest armband, stetched it out until it would have gone around a piano, then let it snap back again. The business manager let out a yip. Smitty's palm with the two sawbucks came up flat against his face, clamped itself there by the chin and bridge of the nose, and executed a rotary motion, grinding them in. "Wrong guy,"

he said and followed the financial wizard into the sanctum where Pasternack lay in repose, mouth fixed to catch flies.

"Joe," said the humbled sidekick, spitting out pieces of ten-dollar-bill, "the lor."

Pasternack got vertical as though he worked by a spring. "Where's your warrant?" he said before his eyes were even open. "Quick, get me my mouth on the phone, Moe!"

"You go out there and blow your whistle," said Smitty, "and call the bally off—or do I have to throw this place out in the street?" He turned suddenly, tripped over something unseen, and went staggering halfway across the room.The telephone went flying out of Moe's hand at one end and the sound-box came ripping off the baseboard of the wall at the other. "Tch, tch, excuse it please," apologized Smitty insincerely. "Just when you needed it most, too!"

He turned back to the one called Moe and sent him headlong out into the auditorium with a hearty shove at the back of the neck. "Now do like I told you," he said, "while we're waiting for the telephone repairman to get here. And when their dogs have cooled, send them all in here to me. That goes for the cannibal and the washroom dame, too." He motioned toward the desk. "Get out your little tin box, Pasternack. How much you got on hand to pay these people?"

It wasn't in a tin box but in a briefcase. "Close the door," said Pasternack in an insinuating voice. "There's plenty here, and plenty more will be coming in. How big a cut will square you? Write your own ticket."

Smitty sighed wearily. "Do I have to knock your front teeth down the back of your throat before I can convince you I'm one of these old-fashioned guys that likes to work for my money?"

Outside a gun boomed hollowly and the squawking of the phonograph stopped. Moe could be heard making an announcement through the megaphone. "You can't get

away with this!" stormed Pasternack. "Where's your warrant?"

"Where's your license," countered Smitty, "if you're going to get technical? C'mon, don't waste any more time, you're keeping me up! Get the dough ready for the pay-off." He stepped to the door and called out into the auditorium: "Everybody in here. Get your things and line up." Two of the three couples separated slowly like sleepwalkers and began to trudge painfully over toward him, walking zig-zag as though their metabolism was all shot.

The third pair, Number 14, still clung together out on the floor, the man facing toward Smitty. They didn't seem to realize it was over. They seemed to be holding each other up. They were in the shape of a human tent, their feet about three feet apart on the floor, their faces and shoulders pressed closely together. The girl was that clothes-pin, that stringbean of a kid he had already figured for Toodles McGuire. So she was going to be stubborn about it, was she? He went over to the pair bellicosely. "C'mon, you heard me, break it up!"

The man gave him a frightened look over her shoulder. "Will you take her off me, please, Mac? She's passed out or something, and if I let her go she'll crack her conk on the floor." He blew out his breath. "I can't hold her up much longer!"

Smitty hooked an arm about her middle. She didn't weigh any more than a discarded topcoat. The poor devil who had been bearing her weight, more or less, for nine days and nights on end, let go and folded up into a squatting position at her feet like a shriveled Buddha. "Just lemme stay like this," he moaned, "it feels so good." The girl, meanwhile, had begun to bend slowly double over Smitty's supporting arm, closing up like a jackknife. But she did it with a jerkiness, a deliberateness, that was almost grisly, slipping stiffly down a notch at a time, until her upside-down head

had met her knees. She was like a walking doll whose spring has run down.

Smitty turned and barked over one shoulder at the washroom hag. “Hey you! C’mere and gimme a hand with this girl! Can’t you see she needs attention? Take her in there with you and see what you can do for her—”

The old crone edged fearfully nearer, but when Smitty tried to pass the inanimate form to her she drew hurriedly back. “I—I ain’t got the stren’th to lift her,” she mumbled stubbornly. “You’re strong, you carry her in and set her down—”

“I can’t go in there,” he snarled disgustedly. “That’s no place for me! What’re you here for if you can’t—”

The girl who had been sitting on the sidelines suddenly got up and came limping over on one stockingless foot. “Give her to me,” she said. “I’ll take her in for you.” She gave the old woman a long hard look before which the latter quailed and dropped her eyes. “Take hold of her feet,” she ordered in a low voice. The hag hurriedly stooped to obey. They sidled off with her between them, and disappeared around the side of the orchestra-stand, toward the washroom. Their burden sagged low, until it almost touched the floor.

“Hang onto her,” Smitty thought he heard the younger woman say. “She won’t bite you!” The washroom door banged closed on the weird little procession. Smitty turned and hoisted the deflated Number 14 to his feet. “C’mon,” he said. “In you go, with the rest!”

They were all lined up against the wall in Pasternack’s “office,” so played-out that if the wall had suddenly been taken away they would have all toppled flat like a pack of cards. Pasternack and his shill had gone into a huddle in the opposite corner, buzzing like a hive of bees.

“Would you two like to be alone?” Smitty wanted to know, parking Number 14 with the rest of the droops.

Pasternack evidently believed in the old adage, “He who fights and runs away lives to fight, etc.” The game, he seemed to think, was no longer worth the candle. He unlatched the briefcase he had been guarding under his arm, walked back to the desk with it, and prepared to ease his conscience. “Well, folks,” he remarked genially, “on the advice of this gentleman here” (big pally smile for Smitty) “my partner and I are calling off the contest. While we are under no legal obligation to any of you” (business of clearing his throat and hitching up his necktie) “we have decided to do the square thing, just so there won’t be any trouble, and split the prize money among all the remaining entries. Deducting the rental for the armory, the light bill, and the cost of printing tickets and handbills, that would leave—”

“No, you don’t!” said Smitty. “That comes out of your first nine days profits. What’s on hand now gets divvied without any deductions. Do it your way and they’d all be owing you money!” He turned to the doorman. “You been paid, sunburnt?”

“Nossuh! I’se got five dolluhs a night coming at me—”

“Forty-five for you,” said Smitty.

Pasternack suddenly blew up and advanced menacingly upon his partner. “That’s what I get for listening to you, know-it-all! So New York was a sucker town, was it? So there was easy pickings here, was there? Yah!”

“Boys, boys,” remonstrated Smitty, elbowing them apart.

“Throw them a piece of cheese, the rats,” remarked the girl in shorts. There was a scuffling sound in the doorway and Smitty turned in time to see the lamed girl and the washroom matron each trying to get in ahead of the other.

“You don’t leave me in there!”

“Well, I’m not staying in there alone with her. It ain’t my job! I resign!”

The one with the limp got to him first. “Listen, mister, you better go in there yourself,” she panted. “We can’t do

anything with her. I think she's dead."

"She's cold as ice and all stiff-like," corroborated the old woman.

"Oh my God, I've killed her!" someone groaned. Number 14 sagged to his knees and went out like a light. Those on either side of him eased him down to the floor by his arms, too weak themselves to support him.

"Hold everything!" barked Smitty. He gripped the pop-eyed doorman by the shoulder. "Scram out front and get a cop. Tell him to put in a call for an ambulance, and then have him report in here to me. And if you try lighting out, you lose your forty-five bucks and get the electric chair."

"I'se pracktilly back inside again," sobbed the terrified darky as he fled.

"The rest of you stay right where you are. I'll hold you responsible, Pasternack, if anybody ducks."

"As though we could move an inch on these howling dogs," muttered the girl in shorts.

Smitty pushed the girl with one shoe ahead of him. "You come and show me," he grunted. He was what might be termed a moral coward at the moment; he was going where he'd never gone before.

"Straight ahead of you," she scowled, halting outside the door. "Do you need a road-map?"

"C'mon, I'm not going in there alone," he said, and gave her a shove through the forbidden portal.

She was stretched out on the floor where they'd left her, a bottle of rubbing alcohol that hadn't worked uncorked beside her. His face was flaming as he squatted down and examined her. She was gone all right. She was as cold as they'd said and getting more rigid by the minute. "Overtaxed her heart most likely," he growled. "That guy Pasternack ought to be hauled up for this. He's morally responsible." The cop, less well-brought-up than Smitty, stuck his head in the door without compunction.

“Stay by the entrance,” Smitty instructed him. “Nobody leaves.” Then, “This was the McGuire kid, wasn’t it?” he asked his feminine companion.

“Can’t prove it by me,” she said sulkily. “Pasternack kept calling her Rose Lamont all through the contest. Why don’t-cha ask the guy that was dancing with her? Maybe they got around to swapping names after nine days. Personally,” she said as she moved toward the door, “I don’t know who she was and I don’t give a damn!”

“You’ll make a swell mother for some guy’s children,” commented Smitty following her out. “In there,” he said to the ambulance doctor who had just arrived, “but it’s the morgue now, and not first-aid. Take a look.”

Number 14, when he got back to where they all were, was taking it hard and self-accusing. “I didn’t mean to do it, I didn’t mean to!” he kept moaning.

“Shut up, you sap, you’re making it tough for yourself,” someone hissed.

“Lemme see a list of your entries,” Smitty told Pasternack.

The impresario fished a ledger out of the desk drawer and held it out to him. “All I got out of this enterprise was kicks in the pants! Why didn’t I stick to the sticks where they don’t drop dead from a little dancing? Ask me, why didn’t I?”

“Fourteen,” read Smitty. “Rose Lamont and Gene Monahan. That your real name, guy? Back it up.” 14 jerked off the coat that someone had slipped around his shoulders and turned the inner pocket inside out. The name was inked onto the label. The address checked too. “What about her, was that her real tag?”

“McGuire was her real name,” admitted Monahan, “Toodles

McGuire. She was going to change it anyway, pretty soon, if we’dda won that thousand”—he hung his head—“so it didn’t matter.”

“Why’d you say you did it? Why do you keep saying you didn’t mean to?”

“Because I could feel there was something the matter with her in my arms. I knew she oughtta quit, and I wouldn’t let her. I kept begging her to stick it out a little longer, even when she didn’t answer me. I went crazy, I guess, thinking of that thousand dollars. We needed it to get married on. I kept expecting the others to drop out any minute, there were only two other couples left, and no one was watching us any more. When the rest-periods came, I carried her in my arms to the washroom door, so no one would notice she couldn’t make it herself, and turned her over to the old lady in there. She couldn’t do anything with her either, but I begged her not to let on, and each time the whistle blew I picked her up and started out from there with her—”

“Well, you’ve danced her into her grave,” said Smitty bitterly. “If I was you I’d go out and stick both my feet under the first trolley-car that came along and hold them there until it went by. It might make a man of you!”

He went out and found the ambulance doctor in the act of leaving. “What was it, her heart?”

The A.D. favored him with a peculiar look, starting at the floor and ending at the top of his head. “Why wouldn’t it be? Nobody’s heart keeps going with a seven- or eight-inch metal pencil jammed into it.” He unfolded a handkerchief to reveal a slim coppery cylinder, tapering to needle-like sharpness at the writing end, where the case was pointed over the lead to protect it. It was aluminum—encrusted blood was what gave it its copper sheen. Smitty nearly dropped it in consternation—not because of what it had done but because he had missed seeing it.

“And another thing,” went on the A.D. “You’re new to this sort of thing, aren’t you? Well, just a friendly tip. No offense, but you don’t call an ambulance that long after they’ve gone, our time is too val—”

“I don’t getcha,” said Smitty impatiently. “She needed help; who am I supposed to ring in, potter’s field, and have her buried before she’s quit breathing?”

This time the look he got was withering. “She was past help hours ago.” The doctor scanned his wrist. “It’s five now. She’s been dead since three, easily. I can’t tell you when exactly, but your friend the medical examiner’ll tell you whether I’m right or not. I’ve seen too many of ’em in my time. She’s been gone two hours anyhow.”

Smitty had taken a step back, as though he were afraid of the guy. “I came in here at four thirty,” he stammered excitedly, “and she was dancing on that floor there—I saw her with my own eyes—fifteen, twenty minutes ago!” His face was slightly sallow.

“I don’t care whether you saw her dancin’ or saw her doin’ double-hand-springs on her left ear, she was dead!” roared the ambulance man testily. “She was celebrating her own wake then, if you insist!” He took a look at Smitty’s horrified face, quieted down, spit emphatically out of one comer of his mouth, and remarked: “Somebody was dancing with her dead body, that’s all. Pleasant dreams, kid!” Smitty started to bum slowly. “Somebody was,” he agreed, gritting his teeth. “I know who Somebody is, too. His number was Fourteen until a little while ago; well, it’s Thirteen from now on!”

He went in to look at her again, the doctor whose time was so valuable trailing along. “From the back, eh? That’s how I missed it. She was lying on it the first time I came in and looked.”

“I nearly missed it myself,” the intern told him. “I thought it was a boil at first. See this little pad of gauze? It had been soaked in alcohol and laid over it. There was absolutely no external flow of blood, and the pencil didn’t protrude, it was in up to the hilt. In fact I had to use forceps to get it out. You can see for yourself, the clip that fastens to the wearer’s

pocket, which would have stopped it halfway, is missing. Probably broken off long before."

"I can't figure it," said Smitty. "If it went in up to the hilt, what room was there left for the grip that sent it home?"

"Must have just gone in an inch or two at first and stayed there," suggested the intern. "She probably killed herself on it by keeling over backwards and hittin the floor or the wall, driving it the rest of the way in." He got to his feet. "Well, the pleasure's all yours." He flipped a careless salute and left.

"Send the old crow in that had charge in here," Smitty told the cop.

The old woman came in fumbling with her hands, as though she had the seven-day itch.

"What's your name?"

"Josephine Falvey—Mrs. Josephine Falvey." She couldn't keep her eyes off what lay on the floor.

"It don't matter after you're forty," Smitty assured her drily. "What'd you bandage that wound up for? D'you know that makes you an accessory to a crime?"

"I didn't do no such a—" she started to deny whitely.

He suddenly thrust the postage-stamp of folded gauze, rusty on one side, under her nose. She cawed and jumped back. He followed her retreat. "You didn't stick this on? C'mon, answer me!"

"Yeah, I did!" she cackled, almost jumping up and down. "I did, I did—but I didn't mean no harm. Honest, mister, I—"

"When'd you do it?"

"The last time, when you made me and the girl bring her in here. Up to then I kept rubbing her face with alcohol each time he brought her back to the door, but it didn't seem to help her any. I knew I should of gone out and reported it to Pasternack, but he—that feller you know—begged me not to. He begged me to give them a break and not get them ruled out. He said it didn't matter if she acted all limp that way, that she was just dazed. And anyway,

there wasn't so much difference between her and the rest any more, they were all acting dopy like that. Then after you told me to bring her in the last time, I stuck my hand down the back of her dress and I felt something hard and round, like a carbuncle or berl, so I put a little gauze application over it. And then me and her decided, as long as the contest was over anyway, we better go out and tell you —"

"Yeah," he scoffed, "and I s'pose if I hadn't shown up she'd still be dancing around out there, until the place needed disinfecting! When was the first time you noticed anything the matter with her?"

She babbled: "About two thirty, three o'clock. They were all in here—the place was still crowded—and someone knocked on the door. He was standing out there with her in his arms and he passed her to me and whispered, 'Look after her, will you?' That's when he begged me not to tell anyone. He said he'd—" She stopped.

"Go on!" snapped Smitty.

"He said he'd cut me in on the thousand if they won it. Then when the whistle blew and they all went out again, he was standing there waiting to take her back in his arms—and off he goes with her. They all had to be helped out by that time, anyway, so nobody noticed anything wrong. After that, the same thing happened each time—until you came. But I didn't dream she was dead." She crossed herself. "If I'da thought that, you couldn't have got me to touch her for love nor money—"

"I've got my doubts," Smitty told her, "about the money part of that, anyway. Outside—and consider yourself a material witness." If the old crone was to be believed, it had happened outside on the dance floor under the bright arc lights, and not in here. He was pretty sure it had, at that. Monahan wouldn't have dared try to force his way in here. The screaming of the other occupants would have blown the roof off. Secondly, the very fact that the floor had been

more crowded at that time than later had helped cover it up. They'd probably quarreled when she tried to quit. He'd whipped out the pencil and struck her while she clung to him. She'd either fallen and killed herself on it, and he'd picked her up again immediately before anyone noticed, or else the Falvey woman had handled her carelessly in the washroom and the impaled pencil had reached her heart.

Smitty decided he wanted to know if any of the feminine entries had been seen to fall to the floor at any time during the evening. Pasternack had been in his office from ten on, first giving out publicity items and then taking a nap, so Smitty put him back on the shelf. Moe, however, came across beautifully.

"Did I see anyone fall?" he echoed shrilly. "Who didn't? Such a commotion you never saw in your life. About half-past two. Right when we were on the air, too."

"Go on, this is getting good. What'd he do, pick her right up again?"

"Pick her up! She wouldn't get up. You couldn't go near her! She just sat there swearing and screaming and throwing things. I thought we'd have to send for the police. Finally they sneaked up behind her and hauled her off on her fanny to the bleachers and disqualified her—"

"Wa-a-ait a minute," gasped Smitty. "Who you talking about?" Moe looked surprised. "That Standish dame, who else? You saw her, the one with the bum pin. That was when she sprained it and couldn't dance any more. She wouldn't go home. She hung around saying she was framed and gypped and we couldn't get rid of her—"

"Wrong number," said Smitty disgustedly. "Back where you came from." And to the cop: "Now we'll get down to brass tacks. Let's have a crack at Monahan—"

He was thumbing his notebook with studied absorption when the fellow was shoved in the door. "Be right with you," he said offhandedly, tapping his pockets, "soon as I jot down —Lend me your pencil a minute, will you?"

“I—I had one, but I lost it,” said Monahan dully.

“How come?” asked Smitty quietly.

“Fell out of my pocket, I guess. The clip was broken.”

“This it?”

The fellow’s eyes grew big, while it almost touched their lashes, twirling from left to right and right to left. “Yeah, but what’s the matter with it, what’s it got on it?”

“You asking me that?” leered Smitty. “Come on, show me how you did it!” ‘ Monahan cowered back against the wall, looked from the body on the floor to the pencil, and back again. “Oh no,” he moaned, “no. Is that what happened to her? I didn’t even know—”

“Guys as innocent as you rub me the wrong way,” said Smitty. He reached for him, hauled him out into the center of the room, and then sent him flying back again. His head bonged the door and the cop looked in inquiringly. “No, I didn’t knock,” said Smitty, “that was just his dome.” He sprayed a little of the alcohol into Monahan’s stunned face and hauled him forward again. “The first peep out of you was, ‘I killed her.’ Then you keeled over. Later on you kept saying, ‘I’m to blame, I’m to blame.’ Why try to back out now?”

“But I didn’t mean I did anything to her,” wailed Monahan. “I thought I killed her by dancing too much. She was all right when I helped her in here about two. Then when I came back for her, the old dame whispered she couldn’t wake her up. She said maybe the motion of dancing would bring her to. She said, ‘You want that thousand dollars, don’t you? Here, hold her up, no one’ll be any the wiser.’ And I listened to her like a fool and faked it from then on.”

Smitty sent him hurling again. “Oh, so now it’s supposed to have happened in here—with your pencil, no less! Quit trying to pass the buck!”

The cop, who didn’t seem to be very bright, again opened the door, and Monahan came sprawling out at his feet.

“Geez, what a hard head he must have,” he remarked.

“Go over and start up that phonograph over there,” ordered Smitty. “We’re going to have a little demonstration—of how he did it. If banging his conk against the door won’t bring back his memory, maybe dancing with her will do it.” He hoisted Monahan upright by the scruff of the neck. “Which pocket was the pencil in?”

The man motioned toward his breast. Smitty dropped it in point first. The cop fitted the needle into the groove and threw the switch. A blare came from the amplifier. “Pick her up and hold her,” grated Smitty.

An animal-like moan was the only answer he got. The man tried to back away. The cop threw him forward again. “So you won’t dance, eh?”

“I won’t dance,” gasped Monahan.

When they helped him up from the floor, he would dance.

“You held her like that dead, for two solid hours,” Smitty reminded him. “Why mind an extra five minutes or so?”

The moving scarecrow crouched down beside the other inert scarecrow on the floor. Slowly his arms went around her. The two scarecrows rose to their feet, tottered drunkenly together, then moved out of the doorway into the open in time to the music. The cop began to perspire.

Smitty said: “Any time you’re willing to admit you done it, you can quit.”

“God forgive you for this!” said a tomb-like voice.

“Take out the pencil,” said Smitty, “without letting go of her—like you did the first time.”

“This is the first time,” said that hollow voice. “The time before—it dropped out.” His right hand slipped slowly away from the corpse’s back, dipped into his pocket.

The others had come out of Pasternack’s office, drawn by the sound of the macabre music, and stood huddled together, horror and unbelief written all over their weary faces. A corner of the bleachers hid both Smitty and the cop from them; all they could see was that grisly couple moving

slowly out into the center of the big floor, alone under the funeral heliotrope arc light. Monahan's hand suddenly went up, with something gleaming in it; stabbed down again and was hidden against his partner's back. There was an unearthly howl and the girl with the turned ankle fell flat on her face amidst the onlookers.

Smitty signaled the cop; the music suddenly broke off. Monahan and his partner had come to a halt again and stood there like they had when the contest first ended, upright, tent-shaped, feet far apart, heads locked together. One pair of eyes was as glazed as the other now.

"All right, break, break!" said Smitty.

Monahan was clinging to her with a silent, terrible intensity as though he could no longer let go.

The Standish girl had sat up, but promptly covered her eyes with both hands and was shaking all over as if she had a chill.

"I want that girl in here," said Smitty. "And you, Moe. And the old lady."

He closed the door on the three of them. "Let's see that book of entries again."

Moe handed it over jumpily.

"Sylvia Standish, eh?" The girl nodded, still sucking in her breath from the fright she'd had.

"Toodles McGuire was Rose Lamont—now what's your real name?" He thumbed at the old woman. "What are you two to each other?"

The girl looked away. "She's my mother, if you gotta know," she said.

"Might as well admit it, it's easy enough to check up on," he agreed. "I had a hunch there was a tie-up like that in it somewhere. You were too ready to help her carry the body in here the first time." He turned to the cringing Moe. "I understood you to say she carried on like nobody's never-mind when she was ruled out, had to be hauled off the floor

by main force and wouldn’t go home. Was she just a bum loser, or what was her grievance?”

“She claimed it was done purposely,” said Moe. “Me, I got my doubts. It was like this. That girl the feller killed, she had on a string of glass beads, see? So the string broke and they rolled all over the floor under everybody’s feet. So this one, she slipped on ’em, fell and turned her ankle and couldn’t dance no more. Then she starts hollering blue murder.” He shrugged. “What should we do, call off the contest because she couldn’t dance no more?”

“She did it purposely,” broke in the girl hotly, “so she could hook the award herself! She knew I had a better chance than anyone else—”

“I suppose it was while you were sitting there on the floor you picked up the pencil Monahan had dropped,” Smitty said casually.

“I did like hell! It fell out in the bleachers when he came over to apolo—” She stopped abruptly. “I don’t know what pencil you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry about a little slip-up like that,” Smitty told her. “You’re down for it anyway—and have been ever since you folded up out there just now. You’re not telling me anything I don’t know already.”

“Anyone woulda keeled over; I thought I was seeing her ghost—”

“That ain’t what told me. It was seeing him pretend to do it that told me he never did it. It wasn’t done outside at all, in spite of what your old lady tried to hand me. Know why? The pencil didn’t go through her dress. There’s no hole in the back of her dress. Therefore she had her dress off and was cooling off when it happened. Therefore it was done here in the restroom. For Monahan to do it outside he would have had to hitch her whole dress up almost over her head in front of everybody—and maybe that wouldn’t have been noticed!

“He never came in here after her; your own mother would have been the first one to squawk for help. You did, though. She stayed a moment after the others. You came in the minute they cleared out and stuck her with it. She fell on it and killed herself. Then your old lady tried to cover you by putting a pad on the wound and giving Monahan the idea she was stupefied from fatigue. When he began to notice the coldness, if he did, he thought it was from the alcohol rubs she was getting every rest-period. I guess he isn’t very bright anyway—a guy like that, that dances for his coffee-and. He didn’t have any motive. He wouldn’t have done it even if she wanted to quit, he’d have let her. He was too penitent later on when he thought he’d tired her to death. But you had all the motive I need—those broken beads. Getting even for what you thought she did. Have I left anything out?”

“Yeah,” she said curtly, “look up my sleeve and tell me if my hat’s on straight!”

On the way out to the Black Maria that had backed up to the entrance, with the two Falvey women, Pasternack, Moe, and the other four dancers marching single file ahead of him, Smitty called to the cop: “Where’s Monahan? Bring him along!”

The cop came up mopping his brow. “I finally pried him loose,” he said, “when they came to take her away, but I can’t get him to stop laughing. He’s been laughing ever since. I think he’s lost his mind. Makes your blood run cold. Look at that!”

Monahan was standing there, propped against the wall, a lone figure under the arc light, his arms still extended in the half-embrace in which he had held his partner for nine days and nights, while peal after peal of macabre mirth came from him, shaking him from head to foot.

THE DEATH OF ME

As soon as the front door closed behind her I locked it on the inside. I'd never yet known her to go out without forgetting something and coming back for it. This was one time I wasn't letting her in again. I undid my tie and snaked it off as I turned away. I went in the living-room and slung a couple of pillows on the floor, so I wouldn't have to fall, could take it lying down. I got the gun out from behind the radio console where I'd hidden it and tossed it onto the pillows. She'd wondered why there was so much static all through supper. We didn't have the price of new tubes so she must have thought it was that.

It looked more like a relic than an up-to-date model. I didn't know much about guns; all I hoped was that he hadn't gypped me. The only thing I was sure of was it was loaded, and that was what counted. All it had to do was go off once. I unhooked my shaving mirror from the bathroom wall and brought that out, to see what I was doing, so there wouldn't have to be any second tries. I opened the little flap in back of it and stood it up on the floor, facing the pillows that were slated to be my bier. The movie show wouldn't break up until eleven-thirty. That was long enough. Plenty long enough.

I went over to the desk, sat down and scrawled her a note. Nothing much, just two lines. "Sorry, old dear, too many bills" I unstrapped my wrist watch and put it on top of

the note. Then I started emptying out the pockets of my baggy suit one by one.

It was one of those suits sold by the job-lot, hundreds of them all exactly alike, at seventeen or nineteen dollars a throw, and distributed around town on the backs of life's failures. It had been carrying around hundreds of dollars—in money owed. Every pocket had its bills, its reminders, its summonses jabbed through the crack of the door by process-servers. Five days running now, I'd gotten a different summons each day. I'd quit trying to dodge them any more. I stacked them all up neatly before me. The notice from the landlord to vacate was there too. The gas had already been turned off the day before—hence the gun. Jumping from the window might have only broken my back and paralyzed me.

On top of the whole heap went the insurance policy in its blue folder. That wasn't worth a cent either—right now. Ten minutes from now it was going to be worth ten thousand dollars. I stripped off my coat, opened the collar of my shirt and lay down on my back on the pillows.

I had to shift the mirror a little so I could see the side of my head. I picked up the gun in my right hand and flicked open the safety catch. Then I held it to my head, a little above the ear. It felt cold and hard; heavy, too. I was pushing it in more than I needed to, I guess. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and jerked the trigger with a spasmodic lunge that went all through me. The impact of the hammer jarred my whole head, and the click was magnified like something heard through a hollow tube or pipe—but that was all there was, a click. So he'd gypped me, or else the cartridges were no good and it had jammed.

It was loaded all right. I'd seen them in it myself when he broke it open for me. My arm flopped back and hit the carpet with a thud. I lay there sweating like a mule. What could have been easier than giving it another try? I

couldn’t. I might as well have tried to walk on the ceiling now.

Water doesn’t reach the same boiling-point twice. A pole-vaulter doesn’t stay up in the air at his highest point more than a split second. I lay there five minutes maybe, and then when I saw it wasn’t going to be any use any more, I got up on my feet again.

I slurred on my coat, shoved the double-crossing gun into my pocket, crammed the slew of bills about my person again. I kicked the mirror and the pillows aside, strapped on my wrist watch. I’d felt sorry for myself before; now I had no use for myself. The farewell note

I crumpled up, and the insurance policy, worthless once more, I flung violently into the far comer of the room. I was still shaking a little from the effects of the let-down when I banged out of the place and started off.

I found a place where I could get a jiggerful of very bad alcohol scented with juniper for the fifteen cents I had on me. The inward shaking stopped about then, and I struck on from there, down a long gloomy thoroughfare lined with warehouses, that had railroad tracks running down the middle of it. It had a bad name, in regard to both traffic and bodily safety, but if anyone had tried to hold me up just then they probably would have lost whatever they had on them instead.

An occasional arc-light gleamed funereally at the infrequent intersections. Presently the sidewalk and the cobbles petered out, and it had narrowed into just the railroad right-of-way, between low-lying sheds and walled-in lumber yards. I found myself walking the ties, on the outside of the rails. If a train had come up behind me without warning, I would have gotten what I’d been looking for a little while ago. I stumbled over something, went down, skinned my palm on the rail. I picked myself up and looked. One had come up already it seemed, and somebody who hadn’t been looking for it had gotten it instead. His

body was huddled between two of the ties, on the outside of the rail, had tripped me as I walked them. The head would have been resting on the rail itself if there had been any head left. But it had been flattened out. I was glad it was pretty dark around there; you didn't have to see if you didn't want to.

I would have detoured around him and notified the first cop I came to, but as I started to move away, my raised leg wasn't very far from his stiffly outstreched one. The trouser on each matched. The same goods, the same color gray, the same cheap job-lot suit. I reached down and held the two cuffs together with one hand. You couldn't tell them apart. I grabbed him by the ankle and hauled him a little further away from the rail. Now he was headless all right.

I unbuttoned the jacket, held it open and looked at the lining. Sure enough—same label, "Eagle Brand Clothes." I turned the pocket inside out, and the same size was there, a 36. He was roughly my own build, as far as height and weight went. The identification tag in the coat was blank though; had no name and address on it. I got a pencil out and I printed "Walter Lynch, 35 Meadowbrook" on it, the way it was on my own.

I was beginning to shake again, but this time with excitement. I looked up and down the tracks, and then I emptied out every pocket he had on him. I stowed everything away without looking at it, then stuffed all my own bills in and around him. I slipped the key to the flat into his vest-pocket. I exchanged initialled belts with him. I even traded his package of cigarettes for mine—they weren't the same brand. I'd come out without a necktie, but I wouldn't have worn that howler of his to—well, a railroad accident. I edged it gingerly off the rail, where it still lay in a loop, and it came away two colors, green at the ends, the rest of it garnet. I picked up a stray scrap of newspaper, wrapped it up, and shoved it in my pocket to throw away somewhere else. Our shirts were both white, at least his had been until

it happened. But anyway, all this wasn't absolutely necessary, I figured. The papers in the pockets would be enough. They'd hardly ask anyone's wife to look very closely at a husband in the shape this one was. Still, I wanted to do the job up brown just to be sure. I took off my wrist watch and strapped it on him. I gave him a grim salute as I left him. "They can't kill you, boy," I said, "you're twins!"

I left the railroad right-of-way at the next intersection, still without seeing anybody, and struck out for downtown. I was free as air, didn't owe anybody a cent—and in a couple weeks from now there'd be ten grand in the family. I was going back to her, of course. I wasn't going to stay away for good. But I'd lie low first, wait till she'd collected the insurance money, then we'd powder out of town together, start over again some place else with a ten grand nest-egg.

It was a cruel stunt to try on her, but she'd live through it. A couple weeks grief was better than being broke for the rest of our lives. And if I'd let her in on it ahead of time, she wouldn't have gone through with it. She was that kind.

I picked a one-arm restaurant and went in there. I took my meal check with me to the back and shut myself up in the washroom. I was about to have an experience that very few men outside of amnesia victims have ever had. I was about to find out who I was and where I hung out.

First I ripped the identification tag out of my own suit and sent it down the drain along with the guy's stained necktie. Then I started unloading, and sorting out. Item one was a cheap, mangy-looking billfold. Cheap on the outside, not the inside. I counted them. Two grand in twenties, brand new ones, not a wrinkle on them. There was a rubber band around them. Well, I was going to be well-heeled while I lay low, anyway.

Item two was a key with a six-pointed brass star dangling from it. On the star was stamped "Hotel Columbia, 601." Item three was a bill from the same hotel, made out to George Kelly, paid up a week in advance. Items four and

five were a smaller key to a valise or bag, and two train tickets. One was punched and one hadn't been used yet. One was a week old and the other had been bought that very night. He must have been on his way back with it when he was knocked down crossing the tracks. The used ticket was from Chicago here, and the one intended to be used was from here on to New York.

But "here" happened not to be in a straight line between the two, in fact it was one hell of a detour to take. All that interested me was that he'd only come to town a week ago, and had been about to haul his freight out again tomorrow or the next day. Which meant it wasn't likely he knew anyone in town very well, so if his face had changed remarkably overnight who would be the wiser—outside of the clerk at his hotel? And a low-tipped hat-brim would take care of that.

The bill was paid up in advance, the room-key was in my pocket and I didn't have to go near the desk on my way in. I wanted to go over there and take a look around Room 601 with the help of that other little key. Who could tell, there might be some more of those nice crisp twenties stowed away there? As long as the guy was dead anyway, I told myself, this wasn't robbery. It was just making the most of a good thing.

I put everything back in my pockets and went outside and ordered a cup of coffee at the counter. I needed change for the phone call I was going to make before I went over there. Kelly, strangely enough, hadn't had any small change on him; only those twenties.

I stripped one off and shoved it at the counterman. I got a dirty look. "That the smallest you got?" he growled. "Hell, you clean the till out all for a fi' cent cup of coffee!"

"If it's asking too much of you," I snarled, "I can drink my coffee any other place."

But it already had milk in it and couldn't be put back in the boiler. He almost wore the twenty out testing it for

counterfeitness, stretched it to the tearing point, held it up to the light, peered at it. Finally, unable to find anything against it, he jotted down the serial number on a piece of paper and grudgingly handed me nineteen-ninety-five out of the cash register.

I left the coffee standing there and went over to call up the Columbia Hotel from the open pay telephone on the wall. 601, of course, didn't answer. Still he might be sharing it with someone, a woman for instance, even though the bill had been made out to him alone. I got the clerk on the wire.

"Well, is he alone there? Isn't there anybody rooming with him I can talk to?" There wasn't. "Has he had any callers since he's been staying there?"

"Not that I know of," said the clerk. "We've seen very little of him." A lone wolf, eh? Perfect, as far as I was concerned.

By the time I got to the Columbia I had a hat, the brim rakishly shading the bridge of my nose. I needn't have bothered. The clerk was all wrapped up in some girl dangling across his desk and didn't even look up. The aged colored man who ran the creaking elevator was half blind. It was an eerie, moth-eaten sort of place, but perfect to hole up in for a week or two.

When I got out of the cage I started off in the wrong direction down the hall. "You is this heah way, boss, not that way," the old darky reminded me.

I snapped my fingers and switched around. "Need a road map in this dump," I scowled to cover up my mistake. He peered nearsightedly at me, closed the door, and went down. 601 was around a bend of the hall, down at the very end. I knocked first, just to be on the safe side, then let myself in. I locked the door again on the inside and wedged a chair up against the knob. This was my room now; just let anyone try to get in!

He'd traveled light, the late Kelly. Nothing there but some dirty shirts over in the corner and some clean ones in the

bureau drawer. Bought right here in town too, the cellophane was still on some and the sales slip lying with them. He must have arrived without a shirt to his back.

But that small key I had belonged to something, and when I went hunting it up I found the closet door locked and the key to it missing. For a minute I thought I'd overlooked it when I was frisking him down by the tracks, but I was sure I hadn't. The small key was definitely not the one to the closet door. It nearly fell through to the other side when I tried it. I could have called down for a passkey, but I didn't want anyone up here. Since the key hadn't been on him, and wasn't in the door, he must have hidden it somewhere around the room. Meaning he thought a lot of whatever was behind that door and wasn't taking any chances with it. I started to hunt for the key high and low.

It turned up in about an hour's time, after I had the big rug rolled up against the wall and the bed stripped down and the mattress gashed all over with a razor blade and the whole place looking like a tornado had hit it. The funny little blur at the bottom of the inverted light-bowl overhead gave it away when I happened to look up. He'd tossed it up there before he went out.

I nearly broke my neck getting it out of the thing, had to balance on the back of a chair and tilt the bowl with my fingertips while it swayed back and forth and specks of plaster fell on my head. It occurred to me, although it was only a guess, that the way he'd intended to go about it was smash the bowl and let it drop out just before he checked out of the hotel. I fitted the key into the closet door and took a gander.

There was only a small Gladstone bag over in the corner with a hotel towel over it. Not another thing, not even a hat or a spare collar. I hauled the bag out into the room and got busy on it with the small key I'd taken from his pocket. A gun winked up at me first of all, when I got it open. Not a crummy relic like the one I'd bought that afternoon, but a

brand new, efficient-looking affair, bright as a dollar. When I saw what it was lying on I tossed it aside and dumped the bag upside down on the floor, sat down next to it with a thump.

I only had to break open and count the first neat little green brick of bills, after that I just multiplied it by the rest. Twenty-one times two, very simple. Forty-two thousand dollars, in twenties; unsoiled, crisp as autumn leaves. Counting the two thousand the peculiar Mr. Kelly had been carrying around with him for pin-money, and a few loose ones papering the bottom of the bag—he'd evidently broken open one pack himself—the sum total wasn't far from forty-five. I'd been painlessly run over and killed by a train to the tune of forty-five thousand dollars!

The ten grand insurance premium that had loomed so big a while ago dwindled to a mere bagatelle, with all this stuff lying in my lap. Something to light cigarettes with if I ran out of matches! And to think I'd nearly rung down curtains on myself for that! I could've hugged the chiseler that sold me that faulty gun.

But why go through with the scheme now? I had money. Let them keep the insurance. I would come back to life. It was all in cash too—good as gold wherever we went; better, gold wasn't legal any more.

I jammed everything back into the bag, everything but the gun. That I shoved under one of the pillows. Let them find it after I was gone; it was Kelly's anyway. I locked the bag, tossed it temporarily into the closet, and hurriedly went over his few personal belongings once more. The guy didn't have a friend in the world seemingly. There wasn't a scrap of writing, wasn't a photograph, wasn't a thing to show who or what he was. He wasn't in his own home town, the two railroad tickets told that, so who was there to step forward and report him missing? That would have to come from the other end if at all, and it would take a long time to percolate through. My title to the dough was clear in every

sense but the legal one; I'd inherited it from him. I saw now the mistake I'd made, though. I shouldn't have switched identities with him. I should have left him as he was, just taken the key to the bag, picked up the money, gone home and kept on being Walter Lynch. No one knew he had the money. I wouldn't have even had to duck town. This way, I was lying dead by the tracks; and if Edith powdered out with me tonight it would look funny, and would most likely lead to an investigation.

I sat down for a minute and thought it out. Then it came to me. I could still make it look on the up-and-up, but she'd have to play ball with me. This would be the set-up: she would write a note addressed to me and leave it in the flat, saying she was sick of being broke and was quitting me cold. She'd get on the train tonight—alone—and go. That would explain her disappearance and also my "suicide" down by the tracks, a result of her running off. We'd arrange where to meet in New York. I'd follow her on a different train, taking care not to be seen getting on, and using the very ticket Kelly had bought. That way I didn't even have to run the risk of a station agent recalling my face later.

I was almost dizzy with my own brilliance; this took care of everything. My only regret was I had destroyed my own original suicide note to her. It would have been a swell finishing touch to have left it by the body. But her fake note at the flat would give the police the motive for the suicide if they were any good at putting two and two together. "And here I've been going around trying to convince employers I have brains!" I gloated.

She'd only just be getting back from the movie show about now. There'd be nothing to alarm her at first in my not being there. I'd taken the gun out with me and the farewell note too. But she'd turn on the lights, maybe give the radio a try, or ask one of the neighbors if they'd seen me. She mustn't do any of those things, she was supposed

to have gone long ago. I decided to warn her ahead over the phone to lie low until I got there and explained, to wait for me in the dark.

I picked up the room phone and asked for our number. It was taking a slight chance, but it was better than letting her give herself away; she might stand by the brightly-lighted window looking up and down the street for me, in full view of anyone happening along. He put through the call for me. It rang just once at our end, where she and I lived, and then was promptly answered—much quicker than Ethel ever got to it.

A deep bass voice said: “Yeah?” I nearly fainted. “Yeah? What is it?” the voice said a second time. I pulled myself together again. “I’m calling Saxony 4230,” I said impatiently. “They’ve given me the wrong num—Damn that skirt-chasing clerk downstairs.”

The answer came back, “This is Saxony 4230. What is it?” I put out one hand and leaned groggily against the table, without letting go the receiver. “Who are you?” I managed to articulate.

“I’m a patrolman,” he boomed back.

My face was getting wetter by the minute. “Wh-what’s up?” I choked.

“You a friend of the Lynches? They’ve just had a death here.” Then in the background, over and above his voice, came a woman’s screams—screams of agony from some other room, carried faintly over the wire. Blurred and distorted as they were, I recognized them; they were Ethel’s. A second feminine voice called out more distinctly, presumably to the cop I was talking to: “Get her some spirits of ammonia or something to quiet her!” One of the neighbors, called in in the emergency.

Pop! went my whole scheme, like a punctured balloon. My body had already been found down by the tracks. A cop had already broken the news to her. He and the ministering neighbor were witnesses to the fact that she hadn’t run off

and left me before I did it. For that matter, the whole apartment building must be hearing her screams.

The entire set-up shifted back again into its first arrangement, and left me where I'd been before. She couldn't leave town now, not for days, not until after the funeral anyway. The affair at the tracks was an accident once more, not a suicide. I daren't try to get word to her now, after making her go through this. She'd either give herself away in her relief, or uncontrollable anger at finding out might make her turn on me intentionally and expose me.

"Just a friend of theirs," I was saying, or something like that. "I'll call up tomorrow, I guess—"

"Okay," he said, and I heard the line click at the other end.

I forked the receiver as though it weighed a ton and slumped down next to it. It took me a little time to get my breathing back in shape. There was only one thing to do now—get out of town by myself without her. To stay on indefinitely was to invite being recognized by someone sooner or later, and the longer I stayed the greater the chances were of that happening. I'd blow to New York tonight. I'd use Kelly's ticket, get the Flyer that passed through at midnight.

I stealthily eased the chair away from under the doorknob, picked up the bag, unlocked the door, gave it a push. As though it was wired to set off some kind of an alarm, the phone began to ring like fury just as the door swung out. I stood there thunderstruck for a minute. They'd traced my call back! Maybe Ethel had recovered enough to ask them to find out who it was, or maybe the way I'd hung up had looked suspicious. Let it ring its head off. I wasn't going near it. I was getting out of here while the getting out was good! I hotfooted it down the hall, its shrill clamor behind me.

Just before I got to the turn in the hallway, the elevator-slide sloshed open. I stopped dead in my tracks. I could hear footsteps coming toward me along the carpet, softened to a shuffle. I hesitated for a minute, then ducked back, to wait for whoever it was to go by. I closed the door after me, stood listening by it. The bell was still ding-donging in back of me. The knock, when it came, was on my own door, and sent a quiver racing through me. I started to back away slowly across the room, bag still in my hand. The knock came again.

"What is it?" I called out.

It was the old colored man's whine. "Mista Kelly, somebody wants you on de foam pow'ful bad. We done tole 'em you must be asleep if'n you don't answer, but dey say wake you up. Dey say dey know you dere—"

I set the bag down noiselessly, looked at the window. No soap, six stories above the street and no fire-escape, regulations to the contrary. The damn phone kept bleating away there inside the room, nearly driving me crazy.

"Mista Kelly—" he whined again.

I pulled myself together; a voice on the phone wasn't going to kill me. "All right," I said curtly.

If they knew I was here, then they knew I was here. I'd bluff it out—be a friend of the late Lynch's that his wife had never heard about. I took in a chestful of air, bent down and said, "Yep?"

The second word out of the receiver, I knew that it was no check-up on the call I'd made ten minutes ago. The voice was very cagey, almost muffled.

"Getting restless, Hogan?" I lowered my own to match it. Hogan?

First I was Lynch, then I was Kelly, now I was Hogan! But it wasn't much trouble to figure out Kelly and Hogan wore the same pair of shoes; I'd never had much confidence in the names on hotel-blotters in the first place.

"Sorta," I shadow-boxed. "Kelly's the name, though."

The voice went in for irony by the shovelful. “So we noticed,” he drawled. Meaning about my being restless, evidently, and not what my name was. “You got so restless you were figuring on taking a little trip, without waiting for your friends, is that it? Seems you even walked down to the depot, asking about trains, and bought yourself a ticket ahead of time. I had a phone call from somebody that saw you, about eight this evening. I s’pose you woulda just taken an overnight bag—” A pause. “—a little black bag, and hopped aboard.”

So others beside Kelly knew what was in that Gladstone! Nice cheering thought.

The voice remonstrated with a feline purr: “You shouldn’t be so impatient. You knew we were coming. You shoulda given us more time. We only got in late this afternoon.” Another pause. “Tire trouble on the way. We woulda felt very bad to have missed you. It woulda inconvenienced us a lot. You see, you’ve got my razor in your bag, and some shirts and socks belonging to some of the other boys. Now, we’d like to get everything sorted out before you go ahead on any little trips because, if you just go off like that without letting us know, never can tell when you’d be coming back.”

I could almost feel the threat that lurked under the slurring surface of the words flash out of the receiver into my ear like a steel blade. He was talking in code, but the code wasn’t hard to decipher; wasn’t meant to be. They wanted a split of what was in the black bag; maybe they were entitled to it, maybe they weren’t, but they sounded like they were going to get it, whoever they were. Kelly, I gathered, had been on the point of continuing his travels without waiting for that little formality—only he’d taken the back way to and from the depot to avoid being seen, had been seen anyway, and then a freight train had come along and saved him any further trouble. But since I was now Kelly, his false move had gotten me in bad and it was up to me to do the worrying for him.

I hadn’t said two words so far; hadn’t had a chance to. I already had a dim suspicion in the back of my mind about where, or rather how, all that crisp new money had been obtained. But that thought could wait until later. I had no time just now to bother with it. All I knew was there wasn’t going to be any split, big or little; just one look at my face was all they needed and I’d be left with only memories.

I had one trump-card though: they couldn’t tag me. I could walk right by them with the whole satchelful of dough and they wouldn’t know the difference. All I needed was to stall a little, to keep them from coming up here.

“You’ve got me wrong,” I murmured into the phone. “I wouldn’t think of keeping anyone’s razors or shirts or socks —”

“Can’t hear you,” he said. “Take the handkerchief off the thing, you don’t need it.” He’d noticed the difference in voices and thought I was using a filter to disguise mine.

“You do the talking,” I suggested. “It was your nickel.”

“We don’t talk so good with our mouths,” he let me know. “We talk better with other things. You know where to find us. All that was arranged, but you got a poor memory, it looks like. Check out and come on over here—with everything. Then we’ll all see you off on the train, after everything’s straightened out.”

Another of those threats flashed out. I sensed instinctively what Kelly’s “seeing off’ would be like if he had been fool enough to go near them at this point. He was in too bad to redeem himself. He’d never make that New York train standing on his own feet.

“How soon you want me to be over?” I stalled.

The purr left the voice at this point. “We’ll give you thirty minutes.” Then, while the fact that a net was closing in on me slowly sank in, he went on: “I wouldn’t try to make the depot without stopping by here first. Couple of the boys are hanging around there in the car. They like to watch people

get off the trains. They like to watch them get off much better than they like to watch ’em get on, funny isn’t it?”

“Yeah, funny,” I agreed dismally.

“You’re in 601, over at that dump,” he told me. “You can see the street from there. Step over to the window for a minute, I’ll hold the wire—” I put down the receiver, edged up to the window, took a tuck in the dusty net curtains and peered down. It was a side-street, not the one the hotel entrance faced on. But at the corner, which commanded both the window and the entrance, a negligent figure slouched under the white sputtering arc-light, hat-brim down, idly scanning a newspaper. While I watched he raised his head, saw me with the light behind me, stared straight up at the window. Unmistakably my window and no other. I let the curtains spread out again, went back to the phone.

“Like the view?” the voice at the other end suggested. “Nice quiet street, hardly anyone on it, right?”

“Nice quiet street, hardly anyone on it,” I intoned dazedly.

“Then we’ll be seeing you in—twenty-five minutes now.” The line clicked closed, but not quickly enough to cut off a smothered monosyllable. “Rat,” it had sounded like. It wouldn’t have surprised me if it was, old-fashioned and overworked as the expression was.

All of which left me pretty well holed-in. I knew the penalty now for trying to get on the New York train, or any other. I knew the penalty for simply walking away from the hotel in the wrong direction. I knew the penalty for everything in fact but one thing—for staying exactly where I was and not budging.

And what else could that be but a little surprise visit on their part, preferably in the early morning hours? This place was a pushover with just a night clerk and an old myopic colored man. I certainly couldn’t afford to call in police protection beforehand any more than the real Kelly could have.

There was always the alternative of dropping the bag out the window and letting that finger-man out there pick it up and walk off with it intact, but I wasn't quite yellow enough to go for that idea. Forty-five grand was forty-five grand; why should a voice on the wire and a lizard on a street corner dish me out of it? The postman may knock twice, but not Opportunity.

The obvious thing was to get out of 601 in a hurry. I split the phone for the third time that night. "This is Kelly, six-one. I'd like my room changed. Can you gimme an inside room on the top floor?"

The broad I'd seen him with must have put him in good humor. "That shouldn't be hard," he said. "I'll send the key up."

"Here's the idea," I went on. "I want this transfer kept strictly between you and me, I don't want it on the blotter. Anyone stops by, I'm in 601 as far as you know. They don't find me there, then I'm not in the building."

"I don't see how I can do that, we've got to keep the record straight," he said for a come-on.

"I'm sending a sealed envelope down to you," I said. "You open it personally. I'll keep 601—keep paying for it—if that'll make it easier for you. I'm in a little personal trouble, wife after me. Don't want any callers. You play along with me and you won't come out the short end. Send Rastus up with the key."

"I'm your man," he said. When the old darky knocked I left the black bag in the closet, locked 601 after me and took the key with me. The lights were out and he didn't notice the dummy I'd formed out of Kelly's shirts under the bedding. Nor the bulge all those packages of twenties gave my person. The bag was full of toilet-paper to give it the right weight if snatched up in a hurry. They wouldn't be likely to show their faces a second time after filling a perfectly good mattress with lead in the middle of the night

and rousing the whole hotel. Kelly's dandy little gun I took with me.

He showed me into a place on the eighth floor back with a window that looked out on a blank brick shaft, and I had him wait outside the door for a minute. I put three of the twenties into an envelope, sealed it for the clerk, and told him to take it down to him.

"Yessa, Mr. Kelly," he bobbed.

"No, Mr. Kelly's down in 601, there's no one in this room," I told him, and I gave him a twenty for himself. "You ask your boss downstairs if you don't believe me. He'll put you right. You didn't show me up here; this is so you remember that." His eyes bulged when he looked at the tip.

"Yas, sir!" he yammered.

I locked the door, but didn't bother with any mere chair this time. I sealed it up with a big top-heavy chest of drawers that weighed a ton. The room had its own bath. I stretched out on the bed fully dressed with the money still on me and the gun under my pillow and lay there in the dark waiting.

I didn't have such a long wait at that. The firecrackers went off at about three in the morning. I could hear it plainly two floors above, where I was. It sounded like the guts were being blown out of the building. The shots came so close together I couldn't count them; there must have been three or four revolvers being emptied at one time. All into Kelly's rolled-up shirts, in the dark.

The whole thing was over within five minutes, less than that. Then, minutes after, like one last firecracker on the string going off, there came a single shot, much further away this time. It sounded as though it came from the lobby —either a cop had tried to head them off, or they'd taken care of the clerk on their way out.

The keening of police-cars, whistling up from all directions at once, jerked me upright on the bed. I hadn't thought of that. They'd want to know what all the shooting

was for. They'd want to ask the guy who'd been in 601 a lot of questions, especially after they saw the proxy he'd left on the bed to take his medicine for him. They'd want to know why and wherefore, and how come all that money, and the nice shiny gun, was it licensed? Lots and lots of questions, that Kelly-Hogan-Lynch was in no position to answer.

It behooved me to dodge them every bit as much as my would-be murderers. It was out for me. Now was the time for it anyway. Kelly's friends would lie low until the police had cleared away. It was now or never, while the police cars were keeping them away.

I rolled the chest of drawers aside, unlocked the door, and squinted out. The building was humming with sounds and voices. I went back for the gun, laid it flat against my stomach under my shirt, with my belt to hold it up, buttoned my coat over it and started down the hall. An old maid opened her door and gawked. "Wha—what was that down below just now?"

"Backfiring in the street," I said reassuringly, and she jumped in again.

The elevator was just rising flush with the floor. I could see the light and I had an idea who was on it. I dove down the fireproof stairs next to it, which were screened by frosted-glass doors on each floor.

When I got down to the sixth, there was a shadow parked just outside them, on the hall side. A shadow wearing a visored cap. There

was no light on my side. The lower half of the doors was wood. I bent double, slithered past without blurring the upper glass half, and pussyfooted on down.

The other four landings were unguarded as yet. The staircase came out in the rear of the lobby, behind a potted plant. The lobby was jammed, people in bathrobes and kimonos milling about, reporters barging in and out the two rickety phone booths the place boasted, plainclothesmen and a cop keeping a space in front of the desk clear.

Over the desk, head hanging down on the outside, dangled the clerk, showing his baldspot like a target, with a purple-black sworl in the exact middle of it. Outside the door was another cop, visible from where I was. I took the final all-important step that carried me off the staircase into the crowd. Someone turned around and saw me. “What happened?” I asked, and kept moving.

A press photographer was trying to wedge himself into one of the narrow coffin-like booths ahead of two or three others; evidently he doubled as a reporter, newspaper budgets being what they are. He unlimbered the black apparatus that was impeding him, shoved it at me.

“Hold this for me a sec,” he said, and turned to the phone and dropped his nickel in. I kept moving toward the door, strapped the camera around my own shoulder as I went and breezed out past the cop in a typical journalistic hurry.

“Hey, you!” he said, then: “Okay; take one of me, why don’tcha?”

“Bust the camera,” I kidded back. I unloaded it into an ashcan the minute I got around the corner, and kept going.

I was all the way across town from the Columbia when the first streak of dawn showed. The gun and the packs of twenties were both weighing me down, and I was at the mercy of the first patrolman who didn’t like my shape. But this was no time of night to check in at a second hotel. The last train in or out had been at midnight and the next was at seven. I had never realized until now how tough it was getting out of a town at odd hours—especially when you were two guys, neither one of whom could afford to be recognized. I had no car. A long-distance ride in a taxi would have been a dead giveaway; the driver would only have come back and shot his mouth off. To start off on foot wasn’t the answer either. Every passing car whose headlights flicked me stemming the highway would be a possible source of information against me later.

All I needed was just about an hour—hour and a half—until I could get that New York train. Kelly's friends might still be covering the station, police or no police, but how were they going to pick me out in broad daylight? I certainly wasn't wearing Kelly's face, even if I was wearing his clothes. But the station waiting-room was too conspicuous a spot. The way to do it was hop on at the last minute when the train was already under way.

I saw a light through plate glass, and went into another of those all-night beaneries; sitting mum in there was a shade less risky than roaming the streets until I was picked up. I went as far to the back as I could, got behind a bend in the wall, and ordered everything in sight to give myself an excuse for staying awhile. It was all I could do to swallow the stuff, but just as I had about cleaned it up and had no more alibi left, a kid came in selling the early morning editions. I grabbed one and buried my nose in it.

It was a good thing I'd bought it. What I read once more changed the crazy pattern of my plans that I was trying to follow through like a man caught in a maze.

I was on the last page, just two or three lines buried in the middle of a column of assorted mishaps that had taken place during the previous twenty-four hours. I'd been found dead on the tracks. I was thirty-three, unemployed, and lived at 35 Meadowbrook. And that was that.

But the murder at the Columbia Hotel was splashed across page one. And Mr. George Kelly was very badly wanted by the police for questioning, not only about who his callers had been so they could be nailed for killing the clerk, but also about brand new twenty-dollar bills that had been popping up all over town for the past week or more. There might be some connection, the police seemed to feel, with a certain bank robbery in Omaha. Kelly might be someone named Hogan, and Hogan had been very badly wanted for a long time. Then again Kelly might not be. The descriptions of the twenty dollar bill spendthrift that were coming in

didn’t always tally, but the serial numbers on his money all checked with the list that had been sent out by the bank.

The picture of Kelly given by a haberdashery clerk who had sold him shirts and by the station-agent who had sold him a ticket to New York didn’t quite line up with that given by the elevator boy at the hotel nor a coffee pot counterman who’d sold him java he hadn’t drunk—except that they all agreed he was wearing a light-gray suit.

The colored man’s description, being the most recent and detailed, was given more credence than the others; he had rubbed elbows with Kelly night and day for a week. It was, naturally, my own and not the other Kelly’s. He was just senile enough and frightened enough not to remember that I had looked different the first six days of the week from what I had the seventh, nutty as it seems.

And then at the tag end, this: all the trains were being watched and all the cars leaving town were being stopped on the highway and searched.

So I was staying in town and liking it; or to be more exact, staying, like it or not. A stationery store across from the lunchroom opened up at eight, and I ducked in there and bought a light tan briefcase. The storekeeper wasn’t very well up on his newspaper reading, there wasn’t any fuss raised about the twenty I paid for it with, any more than there had been in the eating place I’d just left. But the net was tightening around me all the time. I knew it yet I couldn’t do anything about it. I’d just presented them with two more witnesses to help identify me. I sent him into the back room looking for something I didn’t want, and got the money into the briefcase; it didn’t take more than a minute. The gun I had to leave where it was. I patted myself flat and walked out.

There was a respectable-looking family hotel on the next block. I had to get off the streets in a hurry, so I went in there, and they sold a room to James Harper. My baggage was coming later, I explained. Yes, I was new in town. Just

as I was stepping into the elevator ahead of the bellhop, someone in horn-rimmed glasses brushed by me getting off. I could feel him turning around to look after me, but he wasn't anyone that I knew, so I figured I must have jostled him going by.

I locked my new door, shoved the briefcase under the mattress, and lay down on top of it. I hadn't had any sleep since two nights before. Just as I was fading out there was a slight tap at the door. I jacked myself upright and reached for the gun. The tap came again, very genteel, very apologetic. "Who is it?" I grated.

"Mr. Harper?" said an unctuous voice.

That was my name, or supposed to be. I went up close to the door and said, "Well?"

"Can I see you for a minute?"

"What about?" I switched a chair over, pivoted up on it, and peered over the transom, which was open an inch or two. The man with glasses who'd been in the lobby a few minutes ago was standing there. I could see the whole hall. There wasn't anyone else in it. I jumped down again, pushed the chair back, hesitated for a minute, then turned the key and faced him.

"Harper's the name, all right," I said, "but I think you've got your wires crossed, haven't you? I don't know you."

"Mr. Harper, I represent the Gibraltar Life Insurance Company, here in town. Being a new arrival here, I don't know whether you've heard of us or not—" I certainly had. Ethel had ten thousand coming to her from them. He was way past the door by now. I closed it after him, and quietly locked him in the room with me. He was gushing sales talk. My eyes never left his face.

"No, no insurance," I said. "I never have and never will. Don't believe in it, and what's more I can't afford it—"

"There's where you're wrong," he said briskly. "Let me just give you an instance. There was a man in this town named Lynch—" I stiffened and hooked my thumb into the

waistband of my trousers, that way it was near the opening of my shirt. He continued. “He was broke, without a job, down on his luck—but he did have insurance. He met with an accident.” He spread his hands triumphantly. “His wife gets ten thousand dollars.” Then very slowly, “As soon as we’re convinced, of course, that he’s dead.” Smack, between the eyes!

“Did you sell him his policy?” I tried to remember what the salesman who’d sold me mine looked like. I was quivering inside like a vibrator.

“No,” he said, “I’m just an investigator for the company, but I was present when he took his examination.”

“Then, if you’re an investigator,” I said brittlely, “how can you sell me one?”

“I’ll be frank with you,” he said with a cold smile. “I’m up here mainly to protect the company’s interests. There’s a remarkable resemblance between you and this Lynch, Mr. Harper. In fact, downstairs just now I thought I was seeing a ghost. Now don’t take offense, but we have to be careful what we’re doing. I may be mistaken of course, but I have a very good memory for faces. You can establish your own identity, I suppose?”

“Sure,” I said truculently, “but I’m not going to. What’s all this got to do with me anyway?”

“Nothing,” he admitted glibly. “Of course this widow of his is in desperate need, and it will hold up the payment to her indefinitely, that’s all. In fact until I’m satisfied beyond the shadow of a doubt that there hasn’t been any—slipup.”

“What’ll it take to do that?”

“Simply your word for it, that you are not Walter Lynch. It’s just one of those coincidences, that’s all.”

“If that’s all you want, you’ve got it. Take my word for it, I’m not.” I tried to laugh as if the whole thing were preposterous.

“Would you put that in writing for me?” he said. “Just so my conscience will be clear, just so I can protect myself if

the company says anything later. After all, it's my bread and butter—"

I pulled out a sheet of hotel stationery. "What's the catch in this?" I asked.

His eyes widened innocently. "Nothing. You don't have to put your signature in full if that's what's worrying you. Just initial it. 'I am not Walter Lynch, signed J. H.' It will avoid the necessity for a more thorough investigation by the company—"

I scrawled it out and gave it to him. He blotted it, folded it, and tore off a strip before he tucked it in his wallet.

"Don't need the second half of the sheet," he murmured. He moved toward the door. "Well, I'll trot down to the office," he said. "Sorry I can't interest you in a policy." He turned the key without seeming to notice that the door had been locked, went out into the hall.

I pounced on the strips of paper he'd let fall. There were two of them. "*I am not*—" was on one and "*J.H.*" on the other. I'd fallen for him. He had my own original signature, standing by itself now, to compare with the one on file. He suspected who I was!

I ran out after him. The elevator was just going down. I rang for it like blazes, but it wouldn't come back. I chased back to the room, got the briefcase, and trooped down the stairs. When I came out into the lobby he'd disappeared. I darted out into the street and looked both ways. No sign of him. He must have gone back to his own room for a minute. Just as I was turning to go in again, out he came. He seemed surprised to see me, then covered it by saying, "If you ever change your mind, let me know."

"I have," I said abruptly. "I think I will take out a policy after all. That your car?"

His eyes lighted up. "Good!" he said. "Step in. I'll ride you down to the office myself, turn you over to our ace salesman." I knew what he was thinking, that the salesman could back him up in his identification of me.

I got in next to him. When the first light stopped him I had the gun out against his ribs, under my left arm.

"You don't need to wait for that," I said. "Turn up the other way, we're lighting out. Argue about it and I'll give it to you right here in the car."

He shuddered a little and then gave the wheel a turn. He didn't say anything.

"Don't look so hard at the next traffic cop you pass," I warned him once. When we got out of the business district, I said: "Take one hand off the wheel and haul that signature out of your wallet." I rolled it up with one hand, chewed it to a pulp, and spit it out in little soggy pieces. He was sweating a little. I was too, but not as much.

"What's it going to be?" he quavered. "I've got a wife and kids—"

"You'll get back to 'em," I reassured him, "but you'll be a little late, that's all. You're going to clear me out of town. I'll turn you back alone."

He gave a sigh of relief. "All right," he said. "I'll do whatever you say."

"Can you drive without your glasses?" He took them off and handed them to me and I put them on. I could hardly see anything at first. I took off the light-gray coat and changed that with him too. The briefcase on my lap covered my trousers from above and the car door from the side.

"If we're stopped and asked any questions," I said, "one wrong word out of you and I'll give it to you right under their noses, state police or no state police."

He just nodded, completely buffaloed.

The suburbs petered out and we hit open country. We weren't, newspapers to the contrary, stopped. A motorcycle cop passed us coming into town; he just glanced in as he went by, didn't look back. I watched him in the mirror until he was gone. Twenty miles out we left the main highway and took a side road, with fewer cars on it. About ten minutes later his machine started to buck.

“I’m running out of gas,” he said.

“See if you can make that clump of trees over there,” I barked. “Get off the road and into it. Then you can start back for gas on foot and I’ll light out.”

He swerved off the road, bumped across grassy ground and came to a stop on the other side of the trees. He cut the engine and we both got out.

“All right,” I said, “now remember what I told you, keep your mouth shut. Go ahead, never mind watching me.”

I stood with one elbow on the car door and one leg on the running-board. He turned and started shuffling off through the knee-deep grass. I let him get about five yards away and then I shot him three times in the head. He fell and you couldn’t see him in the grass, just a sort of hole there where it was pressed down. I looked around and there wasn’t anyone in sight on the road, so I went up to him and gave him another one right up against his ear to make sure.

I got back in the car and started it. He’d lied about the gas; I saw that by looking at his tank-meter. It was running low, but there was enough left to get back on the road again and make the next filling station.

When I’d filled up, an attendant took the twenty inside with him and stayed in there longer than I liked. I sounded the horn and he came running out.

“I can’t make change,” he said.

“Well, keep it then!” I snapped and roared away.

I met the cops that his phone call had tipped off about ten minutes later, coming toward me not after me. Five of them —too many to buck. I’d thrown the gun away after leaving the gas-station, and I was sitting on the briefcase. I braked and sat there looking innocently surprised.

“Driver’s license?” they said. I had the insurance fellow’s in the coat I was wearing.

“Left it home,” I said.

They came over and frisked me, and then one of them took it out of my pocket. “No, you didn’t,” he said, “but it’s

got the wrong guy's description on it. Get out a minute."

I had to. Two of them had guns out.

"Your coat don't match your trousers," he said dryly. "And you ought to go back to the optician and see about those glasses. Both side-pieces stick out about three inches in back of your ears." Then he picked up the briefcase and said, "Isn't it uncomfortable sitting this way?" He opened it, looked in. "Yeah," he said, "Hogan," and we started back to town, one of them riding with me with my wrist linked to his. The filling-station fellow said, "Yep, that's him," and we kept going.

"I'm Walter Lynch," I said. "The real Hogan died down by the tracks. I took the money from his room, that's all—changed places with him. Maybe I can go to jail for that, but you can't pin a murder rap on me. My wife will identify me. Take me over to 35 Meadow-brook, she'll tell you who I am!"

"Better pick a live one," he said. "She jumped out a window early this morning—went crazy with grief, I guess. Don't you read the papers?"

When we got to the clump of trees, they'd found the insurance guy already. I could see some of them standing around the body. A detective came over and said, "The great Hogan at last, eh?"

"I'm Walter Lynch," I said.

The detective said, "That saves me a good deal of trouble. That insurance guy, lying out there now, put in a call to his office just before he left his hotel—something about a guy named Lynch trying to pull a fast one on the company. When he didn't show up they notified us." He got in. "I'll ride back with you," he said.

I didn't say anything any more after that. If I let them think I was Hogan, I went up for murder. If I succeeded in proving I was Lynch, I went up for murder anyway. As the detective put it on the way to town, "Make up your mind

who you wanna be—either way y’gonna sit down on a couple thousand volts.”

THE SHOWBOAT MURDERS

I

“Just one night,” Miss Dulcy Harris was saying dramatically. “Just one night is all I ask! One night without hearing all about who you arrested and what they were wanted for and what their past record was and what they said in the line-up! Just one night away from crime!”

She put her foot down, both literally and metaphorically. A little puff of dust rose from the ground at the impact. “Is this your night off, or isn’t it? Well, you can take those tickets to ’X-Men’ and just tear them up, because I’m not going to sit through any more crime pictures with you and then spend the rest of the night listening to why the detectives aren’t like detectives in real life. I’ve planned our evening for us, for once! You’re taking me out to that showboat in the river.”

Inspector Whittaker (Whitey) Ames, her affianced, unhappily swiveled his neck around inside his starched collar. “Aw, gee, honey,” he pleaded, “not a showboat. Anything but that.”

“Just why so?” she queried suspiciously.

“Because I’m a total loss on anything floating. It upsets me—” She hooted incredulously. “You mean you get seasick? But it’s anchored, it isn’t even moving!”

“But it probably jiggles a little with the current.”

Dulcy narrowed her eyes determinedly. “Everyone but me has been there by now—” She had more to say, much more. Before she had half finished he took her heroically by the arm.

“You win,” he said, “let’s get the tickets. But I shoulda skipped that cocoanut pie at dinner.”

Dance music came blaring up, and the excursion tug that linked the showboat to the shore fitted its apron neatly into the pier. The crowd made a dive for the floating bar it boasted, and sounds of ice rattling against metal filled the night.

“Let’s go round to the other side,” gulped Whitey, “away from the smell of that orange peel.”

“It’s just your imagination,” Dulcy told him. “Don’t give in. Keep saying the multiplication table over to yourself. It works wonders.” The sail down-river lasted for about three-quarters of an hour, and Ames held out manfully. The last outlying lights of St. Louis on the right had petered out before a playful searchlight beam sent a shaft of pale blue up into the sky ahead of them. The excursion tug tracked it down, and presently a low-lying hulk showed up on the river bosom, garlanded with colored lights. The tug came alongside, nudged it, retreated, and finally stuck as closely as a stamp to a letter.

A ribbed incline on castors was wheeled out, the showboat lying lower in the water, and down it poured the audience. Almost before the last stragglers had cleared it, it was hauled up again, the tug gave a toot, beat the water white, and headed back where it had come from. The crowd it had brought was left there in midstream, cut off from the shore until the end of the show on something that had been a freighter and was no longer fit to go to sea.

The whole superstructure had been planed off, leaving a flat surface not more than ten feet above water level. An awning on metal stanchions roofed it, leaving the sides open to the breeze. Under this were ranged rows of folding

wooden chairs packed tightly together with an aisle running down the middle of them. The bow, which was the stage, was curtained off. There were no footlights, but the same rickety platform back at the stern that lodged the sky-writing searchlight also held a couple of spots with gelatin slides. These were trained out across the heads of the audience, giving people red or green necks if they sat up too high.

A scramble for seats began and Dulcy, who was very dexterous in crowds, shot ahead and got two on the aisle before Whitey had disentangled himself from everyone else's arms and legs.

"How you getting along with yourself?" she wanted to know when he joined her.

"I'm up in the fourteens now," he muttered tensely. "I'm going to need an adding machine pretty soon."

Jazz blared out, the curtain rolled out of the way, and a long line of little ladies without much clothing pranced out onto the stage. They began to imitate people who have eaten green apples and have a pain in the stomach. It may have been that thought more than anything else, but Whitey suddenly gave up the struggle.

"'Scuse me, be right back," he said in a strangled voice, and bolted up the aisle, hand soldered to his mouth. A bartender on duty at that end mercifully caught him by the arm and guided him down a short, steep companionway to the lower level. At the bottom of it he found a short elbow of passageway, an open porthole—and peace.

The footsteps of the dancers on the planks over his head sounded like thunder down here. Just as he was about to duck in again he saw something out of the corner of his eye. From where he was, by turning his head sidewise, he could look along the whole hull. The row of lighted portholes was like a succession of orange circles, diminishing in perspective toward the bow.

A hand was sticking out of the one next in line. It stood out white against the black hull. It was slowly moving, drooping downward as it lengthened. The forearm showed up, and told him it was a woman's. As the elbow cleared the porthole the whole limb sagged bonelessly, like a white vine growing out of the side of the ship, and dangled there against the hull.

Meanwhile a second hand showed up, obviously the mate of the first. Then between them came a head of wavy red hair, hanging downward like the arms, so that the face was hidden. The slowness of the whole thing held Whitey there pop-eyed.

"What's she fixing to do, crawl halfway out to get a breath of air?" he muttered.

But when people want a breath of air they lift their heads. Her nose was practically scraping the rusty side of the hull. From the first glimpse of her fingertips she had been slowly emerging, like a human snail from its shell; now she stopped and went into reverse, began to disappear backwards. He guessed the reason at once: the porthole wasn't wide enough to let her shoulders through. Then suddenly he saw something that made his hair stand up. She was a freak! A third hand had showed up. It trailed down the nearest arm, got a grip on it at the elbow, and began to pull it in again after it. It was a heavier hand than the woman's; darker, rougher.

He got it at once, after the first momentary optical illusion had passed. It was a man's hand, pulling her back inside again. Her head disappeared, then her upper arms. Last of all went her two hands, crossed at the wrists and inanimate as severed chicken-claws. Then the porthole was empty, just an orange circle. He decided he wanted to see what was going on in there. If she'd fainted, he knew better ways of bringing her to than ramming her in and out of the porthole like a laundry bag.

Somebody else had beaten him to the door when he rounded the comer of the passageway. A very nautical-looking lady stood there, knocking peremptorily. She wore a white yachting cap atop frizzed gray hair, a jacket with brass buttons, and tennis shoes. Her only concession to femininity was her skirt. A cigarette dangled from her lower lip.

"C'mon, Toots," she was saying in a raspy voice. "You're holding up my show. I'm gonna dock you for this. Y'shoulda been on long ago! Quit stalling and open up this door!" She saluted Whitey with a terse "Upstairs! No customers allowed down here!" Then went back to rattling the doorknob again.

"Upstairs yourself. I'm homicide squad, St. Louis," grunted Whitey, crowding her aside. "Dig me up a passkey, or I'll bust down this door."

"I'm in the red enough," rasped the nautical lady. "If you want to get in that bad, go through the chorus dressing room at the end. There's a door between that won't cost as much to repair."

Whitey ran. The dressing room, luckily, was empty. The chorines were all onstage just then. One shoulder cracked the communicating door like a match box, it was that flimsy.

The girl was seated at her dressing table. She was alone in the room; the third hand and whoever it had belonged to had vanished. She was motionless, slumped before the mirror with her head on her arms. She had on even less than the girls upstairs, and that held Whitey for a minute.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Hey, you!" Then he went over to her and noticed that the top of the dressing table was all messed up with rouge.

Only it wasn't rouge. He lifted her head and for a moment had a horrible impression that it had come off in his hands. A yawning red mouth opened, lower down than the real one. Her throat had been gashed from ear to ear. At her feet was the jagged sliver of glass that had done it, with the

rag that had protected the wielder's hand still folded around the upper half of it.

That let suicide out then and there. Who cares about cutting their hand if they're going to cut their own throat anyway? The glass had come from the porthole—the casing stood inward, just an empty hoop bolted to the frame. Under it the floor was iced with fragments, and with them lay the heavy curling iron that had smashed the glass.

She had probably thrown it at her murderer in the struggle and unwittingly furnished him with a weapon. Or else broken the porthole purposely in a vain attempt to top the blare of the show and attract the attention of those above. The slow-motion pantomime he had seen, Whitey realized, must have been an unsuccessful attempt to get rid of her body. And the line of escape was fairly obvious—the same side-door he had come through, locked by the murderer on his way out. But of all the quick getaways! He must have just missed the killer by the skin of his teeth. But what counted was that the murderer was still on board, and had to stay there until the tug came back—unless he jumped for it and swam the Mississippi River.

II

Whitey threw something over the dead girl, raced out the way he had come, and continued along the passage to the upper end, careening crazily from side to side in his hurry. He whizzed up the stairs there and found himself in the wings—or what passed as such, since the showboat used no scenery. The chorus was still dancing—less than ten minutes had gone by since he'd left his seat. Between them and the backdrop, instead of in front as in a regular theater, was the band. The stage manager materialized from

between two folds in the curtain and Whitey flashed his badge.

"Who's missing out there?" he asked.

"Carrots, leading lady. She's gonna get hell for it, too."

"She has already," snapped Whitey. "Then that's the whole show, outside of her? What do they do, dance all evening?"

"The comedian and his stooge spell them. That's them, those two standing across from us in the other wing."

"How long have they been there?"

"From the time the curtain went up. I seen 'em myself. They always do that. It's cooler up here."

"Save it till later!" said Whitey, and dived down the stairs again, along the passage, and up at the other end. He made it as quickly as he would have by jumping out on the stage and running through the audience, which might have started a panic on the overcrowded boat. He ran up the short vertical ladder to the crow's-nest containing the searchlight and the bored-looking sailor who manipulated it. Just at present, however, he was letting it shoot skyward while he followed the performers with a colored spot.

"Never mind them," ordered Whitey breathlessly, "train that other thing down on the water, close in as you can get it, and keep it going from side to side, so that you'll throw the light on anyone who slips overboard and starts swimming ashore—"

"I take orders from—" the sailor tried to say.

"From me from now on," barked Whitey, "or else I'll knock you offa here and do it myself!" He waited just long enough to see the big metal hood give a half-revolution and splash a big patch of water to daylight, then slowly wheel around to the other side. Every ripple on the surface stood out in the fierce glare.

"Will it go all the way around?" Whitey asked.

"Just halfway," sweated the sailor, "and then back again."

“That’ll do it,” said Whitey. “Train one of those colored ones backwards, into the arc the big one doesn’t cover, and leave it that way—that’ll give us the whole circle. And keep the other one on the go. The minute you spot anything that doesn’t belong out there—I don’t care what it is—lemme know, if you value your tattooed hide.”

“I ain’t got so much as a—” the sailor tried to contradict, but Whitey was already on his way down again. When he hit the below-deck passageway again, the lady captain was still parked outside the locked door. She had quit trying the knob and was deftly rolling herself a cigarette instead. She promptly dropped it at the sight of him.

“Where’d you come from?” she gawked. “I’ve been waiting all this time for you to get in the side way.”

“I’ve been in and out again,” he told her. “Follow me. You don’t look like the kind that throws faints, and I want to talk to you.” They went through the still empty chorus dressing room and beyond. The lady captain glimpsed the prone figure under the mirror and immediately went into an employer’s rage.

“You holder-outer! You letterdowner!” she bellowed. “What d’ye mean by gumming up my opening number? Who d’ye think you are, Ethel Merman?”

“Close what’s left of that door and shut up,” said Whitey sourly. “She’s dead.”

The lady captain was not, to put it mildly, the nervous type. She went over, tossed aside the towel, and spaded one hand under the girl’s flabby arm. “Yep,” she snapped, “cold as yesterday’s headline.” She came away stroking her chin like a man. “Have to get that gal from Tony’s to take her place. Get her five bucks cheaper, too,” she commented.

“Have a murder like this every night?” Whitey said bitingly. “No? Then why not show a little surprise?”

“Boo! I’m surprised!” she came right back at him. “What d’ye want me to do, turn handsprings? All I know is, this throws a hitch into my show. Look at that door! And look at

that porthole! They put them in for nothing, you know; don't cost a cent!"

"I've come across some tough cases in my time," he let her know. "I'd offer you a cigar, only I haven't got the kind that blows up in your face. Now let's get going. Who was she?"

"Carrots Kirby, twenty-four, fifty a week for showing her vaccination mark."

"Run around with anybody?"

"Anybody," she agreed.

"Big help, aren't you?" he glared. "Any way of getting word ashore that we have a murder case aboard?"

"Nope," she said calmly. "Have to wait until the tug comes back at twelve."

"What's the idea? Why doesn't it stand by?"

"That would cost do-re-mi," she stated. "I'd have to hire it for the whole evening. This way I just charter it for the two trips, coming and going."

"You mean you haven't any small boats on this thing? You're crowded to the rails! What would you do if anything happened?"

"This isn't a sea-going boat. We're all lighted up from head to stem, if it's a collision you're thinking about. We've got fire-extinguishers, if that's what y'mean. And my bartender doubles as a bouncer, in case of a riot."

"With water all around, where does he bounce them to?" Whitey demanded.

"He don't bounce 'em to anywhere," she stated elegantly. "He just bounces 'em on the button, and they stay quiet."

"Just a sissy enterprise from start to finish. How long were you in front of that door?"

"Just got there ahead of you."

"How do I know that?" Whitey challenged.

"You don't," she agreed, "but you can check up on it with the bartender. I was watching the show from in back when I saw Carrots missed her cue. As a matter of fact, I saw you

stumble by. Only came down after you did, while you were at the porthole."

Your luck is, Whitey thought grimly, that it was a man's hand I saw hauling her in. He said, "If you were standing in back watching, then who was missing from the show—outside of her?"

"Nobody," she snapped. "I only have the chorus, the two comics, her and the stage manager working for me. The stage manager was on that side, signaling me from the curtain to go page her. The two comics were on the other side, kibitzing with the girls like they always do. I could see both of 'em. Every girl was in place, not one missing."

"Who else y'got on your payroll?"

"Just Shorty behind the light up there, Butch the bartender, and an electrician down in the power room in case anything goes wrong with the lights. We generate our own power, y'know."

"How about the audience? Anyone leave their seats before I did?"

"Not a blessed soul. They never start wandering back for refills until the show's past the halfway mark, anyway."

"Well, did anyone go to their seats after everyone else was seated, then?" Whitey demanded.

"Nope, they all sat down at once. You saw the scramble for seats that went on yourself."

"Well, if I'm going to take your word for it," he remarked, "I'll end up by believing a swordfish took a leap in the window and did it to her. All I know is she's been turned into a tomato surprise and whoever did it is still on board."

There was a tap at the shattered door and the bartender's homely face peered through the split panel. "Shorty just picked up something with the big light—" he began. Whitey nearly flattened him going by, and was up on the platform in no time flat.

"It went down," the sailor apologized. "Only your orders was, anything that didn't belong out there, to tip you off—"

“What the hell was it?”

“Something silver, looked like a big oil or gasoline can. Musta been dropped over the side. It was so close to us I couldn’t get the light square down on it, but I caught the reflection. It made me nervous,” he admitted. “If anything like that spreads around us, all somebody’s gotta do is toss a butt overboard, and—”

“How’d it go down, straight?”

“No, sort of sideways and slow.”

“Then it was empty.”

Shorty sighed. “Gee, that’s good.”

“Bad, you mean! Whatever was in it is still with us, probably spread around nice and lovely . . . How do I get to this power room, where this electrician is?”

“It’s under the stairs that lead up to the stage,” explained the sailor. “You’ve gotta look close or you’ll miss seeing the door.” Down went Whitey again. He had the rather chilling suspicion that the murderer, failing to get rid of the body through the porthole, intended to try a little wholesale arson to cover up the traces of the crime.

And yet the murderer himself was on board, would be trapped with the rest if he did such a thing. What the murderer didn’t know, since the show was still going full blast and no alarm had been raised as yet, was that the crime had already been unearthed, and that there was a detective on board. He intended taking his time, probably, and then swimming for it—with a good head-start. Whitey detoured into the audience for a moment to single out Dulcy and hustle her to the rear.

“What’s the idea, making me give up a perfectly good seat?” she said.

“I want you back here where you won’t get trampled on in case anything happens,” Whitey said. “Now don’t get nervous, but just stand here where I can find you in a hurry —”

“Well, aren’t you the cheerful little ray of sunshine!”

“Tell me about the part of the show that I missed. Did you notice anyone who came on later than the others?”

“No,” she said, then added, “Anyone at all?”

“Anyone at all. I don’t care who!”

“None of the performers did, but the bandmaster keeps wandering off and on all the time, I’ve noticed. I mean he just introduces each new turn and then strolls off again and lets the other five do the playing—”

“I could kiss you!” Whitey said fervently. “None of the others mentioned that. I suppose they thought I meant only the performers. I muffed it myself when I was in the wings before, forgot about him.”

“What do you mean? Who’s ‘he’ ? What’s the band leader done?” Dulcy wanted to know.

“Played a sour note. Remember what I told you—don’t move!”

III

The music was playing no longer. The two comedians had just come on, but the five musicians were sitting in full view. Only their leader was missing. When Whitey got down to the passageway below it was choked with chorus girls, all trying to get into their dressing room at once and do a quick change. They not only slowed him down, they resented his presence in their half-clad midst and began to squeal and claw at him.

“Get out of here! Go back where you belong!” Whitey emerged, protecting his bent head with both arms, and a dance-shoe came flying after him and glanced harmlessly off his skull. They banged their door after them resentfully and the corridor was suddenly quiet.

Just under the stairs was the power room doorway. A heavy smell of oil and machinery seeped out as he got the door open. The place was a labyrinth of greasy generators and what not, shot through with weird, futuristic shadows. It was empty—and it looked very much as if it needed someone in charge of it at the moment.

Quantities of newspapers were scattered about wholesale, all transparent with oil, soaked with it. Nobody read that many newspapers and drenched them that way. The door clapped back on its hinges behind him and the smell became almost overpowering. The two overworked bulbs overhead couldn't get into the corners and angles and light them up.

He advanced warily and an overturned copper oiler on the floor clanged loudly under his foot. A moment later he stumbled over one of the newspapers and a man's upturned shoe was revealed. Whitey crouched down and found a man in the dungarees of an engineer lying flat on his back in a narrow lane of blackness between two pieces of machinery, only his feet protruding into the light. A hefty wrench lying at his heels told most of the story.

The engineer was out cold, but still breathing. Whitey crouched down above him to haul him out into the open, careless of which way he turned his back. It was then that the wrench started to move slowly along the floor like something possessed. The comer of his eye saw it—but not quickly enough. The wrench swung up into the air just as he turned his head, then came down again. Whitey just had time to see the arm wielding it, the face behind it—then both were wiped out in a flash of white fire that seemed to come from his own head.

The fire was still there when he came to a minute or so later, but it wasn't white and it wasn't at his head any more. It was down near his legs. The way it was stinging and biting him would have brought the dead to life. And the blow hadn't been as accurate as intended, or it would have

finished him; too much emotion and not enough aim had been put into it. The biting and stinging made him jackknife his legs up out of the way before he had even opened his eyes.

When he did so, bright yellow flame was fluttering from the scattered newspapers all over the room, in three or four places at once. One of the burning papers had been lying across his own legs. He was partly across the body of the engineer, who was still motionless. His splitting head was still trying to drag him back into unconsciousness again, but pain defeated it. He shoved backward with his buckled legs, and felt his back slip up the oily wall behind him until he was totteringly erect.

He still saw everything double, but the oil-soaked overalls of the man at his feet were already smoking, and the air was full of dancing sparks from the papers. Grease-rags began to smoulder ominously here and there and make it tough to breathe. The room got hot. One of the two bulbs overhead suddenly popped into nothingness. The fire was past the stamping-out stage now.

Whitey grabbed the engineer by one ankle and dragged him out of the little lane that had hidden him. The slippery floor made it easier. Half of the burning papers had taken wings now and were swirling about in the torturing air like huge fire-birds. One of Whitey’s own lisle socks began to peel back in a red thread, and he rubbed it out against his other leg like a mosquito bite. He struggled through the inferno toward the door, the body of the man he was dragging after him snuffing out buttercups of flame along the floor as it passed over them. A belt on the machinery suddenly burned in two and sent up a shower of sparks like a rocket.

He had just enough strength left, in the wilting heat-waves swirling about him, to claw at the door like some idiot thing wanting out and unable to show it in any other way. The door wouldn’t move—was either warped by the

heat or else locked. Whitey could feel himself going, knew he'd never get up again, would be cremated in here. But his fall was his salvation. As his body slumped against the door it gave outward under his weight—and quite easily. In his torment he'd forgotten it opened that way.

Air that was air came rushing past him. He fell on his hands and knees, and behind him the room gave a roar and turned itself into a furnace as it found the draught it had been waiting for. He tugged, strained, and the body of the engineer came slipping over the threshold after him, bringing patches of fire with it like a human torch. The door, released, clapped back again.

He beat out the fire on the man he had saved with his bare hands, listened for heart-action. Too late. There wasn't any; he was dead. Whitey had been through all that for nothing. Chalk up two murders now instead of one. And there were the living to be thought of, dozens of them, up above. He knew better than to yell "Fire!"

He staggered to his feet, reeled down the passageway he had traversed so often tonight, looked in at the chorus girls' dressing room. It was empty, they were onstage once more. The clink of a glass attracted him and he looked beyond, into the room where Carrots Kirby's body was. The lady commodore sat there big as life, a bottle of gin in one hand, a glass in the other.

"Heresh lookin' atcha, sport," she announced blithely. "I'm the only mourner."

She had probably never been torn away from a bottle so suddenly in her life before. It actually bounced and cracked in two.

"Never mind lookin' at me!" he rasped. "There's a fire—keep still about it and get the extinguishers, quick!" One look at his face and she was sober. She came tottering out after him.

"Oh, Lord, and I don't even carry insurance!" she mourned.

“Rockets!” he yelled back. “Send up rockets if you’ve got any—attract someone on shore or some other boat!”

The clatter of a rumba held the audience spellbound as his head emerged from the companionway. Dulcy was standing there where he’d left her, looking very sulky. He flashed past and on up to the searchlight-nest. The sailor had a grievance.

“Now you come,” he growled. “First you tell me to watch the water, then you don’t show up! I picked up a guy out there five minutes ago—I’m following him with the light, but he’s halfway across the river already.”

“Yeah? Well, I was busy having my nails manicured,” Whitey said. He peered out into the searchlight beam, his eyes still smarting from the fire.

“See him?” encouraged the sailor. “Mean to say you can’t see him?”

A black dot bobbed up and down, the head of a swimmer desperately trying to make land. He was going diagonally with the current.

“The Missouri side,” said Whitey. “He’ll have all St. Louis to hide in once he steps out!” He turned and hopped down again to the deck, twisting out of his coat.

The lady captain was busy fanning herself weakly with one hand, a new gin-bottle in the other.

“The fire’s under control,” she panted. “A minute more and it would have sent the lighting system out of commish! After this, I stick to running a tea shop.”

The bartender came up from below, face smudged, dragging an empty extinguisher after him. “Wotta evening!” he grunted. Whitey was kicking off his shoes. Dulcy appeared beside him.

“Wait a minute, you can’t walk out on me like this—” she began. He clambered up on the low rail. “You just finish seeing your show, honey. I gotta little job to do out there,” Whitey pleaded.

He went overboard in a long, not too graceful curve and sent up a thin mushroom of water. Her voice split the air behind him.

“Oh no, you’re not leaving me behind—how do I know what’s going to happen to me?” There was a second splash and she bobbed up right beside him.

“Get back there, you little fool!” he spluttered. “What are you trying to do, drown yourself?”

IV

She kept abreast of him without any effort. “I can swim circles around you,” she said.

There was a pull to the current that set their course for them automatically, just as it had the fugitive’s. “All right?” Whitey kept asking. “Sure you’re all right? I gotta get that guy out there.”

“If you’re going to get him, get him!” Dulcy said crossly at last. “I can last, but I can’t make speed.”

He went into the crawl and outdistanced her. His banged head throbbed; he’d been seasick, hit with a wrench, singed and scorched—but there was no place else to go but down if he quit.

By the time it felt as if he should have been all the way into Kansas, he was still only a quarter of the way to shore. But the quarry, he reasoned, must be having his troubles too. A fellow that stayed up all night shaking to jazz music wasn’t cut out for a cross-river swim. They were sending up rockets behind Whitey, lighting the sky green. That ought to attract a police launch.

Weariness began to creep in, a shortening of stroke, a slowing-up. He went into a side stroke, to give slightly different muscles play. His legs began to drag after him like

so much dead weight. He threatened to fold up and go down any minute, could almost feel something pulling at him from below. He had to quit altogether finally, and not a moment too soon, roll over on his back and float open-mouthed, like a stranded fish. He paddled backhand with one hand to keep from being carried too far out of his course.

A faint threshing, a slapping noise, came from somewhere nearby. The sound of someone agonizedly trying to stay up. At first he thought it was Dulcy, but the cry, when it came, was a man's. Whitey trod water, trying to locate the direction.

The cry came again, far over to the right but a little behind him, not in front. He'd almost passed the murderer in the head-down crawl, or else the other had lost all sense of direction and was heading back toward the boat again! By the time Whitey got to the man there he wasn't swimming any longer but was already in the earlier stages of drowning. The face that turned up despairingly to the sky was the same one that had been limned in white fire when the wrench glanced off Whitey's head.

Whitey came up behind him and caught him by the suspenders. Instantly he tried to turn and get a death-grip on his rescuer, coughing and retching with the water he was swallowing. Before Whitey could jerk away, one madly groping hand had caught inextricably in his shirt and they both went under together.

Whitey kicked like a horse, brought them up again. He pounded his fist like a sledge-hammer into the middle of the band-leader's contorted face. The impact was soggy but shattering. The clutching hand relaxed, the murderer floated unconscious on the water, harmless as a lily.

But the little strength Whitey had had left was gone now. He needed rescuing almost as badly as the bandmaster had a moment ago. Like the proverbial bulldog that won't let go, he kept his hold on the other's suspenders, keeping the two

of them afloat somehow with one wearied, slowly circling arm that felt as though it were going to drop off his shoulder at every stroke.

Thin cries of encouragement were coming across the water; yellow pinpoints marked the portholes of the showboat. Two other boats were standing by it now, attracted by the rockets, and from one of them a second searchlight beam came into play and swept the water with sketchy strokes. The river was talcum-white where it hit.

For Whitey to reach shore was out of the question, even if he let go of the bandmaster and struck out alone. To get back to where the rescue ships were congregating was equally impossible. In about three strokes more he was going to go down.

Nearer than either shore or rescue ships, though, a peculiar round white object was showing in the glare of the interlocked beams. It looked like a large poker chip floating on the water. He moiled slowly toward it, with strokes that no longer bore any resemblance to the act of swimming. It tilted from side to side, but whatever it was it didn't go down. The three strokes were spent, but now the nearness of the objective, the feasibility of getting to it, lent him three more, and then another three—on borrowed time.

Dulcy's head showed up in back of the white thing, paddling it toward him. Water flushed the top of it but it stayed stubbornly afloat. As the space narrowed, she suddenly swung in between them, caught at his flailing wrist, and hooked it onto the circular rim of the white thing. He couldn't have made the gesture himself, the last inch would have defeated him. She quickly shifted over to the other side as the added weight made the object veer over toward him.

It was the bass drum from the showboat orchestra. Somebody had helpfully thrown it in after her.

"Let go of him," she panted, makeup running down her face. "He's gone anyway, and he's weighing you down."

Whitey couldn’t answer, but he held on. The reason may have been he could no longer extricate his numbed hand from the other’s suspenders. The seeking searchlight-beams swept back and forth across them. A police cutter was rapidly drawing near, its green light dipping and rising in its hurry.

“He died on me in the water,” apologized Whitey to his chief, sitting beside the hospital cot, “but at least I got him. A girl in the show threw him down and he went haywire, cut her throat, slugged an electrician to death, and then committed arson to cover up what—”

“Yeah, yeah,” interrupted the chief. “Never mind about that now, he’s dead and that closes the case. You stay under that blanket and don’t be afraid of that whisky the boys sent you.” He got up to go. “I’ll probably have a little news for you after you’ve turned in your report. Somebody else waiting out here to see you.”

Dulcy came in and shot the muffled figure in the bed a rather forbidding look.

“You all right?” he asked timidly. “I—I’m sorry if your evening was spoiled—”

“I give up,” Dulcy said wearily. “I thought taking you out to that thing would get you away from crime for one evening. What’s the use? Separating you from crime is like trying to part a pair of Siamese twins. It follows you around!”

HOT WATER

Hot water is two things. In slang it means getting into trouble, in geography it means a gambling joint just across the California state line in Mexico. Agua Caliente means hot water in Spanish. It means both kinds to yours truly, after what happened that time. I never want to hear the name again.

Ten o'clock Friday night, and all is quiet in Fay North's forty rooms and swimming pool, out in Beverly Hills. Fay has just finished a picture that afternoon and has said something about going to bed early and sleeping until next Tuesday. I have been all around, upstairs and down, seeing that the doors and windows are all locked and that the electric burglar-alarm is in working order, and I am in my own room just off the main entrance, peeling to pajamas and ready to pound the ear, when there is a knock at my door. It is the butler.

"Miss North has changed her mind," he announces. "She is spending the week-end at Agua Caliente. Please be ready in ten minutes."

I am not asked to go, you notice, I am told I am going. That is part of my job. Miss North parts with a generous helping of her salary each week, in my direction, and it is up to me to stick close and see that no bodily harm comes to her. It really isn't an unpleasant job for this reason: on the screen Miss North has become famous for playing tough, rowdy characters, but in real life she isn't like that at all.

She doesn’t drink, doesn’t smoke, and never goes to parties or even night clubs; so all I really have to do is ride back and forth to work with her and shoo salesmen and newspaper writers away from the door.

But she has one great weakness, she is crazy for gambling. She

never wins, but that doesn’t seem to stop her. I feel sorry for her, but it is her money and none of my business what she does with it.

Anyway, she has stayed away from Agua for some time now, after dropping so much there the last time, so she is entitled to blow off steam, I guess, after working so hard. I shake my head about all the good sleep I’m going to miss, but I sling on my shoulder holster, pack a couple of clean shirts, and go out and wait for her in the car without saying a word. A plane would get us there in a couple of hours, but that is another thing about Fay, she won’t get in one, so it means we have to drive all night to be there when the border opens at nine.

Well, she comes out of the house in about five or ten minutes and it seems just the three of us are going, her, me and the driver. For once she is giving Timothy the slip. He is her manager and a very good one, too, but he raised Cain about her losses the last time he was down there with her, and I guess she doesn’t want him around to rub it in. He doesn’t like the place anyway, doesn’t think it’s safe for her to go down there carrying so much money. She has brought several big bags with her, enough to stay for a month, but I guess that is because she is a woman and you have to dress up there. She gets in back and away we go.

“Well, Shad,” she says, “I guess you could kill me for this.”

“No, ma’m,” I say, “you haven’t had a day off in quite some stretch.” Shad isn’t my name, but she calls it to me because when I was new on the job she got the habit of speaking about me as her Shadow.

“Timothy doesn’t need to find out,” she says. “We’ll be back by Monday morning, and if he calls up tomorrow I told the butler to say I have a bad headache and can’t come to the phone.”

It doesn’t sound to me like that is very wise; Timothy might come over twice as quick if he thinks anything is the matter with her, on account of she is such an important investment, but she doesn’t ask for my opinion so I keep it to myself.

Then she says: “This time I can’t lose! I’ll show him, when I come back, whether I’m jinxed or not, like he always says. I’ll make up all my losses, because I know now just what to do. I consulted an astrologer in my dressing room during lunch today, and she gave me a grand tip. I’m dying to see if it’ll work or not.”

First off l figure she means just another new system, every time we go down there she has a new system, none of which ever works, but later I’m to find out it isn’t that at all. The funny part of it is that with me it’s just the other way around. I don’t give a rap about betting or games of chance, in fact I don’t believe in it at all, but I never yet chucked down four bits or a dollar on any kind of a table at all without it collected everyone else’s dough like flypaper and swept the board clean. So then I always picked the nearest sucker with a long face and made him a present of the whole wad—minus the original buck of course—and he went right back and lost it. The wages I get from Miss North are enough for me; I’m no hog.

Well, we drive all night, pass through Dago about seven in the morning, and roll up to the bridge across the Mexican border just as they’re getting ready to open it for the day. Miss North only has to show her face and we clear it, only as usual one of the guardsmen can’t resist hollering after us, “Drop around, don’t be bashful!” which is the catch-word from one of her pictures. She’s so used to hearing it she just smiles.

After that comes a sandy stretch with a lot of cactus, and then flowers, fountains, and a lot of chicken-wire architecture show up, and that's Agua. Miss North engages her usual layout and signs the book "Peggy Peabody" or something, to fool any reporters that may be hanging around. Everybody always stays up all night down there, but I suppose she has to have some place to powder her nose in and change clothes between losses. Anyway, I see to it that I have an adjoining room with a communicating door between. Then we separate to scrape off some of the desert, and in a little while she knocks on the side door.

"You're armed," she says, "so maybe you better take care of this for me until tonight," and she hands me a little two-by-four black toilet case with her initials on it in gold. "I'm so absent-minded I'm liable to mislay it just when I need it —"

Well, I'm just nosey enough to snap the latch and look in it—it isn't even locked, mind you!

"It's the stake for tonight," she smiles sweetly. "Fifteen thousand. I didn't bring much along this time because I'm so sure of doubling or tripling my ante."

"But, Miss North," I groan weakly, "carrying it around like this—"

"Yes, don't you think that's clever of me?" she agrees. "I just dumped out all the gold toilet articles. No one would think of looking in there." Then she says, "See you later," closes the door, and leaves me to do the worrying about it.

Well, the first thing I decide is, it don't stay in that beauty-kit, which hasn't even got a key to it. No matter where it goes, it gets out of there. So I empty it out—it's all ticketed just the way the bank gave it to her—stack it neatly inside a big, roomy envelope, seal it, write her name on the outside, and take it down to the manager's office. He's an American, of course, and perfectly reliable.

"Put this in your safe," I say, "and keep it there until Miss North or me calls for it when the session opens tonight."

“If her luck,” he grins, “is like what it usually is, she might just as well not bother taking it out, because it will only come right straight back in again.” Then he takes out a fat bundle of vouchers and tells me not to bother Miss North’s head about it, but don’t I think maybe she’d like to clear them up and start with a clean slate before she starts plunging again the next few nights?

“But Timothy wrote off everything she owed you people, right after she was down here the last time, and that’s over two months ago,” I object. “I heard him hollering, that’s how I happen to know. Lemme see the dates on some of those.”

Well, some are only from the weekend before, and all of them are later than the last time she was there.

“There’s somebody been down here impersonating her,” I warn him, “and getting credit from you. You better warn your bankers and notify the police.”

His face drops and he tells me, “I never know when she is here and when she isn’t. She always stops off under an alias anyway. Well, I can’t afford to attract attention to a thing like this, it would stop the picture people from coming here, so we’ll just have to forget about these, and I’ll tip off my staff not to let it happen in future.”

And he tears the whole lot of them up and dribbles them into the wastebasket. Most of them were only for medium-sized amounts anyway (which is another reason I know they’re not Fay’s), but it just goes to show there are some regular guys, even in his business.

Well, she comes downstairs after awhile, but I don’t tell her about it, because she’s down here to relax, in the first place; and in the second, it’s Timothy’s look-out, not hers, and everybody in her business has this impersonating stunt pulled on them at one time or another. It’s nothing new.

She’s wearing smoked glasses to keep from being recognized; but then, almost everybody else around is, too, so it don’t mean much.

Well, we spend a quiet afternoon, me tagging after her while she strolls and buys picture postcards; and then at five she goes back to her room to get ready for the fireworks, telling me I can eat downstairs, but she's going to eat alone, up in her room.

Now, here's where the first mistake comes in. I have a right to stick with her, even if I have to eat outside her room door, but I figure everything's under control, that she's safer here than she would be in her own home, that I'm right down at the foot of the stairs if she needs me, and that she'll be down again as soon as she's through dressing.

So I sit me down in the big patio dining-room, and I tear a sirloin at four bucks a throw (not Mex, either). After awhile the dancing quits and the stars, I mean the ones in the sky, show and the big gambling rooms light up, one after the other, and things get right down to business. And still no sign of her. I know I haven't missed her, because I'm right on a line with the stairs and she'd have to pass me on her way in. So I dunk my cigarette and I go up to see what's keeping her.

Well, it seems I pick just the right time for it. A minute later and I wouldn't have seen what I did; a minute sooner and I wouldn't have either.

Just as I get to the top of the stairs and turn down the corridor leading to her room and mine, I catch a strange dame in the act of easing out of my door. She didn't get in by mistake either, one look at the way she's tiptoeing out tells me that. "Oho," I say to myself, "a hotel-rat—or rather a casino-rat, eh?"

Well, I want to see what she's up to and find out who she's working with, if possible, so instead of giving myself away I quickly step back onto the stair-landing and lean over the railing as though I am watching what was going on below. Her head was turned the other way, so I know she hasn't spotted me. She thinks the coast is clear. She closes the door carefully after her and comes hurrying along

toward where I am. I turn around slowly and size her up. She is a tough-looking little customer, with jet-black hair and layers of paint all over her map that you could scrape off with a spoon. She is dressed like a dance hall girl, too—or like what people that never saw one think they are like—only personally I never met one that was such a dead giveaway. In fact, I wonder how she ever got into such a ritzy place with such a get-up. She's got a red shirtwaist on, and a yellow and black checked skirt, like Kiki, that hurts your eyes, only it misses her knees by a mile. But what interests me mostly is that in one hand she is hanging onto that toilet case that Fay turned over to me when we got in. I know it by the gold initials on it. She has lifted it from my room, without bothering to find out if it still has the money in it or not; maybe on account of Fay being right next door, she didn't have time. It is easy to see, though, that she must have overheard Fay tell me what was in it earlier in the day; that's how she knew what to go for. Probably eavesdropped outside our doors.

Well, she brushes by me close enough for me to touch her. She doesn't look at me at all, and I don't raise a finger to stop her.

It may sound funny, my not jumping on her when she is right at my fingertips like that; but the reason is I happen to know there is no money in that toilet case. And as I said before, I would like to see if she has a shill working with her, and where she is heading for with what she thinks she has. Besides, a slippery staircase is no place to tangle with the kind of a customer she looks to be like; the casino bouncers are down below, and she is going down there anyway.

So I let her get two steps ahead of me, and then I turn and start down myself, as if I just remembered something that required my presence below. And I have one hand loose, ready to collar her if she tries to break and run for it.

But she doesn’t; instead, she slows up and takes her time, not hurrying any more, like when she first came out of the room. I can see that she is going to try to bluff it out.

She swaggers along real tough, and everyone is turning around to look at her. Then, when she gets down to the bottom, she happens to pass a guy with a cigarette stuck in his mouth—and doesn’t she reach out and calmly take it away and start puffing it herself, without even a thank-you!

She passes by the main entrance without a look, and heads straight for the big gambling room, cool as a cucumber.

“Well,” I say to myself, “if this don’t beat everything for sheer, unadulterated nerve!” Instead of ducking, she is going to hang around the premises awhile and try her luck with money that she just lifted, which is so hot that smoke ought to be coming out of that case she is carrying this very minute—if it happened to have anything in it! All I ask is just one look at her face when she opens it and finds out what her haul is worth, maybe that will take some of the swagger out of her.

In I go after her, and I buttonhole the nearest bouncer, whom I know by sight.

“Send out for the cops,” I say. “I’m going to present you with a pinch in just about thirty seconds. Camille, over there, squeezing her way in to the middle roulette table—keep your eye on her.” And I tell him what she’s done.

He sends out for the policia and he also sends for the manager, and then him and me and the other bouncer close in on her and get ready to pounce when I give the signal. But first I want to get a load of her disappointment.

Well, they’re as thick as bees around that table—two or three deep—but that hasn’t stopped her; she’s used both elbows, both hips and her chin, and blasted her way through to the baize. We can’t get in that far; all we can see is her back.

“Wait a minute,” I motion them, “she’ll be right out again —into our arms. She hasn’t anything to play with.”

You can hear the banker say, “Place your bets,” and “Bank is closed.” Then the clicking of the little ball as the wheel goes spinning around.

Not another sound for a minute. Then a big “Oo/i/” goes up from everyone at once.

“Killing,” says the bouncer, knowingly.

“Wonder what’s delaying her?” I say. “She ought to have found out by now. Maybe she’s picking people’s pockets—”

The same thing happened a second time; a big long “Oo/i/” sounds like a foghorn.

The manager shows up, and I tell him the story out of the comer of my mouth, “—caught her in the act, and followed her down here. But all she got was the empty kit,” I snicker.

“That’s what you think,” he squelches. “I got my doubts! A voice on the wire, claiming to be Fay North, asked me to turn back that envelope, less than ten minutes ago. I took it up to the room myself—”

“Did you see her take it from you?” I ask excitedly.

“No, that’s why I think something’s punk. An arm reached out from the room, but she stayed behind the door. Claimed she was dressing.”

“Good Gawd!” I moan. “And you turned over fifteen grand like that without—”

“You told me North or you would claim it. The call came from 210, that’s her room, I checked it with the switchboard operator.”

“That’s my room!” I tell him. “North’s is 211, she wouldn’t be in my room; she’s too much of a lady! This phony was in there; I saw her coming out. C’mon! We’ve wasted enough time. The hell with the payoff.”

The Mex police had come in by now, two of them, both higher-ups, this being the casino. The manager and the bouncers shoo everyone aside, the crowd falls back, and we get a good look at what has been going on. The phony is left

standing there all alone. But she is so taken up she never even notices. And she has the fifteen thou all right. Or at least she had it to start with; now she must have two or three times that. In fact, everything in sight is piled up in front of her, nearly chin-high. Her system, it seems, has been to blow the bills she bets with her breath, like handfuls of leaves, letting them land wherever they want to on the number mat. The banker is green in the face.

The manager taps her on the shoulder. “You’re under arrest.”

The Mex line up one on each side of her. She’s hard-boiled all right, like I knew she would be.

“Run along and fly a kite for yourself. Can’t you see I’m busy?”

I stoop down and pick up the toilet-kit, which she has kicked under the table. I shake it in her face.

“This belongs to Fay North. I saw you coming out of my room with it. The manager here turned over fifteen thou to somebody’s bare arm in that room. Now, are you going to come clean or are you going to see the inside of a Mexican jail?”

Well, she keeps looking me in the eye and looking me in the eye like she wanted to say something, and then she looks at all the winnings piled up on the table like she was afraid of something, and she just shuts up like a clam. For a minute I almost have a crazy idea that maybe it is Fay herself, under a heavy character make-up, only just then I turn my head and I see the real Fay come sweeping in the doorway like a queen, heading for one of the smaller side-tables.

“Hold on,” I say, “she’ll tell me in a jiffy. If it was just the empty kit this one lifted, you can turn her loose for my part, but if she phoned down for that money she goes to jail, dame or no dame.”

I run over and I stop Fay and say to her, “Miss North, did you call down awhile ago for that money the manager was

holding for you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, and gives me an unpleasant look through her smoked glasses. “Don’t put me in a bad mood now. Can’t you see I’m on my way to the table? Please stay away from me, I gotta have quiet to concentrate—”

I go back to them and I say, “Okay, off she goes!”

“Why, you—!” she blazes at me, but she doesn’t get any further. The two Mex lieutenants drag her out backwards by the shoulders, kicking like a steer, and there’s quite a commotion for a minute, then the place settles down again and that’s that. Since neither me nor the manager can talk spicko, one of the bouncers goes along with them to prefer the charges and see she’s booked right.

Well, I’m afraid to go too near Fay, on account of she seems to be in a cranky humor and asked me not to distract her; so I sit down just inside the door where I can watch her and be the perfect bodyguard, without getting in her hair. She sure looks spiffy in her gold dress, but she keeps the smoked panes on even while she’s playing. She has the usual luck, and runs out of the fifteen thou, which the house turned back to her, in no time flat. Then she starts unloading I.O.U.’s, and they come over to me to make sure there won’t be any mistake like there was before, but I tell them to go ahead and honor them, it’s the real McCoy this time.

About the time she’s another four or five in the red, a houseboy comes in with a message for her and she quits and goes out after him. I get up to follow her, and she gives me a dirty look over her shoulder, so I change my mind and sit down again, saying to myself, “Gee, I never saw her as snappish as this before!”

But my equilibrium has hardly touched the chair once more, when there comes a whale of a scream from just outside the casino entrance. Then another, which chokes off in the middle like a hand was clapped over the screamer’s

mouth. Then there's a shot, and the sound of a big eight-cylinder job roaring away from in front of the place with its throttle wide open.

By that time the chair is rooms behind me and I'm tearing out the entrance with my own loudspeaker in my hand. There's nothing to shoot at but a little sinking red tail-light which is already clear of the casino grounds and just as I fire at it, it goes out, not because I hit it but because it's too far away to see any more. The porter is sitting on the front steps holding onto his shoulder for dear life, and one of her gold slippers which fell off when she was thrown in is lying there in the roadway.

There is also a scrap of paper a considerable distance away which they must have tossed behind them. I snatch it up as I dash for the garage where Fay's own car is bedded.

The driver is knee-deep in a crap-game, but luckily it is going on right inside the tonneau itself, so I just leap in at the wheel and bring the whole works out with me in reverse. He hangs on, but his three partners fall out, also one of the garage doors comes off its hinges, and almost all the paint gets shaved off that side the car.

Once out it would take too much time to turn it all the way around so I just make a dive through the casino flower-beds and the wheels send up a spray of rose-petals and whatnot. The casino steps are seething with people and I yell back, "Notify the border! They may try to double back and get across with her—" but I don't know whether they hear me or not.

As for notifying the Mex police, what could they do, chase the kidnap-car on donkeys?

"Snatched!" I tell the driver. "Right out of the doorway in front of everybody! I'll never be able to look anyone in the eye again if we don't head them off before this gets out. Reach over and grab the wheel."

He's been tequila-ing, but at least he knows what he's doing. He leans across my shoulders, I duck out of the way,

and he hauls his freight over into the front seat. I give it the lights, and night turns into day ahead of us.

“Got gas?”

“Thank Gawd!” he says. “I filled her up when we checked in, to get it off my mind.”

We finally get out of the grounds, and he tries to take the road to Tijuana and the border.

“Left!” I tell him. “Left! They went the other way, I saw them turn.”

“But there’s not even a road that way—nothing, just desert—not a gas station from here to Mexicali! We’ll get stalled as sure as—”

“Never mind the geography lesson,” I tell him. “Don’t forget, they’re not running on maple syrup either.”

The asphalt doesn’t go an inch beyond the resort limits in that direction and as he says, there isn’t even what you could call a road, just a few burro-cart tracks in the soft powdery dust. But one good thing about it: the tire-treads of their heavy machine are as easy to pick up as if they’d driven over snow.

As if I had to be told this late what the whole idea is, I take time off to look at the piece of paper I picked up outside the casino. “Fifty thousand,” it says in pencil, “gets her back. Notify Timothy in L.A. that the joke is on him, he’ll know what we mean. We’ll cure her of gambling, also of breathing, if he don’t come across.” It is all printed out; evidently it was prepared before they drove up to the casino.

“Americans,” I remark to the driver. “You can tell by the way it’s worded. It’s our fault if we lose ’em, they’ll stand out like a sore thumb if they stay on this side of the line.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, “like a sore thumb with wings; they’re making pretty good headway so far!”

That crack in the note about curing her of gambling makes the whole thing look twice as bad to me, because reading between the lines I get this out of it: Timothy must

have engineered the snatch as a practical joke to begin with, to throw a scare into her and break her of the habit of running down to Agua and throwing away her money. But now his hired kidnapers have double-crossed him and turned it into the real thing, seeing a chance to get ten times the stage-money he paid them. And if there is anything worse than a snatch, it is a snatch with a double-cross in it. He knows who they are, and they know he knows; it's sink or swim with them and they won't stop at anything. Poor Fay is liable to come back to her public in little pieces, even after the ransom is paid.

We haven't once caught sight of them so far, even though they can't possibly make it any quicker than we can over a roadbed that consists entirely of bumps, ridges, hillocks, gullies, with scrub growing all over the place. And yet the treads of their tires are always there ahead of us in the glare of the heads, big as life, so I know we're not wrong. The visibility is swell too, everything stands out under the moon, the ground is white as cornstarch. It's not the seeing, it's the going, that is terrible. One minute the two left wheels are at a forty-five degree angle taking some mound, the next minute it's the two right wheels, and the springs keep going under us the whole time like concertinas.

"Go on," I keep telling him, "get some speed into it; if they can do it, we can! She paid ten grand for this boat."

"But it's supposed to be used for a c-c-car," he chatters, "not a Rocky Mountain goat. That tequila don't go good with all this see-sawing, either!" I take the wheel back from him for awhile and give him a chance to pull himself together.

A minute later as we ride a swell that's a little higher than most of the others, I see a red dot no bigger than a pin-point way off in the distance. In another instant it's gone again as we take a long downgrade, then it shows up just once more, then it goes for good.

“That’s them!” I tell him. “They don’t even know we’re coming after ’em, or they wouldn’t leave their lights on like that!”

“They wouldn’t dare drive over this muck without any,” he groans, holding his stomach with both hands.

“Watch me close in,” I mutter, and I shove my foot halfway through the floor.

Immediately there’s a bang like a firecracker, and a sharp jagged rock, or maybe a dead cactus-branch for all I know, has gotten a front tire. We skiver all over before I can get it under control again.

“That’s been coming to us for the past forty minutes,” he says, jumping out. He reaches for the spare and I pull his hand away.

“That would only go too. Let’s strip them all off and ride the bare rims, the ground’s getting harder all the time.”

We get rid of them and we’re under way again in something like five minutes’ time. But that puts the others five minutes further ahead of us, and the going before was like floating on lilies compared to what we now experience. The expression having the daylights jolted out of you is putting it mild. We don’t dare talk for fear of biting our tongues in two.

A peculiar little gleam like a puddle of water shows up a little while later and when I see what it is I stop for a minute to haul it in. It’s that gold dress of hers lying there on the ground.

“Good night!” he says in a scared voice. “They haven’t—”

“Naw, not this soon. Not until they make a stab at the fifty grand,” I say grimly. “They probably made her change clothes, that’s all, to keep her visibility down once it gets light—”

And away we go, him at the wheel once more.

The sky gets blue, morning checks in, and we can cut the lights now. There’s still gas, but it’s rapidly dwindling.

“All I ask,” I jabber, keeping my tongue away from my teeth, “is that theirs goes first. It should, because our tank started from scratch at the casino, they must have used up some of theirs getting to it from across the line. They also got eight cylinders to feed.”

A little after six we pass through a Mexican village, their treads showing down its main lane. Also, there is a dead rooster stretched out, with all the neighbors standing around offering sympathy to its owner. “They left their card here,” I say. “Let’s ask.” We put on the brakes and I make signals to them, using the two Spanish words I know.

“How many were in the car that ran over that hen’s husband?” I signal.

They all hold up four fingers, also swear a lot and tear their pajamas.

“Hombres or women?” I want to know.

All men, is the answer.

“M’gard!” groans the driver. “Maybe they give it to her and buried her back there where we found the dress!”

“She’s still with them,” I answer. “They got her into men’s clothes, that’s all. Or else there are four in the gang and they have her trussed up on the floor.”

We have a little trouble starting, because they have all collected around us and seem to want to hold us responsible for the damage. A couple of’em go home for their machetes, which are the axes they chop maguey plants with.

“We’re cops,” I high sign them, “chasing after the first car, which has bandidos in it.” When they hear that, they send up a big cheer and clear out of the way. Unfortunately, we knock over a chicken ourselves, just as we’re pulling out; a hen this time.

“It woulda been a shame to separate them two,” says the driver, blowing a feather off his lip.

There are no firearms in the village, so we don’t slow up to explain.

“Shoulda got water,” says the driver. “We’da gotten a lot more than water if we waited,” I tell him.

It’s hot as the devil by nine, and every bone aches.

“We must be way to the east of Mexicali by now,” I mention. “What are they going to do, keep going until they hit the Colorado River?”

“They must have some hide-out they’re heading for between here and there,” he thinks.

“They’re looking for one, you mean. They didn’t have time to get one ready. It was Timothy who cooked up the thing yesterday morning after he found out where she went to. She didn’t even know herself she was coming down to Agua until the last thing Friday night—”

At nine twenty-two by the clock I say, “What’re you stopping for?”

“I ain’t stopping,” he says, “the car is. Maybe you’d care to cast your eye at the gas-lever?” I don’t have to, to know what he means. We’re without gas; and in a perfect spot for it, too.

The wheels have hardly stopped turning before the leather seats begin to get hot as stove-lids.

“All I need is a pinch of salt,” he says, “to be a fried egg. Well, as long as we’re not going any place any more, here goes!” And he hauls a long bottle of tequila out of one of the pockets of the car and pulls the cork out with his teeth.

“Hold on!” I say, and I grab it away from him. “How about trying this on the tank, instead of your insides? Maybe it’ll run on this—”

I hop out and run around to the back and empty it in. He follows me out with two more bottles.

“I laid in a supply,” he says, “for that garage party of mine last night—”

“Give it the ignition,” I snap, “before it finds out what it’s using.”

Well, sure enough, the engine turns over on it, and when I get in next to him, it starts to carry us!

“You shoulda bought a kegful,” I gloat, “it’s lousy with alcohol!”

“Anyway,” he mourns, “it’ll take us to some different place to roast in.”

“I can’t figure,” I’m telling him, “why it hasn’t happened to them; they haven’t had a chance to fill up since we’ve been on their tail—”

When suddenly he stops, this time of his own accord. “It has!” he says. “There they are—or am I just seeing mileages or whatever they call those things?”

They’re so far ahead we can’t even see the car; it’s just the flash of the sun on nickel we can make out from way off. But it holds steady in one place, meaning they aren’t moving any more, they’ve stopped. There are three long, gradual, intervening hollows between us and the flash, separated by two medium-sized rises, not high enough to cut it off. But on a line with them, to the left, there is quite an abrupt crag or cone-shaped mound, the highest thing for miles around. Its shadow falls the other way, they’re right out in the blazing sun.

“They’re stalled,” I say, “or they would have gone around it into the shade. Cut way over to the left, if we can put that thing between us and them maybe we can sneak up and get the drop on them—”

It isn’t the odds that matter, but I keep remembering they have Fay with them, and they are just the kind of rats if they see us coming would—I know the driver is armed without having to ask, she always insisted that he carry a gun on his person just in case. I replace the shot I fired at them from the casino.

“If they flash like that,” he remarks, turning at right-angles to the left, “so do we—they’ve seen us by now.”

“They’re facing the sun, and it’s behind us,” I remind him, “won’t be straight overhead until noon. They can’t tell, unless they got energy enough to climb on foot all the way

to the top of that crest. I don't think they even know we've lasted this far—"

We keep going in a big wide loop, and the hillock slowly shifts, first to dead center, then on around to the right. The winking flash their car gives off disappears as the crest gets in the way, and now we and they are on opposite sides of it.

"Now we'll close in," I say. "See if we can make the shade, anyway, before we get out of the car."

"You shoulda been a general at the Marne," he tells me admiringly.

"How do you know I wasn't?" I squelch.

The shade cast by the summit keeps backing away from us, distances being deceptive in that clear air, but finally when the ground has already started to go up, up, it sweeps over us like cool blue ink—and what a relief! I give him the signal to cut.

"We go the rest of the way on our own."

"Aren't you going to use the car for a shield," he says, "if they start firing at us?"

"There isn't going to be that kind of firing. Miss North is right in the middle of them."

We get out, and on foot we start up to the top on our side, instead of, as he wants, circling around the base. Looking down on them from above will give us a big advantage, I figure; they won't know whether we're a whole posse or just two fellows. It's a tough climb, too; the hill, which looked so smooth from way off, turns out to be full of big and little boulders, and with a tricky grade to it.

"Everything's under control," he heaves behind me, "except suppose it turns out they just stopped to rest instead of being stalled, and they've gone on while we been doing our mountain-climbing act?"

I don't bother answering, it would take too much breath away from my footwork. If they were just resting, they would rest in the shade, not out in the broiling sun.

We get to the top finally, and I motion his shoulders down, so they won't show against the skyline. Then we both stick our noses over and look. The car, being further out, comes in sight first—but there is nobody in it or near it.

"Don't tell me they've gone off on the hoof and left it—" he whispers.

"Sh!" I shut him up, and crane my neck higher. They're in closer to us, right under the brow of the hill, which is almost perpendicular on their side. Three of them are standing around talking it over, and there's a fourth one a few yards away sitting by himself on a boulder.

I nudge the driver and point with my gun. "What d'ye want to bet that's Fay North? He's the only one wearing smoked glasses, like she had on, and the poor guy's barefoot, d'ye notice?" Otherwise the figure has on dungarees, a shirt, and a cap pulled way down on its head.

Well, I have everything doped out beautiful. They haven't seen us yet, so we'll get the drop on them from above, make them reach without having to do any shooting at all, have her frisk them, and then march them ahead of us back to our own car. So I motion him to edge over further along the crest, away from me, so it'll look like there are more of us up here. He's been standing right behind me, gun in hand, looking over my shoulder. He turns to do like I say, and then something happens.

All of a sudden he's flat up against me backwards, pressing as close as he can get and quivering all over like jelly. There's a clatter, and he's dropped his gun. It sounds like a bee or hornet is buzzing around us. He's crowding me so that I can't get out of the way without going over the crest in full view of them, and he has no room to move, badly as he wants to. I twist and look past him, and aiming out of a cleft between two boulders alongside of us, at about chin-level to him, is a perfect honey of a rattler, coiled in striking position. It's so close to him the weaving of its head

almost seems to fan his face—or it looks that way from where I am, anyway.

There's no time to think twice. I whip up my hand and plug three shots into it, close enough to singe the line of his jaw. There's no trouble hitting the thick bedspring coils, I could have almost reached out and touched them, if I'd cared for the pleasure. It strikes with a sort of a flop, but it's dead already, and hangs down like a ribbon. But there goes our chance of surprising them; in a split second we have to topple on our bellies and back away, the way bullets are pinging all over the rocks around us, and sending up squirts of dust. They are certainly quick on the draw, those guys.

The three who were together have shot apart like a busted tomato. One gets behind a bit of scrub; one gets in closer, where there's a little ledge to protect him. And one doesn't get any place at all, goes down on his knees as I get rid of my three remaining shots.

The driver has grabbed up his gun, and shoved over to the other side, to have elbow room. The figure sitting by itself further out has jumped to its feet and started to run toward the car. I can tell by the way she runs that it is Fay North, just as I thought. But she can't make time on the hot sand in her bare feet, stumbles and waddles. The one under the ledge suddenly darts out after her before I have finished reloading, and the second one breaks for it too, at the same time, which is what you call team-work.

The driver gets him the second step he takes, and he slides to a stop on his ear. But the first one has already caught up with her, whirled her around, and is holding her in front of him for a shield. To show us who she is, he knocks the cap off her and all her blond hair comes tumbling down.

"Hold it, don't shoot!" I warn the driver, but he has sense enough without being told.

The guy holding her starts backing toward the car with her, a step at a time. He's holding one arm twisted painfully

behind her back, and you can see his gun gleaming between her elbow and her body sighted on us, but she's game at that. She screams out to us: "Stop him from getting to that car; he's got a tommy-gun in it!" Then she sort of jolts, as though he hit her from behind.

I bum at that, but there's nothing I can do. But the driver doesn't seem to have that much self-control. He's suddenly flying down the incline almost head-first, in a shower of little rocks and dust, arms and legs all waving at the same time. But at least not dropping his gun like before. When I see that, I break cover too, but not quite that recklessly, keeping bent double and zig-zagging down the slope.

Fay is almost hidden by smoke, the way the guy behind her is blasting away, but I see her suddenly come to life, clap her elbow tight against her ribs, imprisoning his gun and jarring his aim. He tries to free it, they struggle, and she gets a terrific clout on the jaw for her trouble. It seems impossible the driver didn't get any of that volley, but he keeps going under his own momentum, as though he can't stop himself.

Fay is out cold now, we are both almost over to her, but the thug with her is only a yard or two away from the car. He lets both her and the gun go and dives for it. He tears the door open and gets in. I jump over her where she is lying, without stopping, because once he gets his hands on that tommy-gun—

He has his hands on it already, as I light on the running-board, but that split second's delay while he is swerving it my way costs him the decision; I tomahawk him between the eyes with the butt of my gun. The tommy goes off spasmodically in the wrong direction and the windshield up front flies in pieces; then him and me and it all go down together in a mess in the back of the car.

The driver shows up in a minute more and sort of folds up over the side of the car like a limp rag, head down. There's blood trickling down from his shoulder.

“Gee, that was swell,” I tell him when I get my breath back, “the way you rushed him from the top of that hill! If it wasn’t for that he’d ’a’ been sitting pretty behind this tommy-gun by now.”

“Rushed him hell!” he grunts. “I lost my balance and fell down it, that’s what happened!”

We truss up the guy in the car, who is all right except that my gun broke his nose, and then we go back to where Fay is sitting up in the sand, looking very bedraggled. Her shoulder is wrenched from the way he had held her, and there is a lump on her jaw, and her face is all grimy and dust-streaked. Even so, when we stand her on her feet and she takes off those smoked glasses, him and me both stare at her and blink and stare some more.

“I know—never mind rubbing it in,” she groans. “After this, I’m through passing myself off as Fay North, rubber checks or no rubber checks. What an experience! I’m her stand-in,” she explains, limping back to the car. “Same measurements, coloring and everything. I guess that’s what gave me the idea. But all I ask you boys is to pick a nice cool jail for me where the sun never shines—if we ever get back to civilization.”

When it finally dawns on me, which isn’t right away, that the real Fay has been enjoying the hospitality of a crummy Mexican jail since the night before, due to me, I begin to wonder if it mightn’t be better to stay out in the desert where I am than go back and face what I have coming to me.

About three o’clock a plane sent out from the casino to look for us sights us and comes down, and the girl and the driver go back in it, but we neither of us say anything about what she has done. I stay there with two cars, two dead snatch-artists and one live one, a pailful of water and a stack of sandwiches for company; and it’s early Monday morning before I’m back in Agua with the rescue party sent out to get me.

She’s been let out of course, but she’s standing there waiting for me on the casino steps.

“Gee, Miss North,” I mumble, “how was I to know that was you, in that black wig and all—?”

She shakes her finger at me and says, “Now don’t try to act modest. You knew what you were doing, and I think it was simply wonderful of you! That was my new system, of course. Remember, I told you I consulted an astrologer the day we left Hollywood. She told me the trouble with my betting was I had the wrong aura! I was too blond and refined. She said if I’d send out tough brunette vibrations my luck would change. Of course I couldn’t tell you, because that would have broken my winning streak.”

“Then you’re not sore?”

“Sore? Why, it was wonderful of you, Shad, the way you put me in jail to save me from being kidnaped. Such foresight—such cleverness! And I’m through with Timothy for trying such a thing on me. You’re my business manager from now on—and I won’t take no for an answer!”

As long as she won’t, I don’t try to say it.

CRIME ON ST. CATHERINE STREET

Hewitt got off the train at the Bonaventure Station with a clean shirt on his back and 75 cents in his pocket. Plenty of people have arrived plenty of places with even less than that, but Hewitt's case was different. He was out to win a bet. A three-cornered argument between himself, two plastered friends, and a New York panhandler was the original cause of it.

"That's all right for you to tell me where to get off," said the panhandler angrily. "I'd like to see you strapped in a strange town where you didn't know anyone; maybe *you* wouldn't put the touch on!"

"I'd clean up," said Hewitt, "and not coffee-and-cake money either. I got brains." He flipped the moocher a quarter.

"You'd cool off," said the panhandler. He shrugged and shuffled off, but the two plastered ones were on the spot with more money than was good for them.

"Here's five hundred says you wouldn't last a week without wiring one of us to straighten you out."

The bet came to two thousand altogether, winner take all.

"No hick towns now, where they don't know what it's all about. And no trying to get work on account of you've got such a cultured personality. It's got to be a place where you don't know a soul."

Hewitt flipped through the pages of a little memo book. “Montreal, then. It’s the only place I haven’t got at least one good address for.”

So they bought him a one-way ticket, took all his money away except six bits, saw him off on the train, and by the time his head cleared he was already across the line. He thought it over, sober, and liked the idea. It was the first time in five years he’d had anything to do except clip coupons, swill highballs, and hit a little white ball from atop a pony.

“What’s the best hotel in town?” he asked a taxi driver.

“The Mount Royal.”

Hewitt cracked the door shut. “Thither,” he said. Any sap without money can go to a cheap rooming house; it takes a smart guy without money to go to a swell hotel and get away with it.

“Dollar,” said the taxi driver.

“Pay the man for me,” said Hewitt to the doorman, “and put it on the bill.” And try to collect, he added to himself. He sauntered in. “Best in the house,” he told the clerk. “Baggage? Oh, that’ll be along later—”

One condescending look and the clerk’s faltering attempt to secure payment in advance faded away in confusion. Hewitt’s tailor had done a good job.

“Send up a menu—and, yes, two tickets to a show.” And when he had been shown to his room, he nodded with restrained approval, as though it just about made the grade, nothing more. “Suppose you draw me a bath,” he told the bellhop.

“Beg pardon, sir. I’m not very clever with pencil and paper, but it’s just inside if you’d care to see it for yourself.”

“Bright lad,” commented Hewitt. “Remind me that I owe you fifty cents.”

Showtime found him on St. Catherine Street, Montreal’s Broadway, a pair of second-row orchestras in a little pink envelope in his breast pocket. Now, he said to himself, for a

partner. That panhandler in New York could have done the same thing, he kept thinking, instead of bumming dimes; it showed what a lot of difference a few brains made. He was forgetting, though, that the panhandler didn't have on a two-hundred-dollar custom-made suit, nor did he have Hewitt's high polish to see him through; also, that this was only the first night—there were six more to go.

A girl waiting for a bus caught his eye. He stepped over, touched his hat. "How would you like to take in the show at the Palace?"

"I call a cop," she said promptly, turning her head away.

"I don't think he'd have the price on him," he suggested amiably. "Why not let me take you instead? I have the tickets right here." He showed them to her. "There's no catch, you can leave me right afterwards, but I hate to sit through a show alone. Stranger in town," he explained.

She turned slowly and looked him speculatively in the eye. Next she took in the way he was dressed; lastly her glance fell on the two tickets sticking out of the envelope. On it was penciled, *Hewitt, 909, Mount Royal*.

He could almost read her thoughts: an expensive hotel, expensive clothes, a stranger in town. An American stranger at that, the most helpless of the species the world over. Her slim heels pivoted on the pavement, got in line with his.

"I go wiz," she said soberly. Under the glaring Palace marquee she said, "It is the fonniest thing ever happen to me. Why you do it, I do not know."

"Because, as I told you, I'm all alone in town."

"You do not know anyone at all?"

There was dynamite somewhere deep down under this situation—he knew that already; he decided to keep hammering away until he struck a spark. "Not a soul," he said, handing the tickets to the doorman.

"Poor m'sieu," she answered, going down the aisle ahead of him. Once they sat down, her eyes were on the show, but

her mind was busy elsewhere; he could tell that by looking at her. He knew there was a phone call coming sooner or later, but didn't know just when.

It came sooner then he expected.

She got up and whispered, "I telephone, eh? To say I am delay, ozzerwise zey wonder why I no come home."

He let her get to the head of the aisle, then got up and followed her. The door of the middle booth was just closing when he showed up; he got into the one next to it and shoved his ear against the partition. No one yet seems to have thought of a sound-proof phone booth, but even so her Canadian-French was hard to unwind, and his Paris days didn't do him much good.

Margot, Perroquet, and Louie all popped out, especially Louie, lots and lots of Louie. She was Margot, Hewitt hazarded, and Louie was working the racket with her. The Perroquet must be where she was going to bring him to be rolled.

That was the best he could do with just three words to work from. The way the word *riche*, which is fortunately the same in any language, kept bouncing around in the next booth, he knew he was on the right track. It wasn't just a call home to brother Louie.

Hewitt reached down in his pocket and touched the three quarters he'd brought with him from New York; that decided him on seeing the thing through. Margot and her Louie were in for a big disappointment. He had nothing to lose—in fact, he even stood a good chance of coming out ahead; he was going to give them a run for their money. Besides, it was already too late in the evening to seek adventure; why not take what he was offered?

When she came tripping blithely down the aisle again, he was sitting in his seat. "What did Maman say?" he asked her out of the corner of his mouth.

"She say, 'Never mind, *ça fait rien*.' "

"I'll bet she did!" he murmured.

Trudging up the aisle later she inquired solicitously, “You tired?”

“Never before four,” he assured her.

“Zen mebbe you care to stop in Le Perroquet five-ten minutes?”

“You took the very words out of my mouth,” he assented.

She gave him a startled look. “Huh? You have heard of it before?”

“Never until now. Any place you say, though.”

She relaxed again. “We go, then. It is a nice *intime* little place.”

They followed St. Catherine Street past the bright-light zone and down toward the French district at its lower end. The Perroquet didn’t go in for neon advertising; it was just a doorway in a very dingy-looking house, with a painted sign over it.

“It is all the way up,” she said. “You don’t mind?”

Hewitt, trailing after her up the endless stairs to the top floor, wondered briefly in just what shape he would be coming down again; but he did not let it worry him too much. Never cross your bridges, he reminded himself, until you come to them. There was another one about burning your bridges behind you, but this wasn’t the time to think of it.

Arrived at the top floor rear, she knocked on the door. “Only membaires,” she whispered, “like private club. But zey let us in, you will see.”

“And my initiation,” he concurred, “will follow almost immediately.”

The door was not locked, just modestly closed to prying eyes. A waiter opened it and nodded them in. The place was just a big attic, furnished with wooden tables and long parallel benches, a loudspeaker, and a wicket in the wall through which drinks were handed out for distribution.

But it was not quite as bad a trap as Hewitt had expected; he could tell by the curious stares Margot drew as she

preceded him to a table that she was not in cahoots with the entire place, that he would have only herself and the Louie fellow to buck if it came to a showdown.

It was an underworld hangout, no doubt about it, but they wouldn't all jump him together, which was something. The feel of a gun on his hip would have been something more, but the only gun he owned was in a desk drawer on Manhattan Island. The squat, aluminum-topped saltcellar on the table for flavoring beer was about the same circumference as a gun muzzle, he, calculated, fingering it. By the time Margot had finished giving the waiter the order, it had disappeared from the table into his side pocket. She didn't even miss it; she propped her elbows comfortably on the table and waited for the drinks to come, her catlike eyes agleam.

Louie, it seemed, was not in the place yet; if he had been, he would have been over by now. The idea, Hewitt surmised, was to get him as boiled as possible ahead of time; then when Louie carelessly sauntered in, he would be a pushover for a rolling and maybe a quiet dropping into the St. Lawrence River.

What they failed to take into account was that he happened to be used to a quart of the best Scotch daily, starting in before breakfast; also, that he mightn't be well-heeled enough to get past the first round in a pay-as-you-go joint like the Perroquet. Which is exactly what happened. The problem solved itself automatically when the waiter stood there and coughed after putting down the first two drinks.

"Trow him a feesh," said Margot impatiently. "He doesn't know a gentleman when he sees one."

Hewitt looked up. "How much?"

"Sixty cents," said the waiter.

Hewitt hauled out his three quarters and made him a present of them, then downed his highball without drawing

breath. “Stay with yours,” he advised her, “or else we’ll be walking out again.”

Her cat-eyes popped. “We just order anozzer, no?”

Laughing at her bewilderment, he shook his head and pulled out the lining of his pocket to show her. “Only on the house. That was my last six bits.”

“Oh, *mon dieu*, wiz zose clothes, you—!” She crumpled like a balloon contacting a pin. “*Sacré!*” she gasped. “Why you let me sink you a *riche* American?”

“I didn’t tell you I had money,” he grinned.

She started hitting herself on the forehead. “He keel me for zis! He keel me!”

“He? Who?” said Hewitt innocently.

“Never mind!” She grabbed him by the shoulder. “You get out of here, quick! You go now, before—”

Hewitt shook his head doggedly. “I like it here. I’m staying for the evening.” He was enjoying himself immensely at her expense.

Seeing it was useless, she jumped up and started for the door. “You wait, I come right back. I go down, wait at ze door. I have to explain somesing to someone.” Then as he tried to get up and follow her, she pushed him down again. “No, no, please! He have a bad temper; he is in enough trouble already—I come right back, I tell you! Here—” She tossed him her purse for security.

She had given herself away so thoroughly by now he didn’t have the heart to rub it in. She went scurrying out and the door closed after her. The whole thing had been in English, and every sallow face in the room was turned his way, thinking he had just had a row with her.

He gave her a minute or two of grace, but he was dying to get a look at this Louie guy’s ugly phiz when he heard the payoff, and maybe save her from being cuffed around a little; so he got up and went after her, shoving her purse in his pocket. The whole room grew expectantly silent.

Getting to the door he collided with an edge of one of the tables, and the aluminum salt shaker in his pocket gave out a loud clunk as it struck a pitcher of beer. Every eye was instantly on that bulge, in his coat pocket and knowing looks were exchanged.

He closed the door after him and began to tiptoe down the four flights of stairs toward the street, hoping to creep up on the pair without their seeing him.

There was a subdued drone coming from somewhere down near the entrance that might be two voices in excited French conversation; it was hard to tell this far up. Below the third floor it grew louder, not only because he was getting nearer but because the voices were rising.

He recognized Margot's whine, pleading desperately with someone. It was Louie, all right; she must have stopped him on his way up, and he wasn't taking it handsomely, judging by the scuffling and face-slapping that began to be audible. He was taking it out on his partner because he thought she had double-crossed him.

"Why, the rat!" exclaimed Hewitt aloud.

He quit tiptoeing and began to lope down a few steps at a time. Behind him, he was dimly aware, the door of the Perroquet had opened, and its denizens were edging cautiously forward, trying to peer down the long, dim stairwell.

Margot screamed something in French, than there were two thunderous explosions that shook the whole rickety house, and a moment later he had flung around the last turn in the stairs and saw her lying spreadeagled halfway down the last flight. A thin layer of smoke hovered over her like a ghostly blanket.

The street entrance showed wide open—and empty. No one could have got out that quickly. Hewitt couldn't have stopped if he had wanted to. He simply cleared her body with a crablike sidewise jump, and went past it under his

own momentum. But he didn’t see the gun lying two steps below her.

His foot shot out on it like a squat black skate; he missed all the rest of the steps, did a complete forward somersault without managing to break his neck somehow, and went tumbling groggily out into the open, skinning his palms and jarring his jaw on the sidewalk.

Behind him he was conscious of a ratlike scurrying toward the back of the house and the groan of a warped basement door somewhere under the stairs. Before him a helmeted bobby was racing up from the opposite corner, banging his club hollowly against each metal lamppost as he passed it. The sound went wailing up and down St. Catherine Street.

Hewitt didn’t wait to fit words to the tune; the thing to do was to get Louie before he had time to burrow his way out of that basement. He picked himself up, turned, and darted inside again. The patrolman shouted something and the stone facing of the doorway gave a funny click, as though a bullet had just bounced off it, but Hewitt wasn’t there any more.

He was making tracks for the back of the hallway, with just a glance up the stairs. The way Margot was still lying there head down in the middle of all the Perroquet Apaches, he knew she must be beyond all help. She’d been a gyp, but she’d been a cute little devil at that; his thumbs were flexing in and out, dying to get around that Louie’s throat.

The door he’d heard close was the one behind the stairs, a low shoulder-high thing; it gave the same grunt a second time when he opened it himself. The china knob came off whole in his hand; a puff of cold, musty air hit him in the face. There was a jabbering from the stairs above, and the cop’s shoes came slapping back toward where he was.

“ ’Alt!” he roared, at the sight of Hewitt’s shadow on the wall before him. There was a cannon boom that seemed to

lift the house off its foundations, and the lobe of Hewitt's ear stung and turned wet.

"Who ya firing at?" he yelped angrily, and threw the loose doorknob with all his might. It missed the cop but caught the dim light bulb screwed into the wall; there was a pop, a tinkle, and everything went pitch-black.

Hewitt heard the cop's head go slamming into the dead-end wall that bounded the hall, and the "Oof!" as all the air left his body. He didn't wait to hand him the smelling salts; if he'd been shot at in the light, he hated to think what would happen to him in the dark.

He ducked through the low cellar opening, pulled the door after him, and massaged it frantically all up and down its rotted edges, collecting splinters. But there was a bolt near the bottom and he shot it home, stooping to do so. Before he could straighten up again there was strange music sighing just over his head, like the low whine of a flexible saw, and as he reared something slapped him lightly back and forth between the eyes.

He froze, then caught at it, felt the handle of a swaying knife imbedded in the panel. So Louie was a pretty good shot, was he? Could aim by ear as well as by sight? Pretty good, but not quite good enough this time. He'd had a gun and he'd had a knife, and now he had nothing left—unless he was a walking arsenal—and was going to get the stuffing kicked out of him!

Hewitt wrenched the knife out of the door, and from the other side of it there was a muffled: "Oh, you would, would you!" and another T.N.T. blast that sent little flying pieces of wood into his face.

"Oh, ideal spot to be in!" Hewitt intoned silently. Bullets in the face and flying knives in the back! He flung himself flat on the doorway landing, grasped the knife hilt between his teeth, and began to crawl on his stomach down the brick cellar stairs like a snake.

The door behind him was anything but quiet, what with pounding of fists, kicking of feet, and heaving of shoulders; but it would hold a minute or two longer, since they did not know where the bolt was to shoot it away.

But the cellar below him was tensely silent, with Louie standing waiting in it somewhere. For all he knew Hewitt was bleeding to death just inside the door, but he was afraid to go over and find out, afraid of bullets coming through the door. Hewitt writhed down on his palms and kneecaps.

“Sounds like we got ’im,” a voice said outside the door. Louie thought so too. Louie was going to find out differently in just about a half minute.

The stairs stopped and the contorted Hewitt found himself on level cellar floor at last. Still couldn’t see a thing; the knife had come in a straight line behind him, though, and there hadn’t been a sound since, so Louie must still be standing where he had thrown it.

Forty years of accumulated dust was packing Hewitt’s nostrils, and he began to feel a sneeze coming on. He put one paw out before him to creep a little farther onward and instead of landing on cold flooring it landed on warm shoe leather. Louie was standing right over him, he had almost crawled between his legs!

Louie must have felt the reptilian touch, as of something slithering across his shoetops. There was a scream of terror from somewhere over Hewitt’s head, the foot jerked spasmodically, and Hewitt got a kick in the jaw that made him see stars. The knife clattered out of his mouth, along with little grits of tooth enamel. He grabbed instinctively for the retreating leg, hooked it, then his hold weakened as the sneeze finished what the kick had done, and he lost the leg again.

At the same instant the heroic door finally split up into black and white ribbons, white from the flashlights playing on the other side of it, and the cops came through. They

came through impulsively, to say the least, not having expected the door to give way just when it did.

The foremost one tried to stop short on the landing, but was crowded off by the two at his heels, and went ricocheting down to the bottom. His mates came down on top of him, and the three of them were in a welter of arms, legs, and winking torches that threw big white polka dots all over the walls.

There was a faint crash of tin, that had nothing to do with them, from an outlying section of the cellar, and Hewitt picked himself up and ran toward it, bent double. He found an opening in the subdividing wall by sheer luck, ducked through it, and instantly was moiling up a crumbling incline of rolling, treacherous coal, that kept going higher as he went along.

The ceiling closed down on him, and a greasy tin chute, impossible to scale, reared before him. But just over it the open grate through which coal was dumped into the house was within arm's reach, and the shoved-aside lid showed him how Louie had made his getaway just now.

Hewitt caught hold of the rim from below, chinned himself until his head was above ground level, then agonizingly drew his jack-knived form up after him, knees pressed up to his chest. He came up like a sooty mermaid into the open air.

They were shooting again down in the cellar; they seemed to do nothing but shoot, without ever hitting anything. He brought his feet up over the edge, straightened up on them, sucked in air, and slyly edged the heavy lid of the coal hole back in place with one foot. Then he started going someplace else with great determination, looking around him as he went.

He had come out, not on St. Catherine, but one street over; there seemed to be but a single cellar under the two houses, placed back to back. Which was a fine arrangement, he felt, one that ought to be encouraged.

There was no sign of Louie, and for the first time in fifteen minutes he was glad of that. He didn't feel equal to taking him on just then.

The hum of the crowd gathered in front of the Perroquet carried clearly over the quiet rooftops from St. Catherine, so he turned down the other way at the first side street he came to. The tip of his ear burned like a blister from the cop's bullet, and his jaw, which had been frozen ever since the kick, slowly came to life again with a pleasant throb and ache. He put his handkerchief to his face and it came away black with coal dust.

He had to get off the streets pronto; his whole appearance was a dead giveaway, and it was he they were after, not Louie; but he didn't know which way to turn, didn't even know how to get back to the Mount Royal. It was the bet that kept him going, now that he had come this far.

"You'd cool off," the panhandler had said.

"I'd stay out of jail," he'd bragged.

"If you get locked up," his friends had warned, "that means being housed and fed at the city's expense, and we win the dough."

Even so, if it had meant just giving himself up, explaining his connection with the affair, then walking out again, he would have chanced it; but he had about as much chance of clearing himself as he had of taking a trip to the moon. He was chained to the murder link by link, and every step he had taken since eight thirty had added another link. Hurrying along, hugging the walls of houses, he reviewed the whole mess in his mind.

He'd picked her up at a bus stop, with people standing all around; he'd even seen them grinning about it; they'd remember when the time came. The doorman at the theater, the usher, they'd remember too; that part of it would all come out.

Next, the Perroquet—the whole bunch there had thought they'd seen it this way: first, the quarrel at the table in English, then the girl jumping up and running away from him, then his going after her. Worst of all, the way the bulge in his pocket, that was really a salt shaker, had bumped the corner of a table and sung out. What chance had he of proving it wasn't the gun found lying two steps below her a minute later?

Lastly, a minute after he dove down the stairwell, she screamed something up it in French, then two shots rang out. They got down just in time to see her lying there and him doubling back from the street doorway to dive into the cellar.

The police had their own little links to go by from that point on. One of them had a good look at him as he sprawled out the doorway for a minute, then plunged back inside. Chased to the back of the hallway, he threw something at the light and smashed it (or so the cops would swear) to make good his escape. Holed up in the cellar, he tried to knife them through the door (again they'd swear this, and under oath). Who but a murderer would go that far resisting arrest?

And the whole crew, cops and Apaches alike, had come so close to seeing the thing done under their very eyes that, human nature being what it is, someone would eventually pop up and swear he *did* see it—and that it was Hewitt he saw do it.

Meantime Louie, who was just one step ahead through the whole chase, hadn't been seen by a soul, either outside or inside the house. It was like a ghost committing a murder, and passing the buck to the living.

Hewitt, hustling along the byways of midnight Montreal, every shadow an enemy, realized that he himself hadn't seen Louie at any time, not once from beginning to end. He'd come upon the girl's body; he'd heard a slithering down the hallway; he'd heard a cellar door squeak closed;

he'd heard a knife whistle across the top of his head; he'd put his hand down on somebody's shoe, and an unidentified voice had screamed in the darkness. Just that, and nothing more—not a look at his face, not even a shadow on a wall as the cop had seen in his own case. And no one, not a living soul, to back him up in the few disembodied sounds that were all he had for evidence. For all he knew there wasn't any Louie.

But there *had* to be; he clung to that idea as his only hope. Without it he was sunk. She'd called someone named Louie from a telephone booth; she'd run downstairs from the Perroquet to head him off, Hewitt himself had grabbed his leg in the cellar, only to lose it again. There *was* a Louie, and Hewitt had to find him (in a town where he didn't know one street from the other) to save his own neck! Nice, sweet, soft job!

If he once got hold of Louie, then the maze would begin to unravel. There were things like prints on the knife and gun, where they had been bought, and who had bought them, that would come to his help, loosen the chain of circumstantial evidence against him; but until he had Louie there was no use counting on those things—there was too much that outweighed them. Once the police got their mitts on Hewitt, it was goodbye to him—he'd never have a chance of clearing himself. He had to stay on the loose until he had produced the real killer or he was done for.

He didn't even have a nickel left, couldn't even get off the streets and lie low anywhere, unless he went back to the Mount Royal, and to do that was like inviting arrest. He thought of the panhandler in New York briefly and muttered, "Maybe you were right, buddy, maybe you were right."

A police car came cutting around the corner just ahead and went shooting down the same narrow street he was following, a movable headlight on it sweeping the doorways from side to side. He shrank back into the shadows; it had

just missed him by inches—if he'd been a block farther on it would have caught him from behind!

The car cut out again at the next corner and disappeared. They were looking for him all right, zigzagging all over town!

That decided him. It was the lesser of two evils—the Mount Royal or being snatched up on the streets. He had a chance of getting away with it at that, if he didn't stay there too long. They mightn't have traced him to the Mount Royal yet; he didn't see how they could have. Eventually they would, probably before morning. If he was going there at all, the sooner he went, the safer it would be; the longer he delayed, the riskier.

First he had to find out where he was. Since this street had already been gone over once, it was better than trying a new one. He stayed on it. It was dead; there wasn't anyone on it he could ask. A janitor emptying ashes had gone inside again before he could catch up to him. At the next crossing a cop, evidently going off duty, nearly bumped into him. He was so scared for a minute that he instinctively did the natural thing.

" 'Scuse me, lost my bearings. Where's the Mount Royal?" The whole force couldn't have heard about it at the same time; this was blocks away from the Perroquet.

The cop touched his helmet politely, as per regulations. He told him, adding it was too far to try to walk. Before Hewitt knew what had happened he had thrown up his arm and signaled something or someone in the distance.

Hewitt steadied himself by putting out his hand to the wall; he kept his face in the shadow, not knowing if there was still soot on it. "Here I go!" he thought. A minute later a taxi came tearing up and slurred to a stop beside them.

"Take this gentleman to the Mount Royal," instructed the cop, and closed the door after him. "Good night," he added.

Hewitt was too limp to answer. He slipped down the back seat cushion to his shoulder blades, let himself be carried

away like a patient on a stretcher, his tongue hanging out.

He'd recovered by the time they got near the hotel. "Take the back entrance," he ordered the driver. He knew just what he was going to do. It was crazy to go up to 909 and just sit there waiting for them to come and get him. He'd go in through the tavern at the rear, breeze past the reception desk, borrow twenty-five or so on his bill, walk out the front way, and lose himself.

The cab drew up and the driver gave him a shrewd look.

"Just hold it," Hewitt said negligently. "Be right with you."

He might as well lose the cab too while he was about it, he figured, otherwise it would provide another of those damned connecting links to wherever it was he went from here. He flung into the smoke-filled taproom, ordered half ale and half beer, and stepped back to peer through the amber-glassed swinging doors that commanded the lobby.

The hotel detective stood out like a sore thumb, from the mere fact that he was studiously minding his own business with newspaper and cigar. The hell with him, thought Hewitt impatiently; he wouldn't have known a fugitive from justice if one came up and shook hands with him. But there were two other men chatting across the desk with the clerk. Were they guests or were they plainclothesmen?

" 'Arf and 'arf," said the bartender behind him.

The radio was bleating: "—and even in our own Montreal we're not free from blah-blah-blah. A young woman named Margot Baptiste was atrociously murdered less than an hour ago by an American gangster who picked her up on St. Catherine Street. The man is still at large, but his arrest is expected momentarily.

"And don't forget, ladies and gentlemen, the *Eagle*, through whose courtesy these news flashes are being sent to you, is still offering its one-thousand-dollar Civic Virtue Law Enforcement. Reward for the private citizen who, brings us information leading to the arrest of any and all

such blah-blah-blah. This offer does not extend to the police, of course; simply to private individuals.

"We believe the whole community should cooperate. Remember, the *Eagle's* motto is 'Keep Kanada Klean from Krime.' So get busy, you upright, law-abiding citizens and amateur sleuths, and maybe you'll win a thousand dollars —"

"Yes, maybe," sneered a barfly somewhere behind Hewitt. "It's just a publicity stunt. I bet if you did go to them with any information, they'd find a way of getting out of paying."

"How can you tell?" objected a second one, "unless you go there and try it? And nobody's been able to try it yet, because the police always get the Johnny first—"

" 'Arf and 'arf," pleaded the bartender, Hewitt kept his back turned. Weren't those two guys ever going to clear away from that desk out there?

"And now," droned the air waves, "to help you win that thousand, here's a description of this latest enemy of society, as furnished by the police. Listen carefully. Height, six feet one. Light-brown hair. Blue eyes. Weight about medium. Talks with an American accent, of course, and at the time of the murder was well-dressed; in fact, unusually so. Dark-blue suit, white shirt, blue four-in-hand—"

Hewitt's breath was steaming the glass in front of him, it was coming so hot.

"So if you see or hear of anyone answering to that description—but remember, don't just telephone in, you must call at the *Eagle* office personally and bring proof to substantiate your report."

" 'Arf and 'arf," whined the bartender wearily.

Hewitt barged out through the flap doors. He didn't actually run, but it was the quickest time anyone had ever made through that dignified lobby. He put a whole row of columns between himself and the desk, getting to the front entrance; but still there was a big open space between each

column, and he had to pass close enough to the hotel dick to have been able to touch him.

“Hi, Mac,” he saluted him loudly, and was gone. They were almost always called Mac anyway, and it carried over to the two at the desk, which was all that mattered.

He breezed out through the front entrance, as penniless as when he’d gone in, but still in circulation at least; and immediately two loving arms were twined around him in a bear hug. The taxi driver was stocky, and not in a trifling mood.

“No yer don’t, no yer don’t. I kinder thought so! In one way, out the other, eh? Well, I’ve ’ad that tried on me before, me fine gent! Now do I get paid, or do I ’oller for the police?”

“You get paid,” agreed Hewitt unhesitatingly. “Only I’m not through yet. First you take me where I’m going—” And, with his eye on the hotel entrance, he wondered desperately where he *was* going. “Now—er—I have it written down right here,” he stalled. “Get in first and let’s get going, until I can find it.”

He closed the door after him and the driver started off. “Yer better find it before we get past the first copper, or you’re going to the station-house,” he glowered.

Hewitt, sweating blood, went through the fake of tapping his pockets all over, the driver’s jaundiced eye on him in the mirror—and suddenly he found it! Pulled it out—out of nowhere! Through all the crawling on the cellar floor, through all the flight through darkness, it had miraculously stayed with him, deep in the capacious inner pocket of his coat—the envelope-sized flat purse that dead Margot had given him to hold for her when she went downstairs to meet her doom.

He opened it, shaking like gelatine. A little change, some face powder, a post card from a girl friend.

“Got it or ’aven’t yer?” asked the driver impatiently.

“Got it!” said Hewitt, reading from the post card. “Such-and-such St. Antoine Street.”

“Bad neighborhood, that,” said the driver morosely. “Don’t try any of your—”

The cab could hardly get into it, it was such a narrow lane. And the problem of getting away from the driver had only been postponed a while longer, not solved. There wasn’t enough in the purse to pay what Hewitt now owed him.

Nor was hanging around this St. Antoine address any safer than the hotel had been, for his purposes. Since the police had established her identity almost at once, they must have been here long ago to check up on her. They might still be here questioning her people, if she had any. Even if they’d gone by now, her people would turn him in without compunction, if they could get their hands on him, thinking he’d killed her.

But maybe she’d lived alone; a bad little egg, rolling people at bars, she wasn’t likely to stick close to the bosom of her family.

He took the card out again and scanned it. Written French wasn’t as tough to make out as the spoken kind. “I saw your sister yesterday,” he spelled out. “They want you to come home. I didn’t tell them where you were—”

So she did live alone, and her people wouldn’t be able to tell the police where. It might be days before they found out for themselves; people like this weren’t the kind to come forward of their own accord with any helpful information. They were on the other side of the fence.

Anyway, it would be better to hide up there for tonight than to keep running around in the open like a hare; it was taking a chance, and a big one, but at least he’d be behind walls and not at the mercy of the first cop who set eyes on him.

First, though, he had to get rid of this gas-buggy Old Man of the Sea whom, apparently, he could not shake off.

He couldn’t pay him and he couldn’t run out on him; the fellow would tell where he’d brought him to. Staring up at the dead, unlighted windows of the dingy flat, he got an idea—why not keep the cabbie with him as a house guest? In fact, it was the only way out, except for throttling him on the spot.

The driver, meanwhile, was drumming his fingers menacingly on the side of the cab.

“How about it?” he growled. “This ’ere’s the number you want, or are you thinking of setting up light ’ousekeeping in me machine?”

Hewitt got out and jerked his thumb. “The money’s upstairs. Come up with me and you’ll get everything that’s coming to you. I’m too tired to chase down again tonight.”

The man was beside him in a minute, fists forming. “Into an ’ole like that? Oh, no, I’ve ’ad that ’appen to me before, tool Now then!”

Hewitt stuck his hand into his coat pocket and suddenly thrust the head of the salt shaker against the driver’s hip. “Now then is right. In you go, or your cab’s a widow!”

They marched into the doorway shoulder to shoulder.

“Put your paws down,” ordered Hewitt. “This is no holdup—it’s an invitation to rest a while. Light a match.”

There wasn’t even a gas jet burning in the dump. He didn’t know what floor it was on, which door it was. The match flare revealed a row of rust-flaked iron letter boxes. Some of them had names on them, three were without any. One of the three was on the first floor.

“Light another and keep moving,” said Hewitt, jogging his captive with the salt shaker. “Stand there with your face up against it.” He stepped back out of reach, and felt in Margot’s purse for the key. No key was in it. “Turn the knob,” he said gruffly, to hide the panic in his voice.

The driver turned it, and the door was locked.

“Stick your fingers up and feel along the top.”

Something fell to the bare floor and he let out a sigh.

“All right, let yourself in.”

The driver did so, then quavered, “I ain’t got no money, guv’nor—”

“Neither have I,” snapped Hewitt, “so we’re going to keep each other company.”

“Then you ain’t gonter—?”

“No, I ain’t gonter murder you. Go on, don’t stand here in the hall all night!”

The key rattled in the lock like a pair of dice, the man was shaking so. He pushed the door open and edged in. Hewitt took the key out, stepped in after him, closed and locked the door, and they were in pitch-darkness.

“Don’t move now, I’m covering you. Light another match.”

A sort of half light came on, and Hewitt made out a gas jet on the wall, but it was sealed with lead. There was a candle stuck into a bottle on the table. One hand still in his pocket, Hewitt picked it up with the other, held it pointed toward the match. As he did so, liquid wax dripped out of the hollow around the wick. A drop of it touched his hand, still warm.

Hewitt tensed, set the lighted candle down with a crash that nearly split the bottle, and, his eyes shot around the four sides of the room like those of an animal caught in a trap. The driver was too thoroughly cowed by now to take advantage of it. Or too slow.

A bed, a broken chair, a closed window too dirty to see through, met Hewitt’s whirling glance—nothing else.

But there were two doors facing them, close together, both closed. He lowered his voice.

“Get over to one side of that first one,” he told the gray-faced driver, “close up against the wall. Reach out and yank it all the way open, as far as it’ll go.”

Hewitt stayed where he was. It was no use trying to get out now anyway; if there were cops behind either one of those doors, it was too late—they had him. But the soft

candle grease could also mean they'd been here just now and gone away again.

The driver stretched out his arm full length, as though he were going to touch a live wire, and brought the door slamming around toward him. A water closet stood revealed.

"Move over and open the next one," muttered Hewitt. "Don't get in front of it, either." He kept twitching in funny places, not with fright, but because he was keyed up.

The driver edged along the wall, reached for the second knob, and gave it a jerk. The door flopped back and this time showed a row of the dead Margot's clothes.

The letdown was terrific. The driver could have jumped him half a dozen times if he'd only had the sense to realize it.

Hewitt took a good look, then said, "Close it again—close it tight. Now go over in the corner and sit down on the floor. If you move I'll shoot you full of holes."

The driver was in no mood to be skeptical; he did as he was told with great haste, then collapsed into a shivering cross-legged squat.

Hewitt went over to the bed, pulled all the musty covers off it, took his hand off the salt shaker long enough to tear one of the sheets into strips. The driver grimaced at the bondage he saw being prepared for him.

Hewitt tore a split in the mattress along one of the seams, pulled out handfuls of gray cotton batting, and dumped them on the floor. The driver began to perspire copiously, as the thought that he was in the power of a maniac crossed his mind for the first time.

Hewitt stepped into the water closet, felt along the rusty, mildewed drainpipes, and began to tug at them with one foot up against the wall as a lever.

A whole section of one came off in his hand with a bang, and he came out all wet, but holding it like a bludgeon. The driver's terror was rapidly nearing the point of hysteria.

Hewitt wrapped a piece of sheeting around the pipe, making a blackjack of it. Then he said, “Light a match and pass it to me.”

When the driver saw him deliberately drop it into the little mound of cotton batting and shove the whole heap up against the closed door with his foot, the limit of his endurance had been reached.

“Ow!” he gibbered. “What’re you gonter do, burn me alive in ’ere?”

“Quiet!” rasped Hewitt, and moved up alongside the door, his back pressed to the wall.

The mattress stuffing began to smolder. Thick smoke crept up to the crack of the closet door and found the keyhole. The air began to grow hazy. Hewitt and the driver could hardly see each other any more. The candle on the table guttered and threatened to go out.

Somebody coughed chokingly, but not in the room itself. A minute more and the door shot open, partially concealing Hewitt. Margot’s dresses began to stir. A revolver came through them first, at waist-level, and a man stepped out after it.

He was short, but muscular as an ape, and as ugly as one. He was half blinded and perspiration was pouring out from under his beetling black brows. He came a step farther, saw the driver huddled in the corner. The gun started to turn that way.

Hewitt brought the piece of lead pipe down on the back of his head with a springy little fillip. The thug went down flat on his face, and stayed there, stunned. It only took him a minute to come to, but when he did he found himself sitting on the broken chair, his arms securely fastened behind him with strips of bedding. Hewitt had his gun, and he was laboriously writing out something with a pencil stub on a piece of paper on the table.

“But if you saw ’im in there the first time I opened the door,” the driver was saying, “why did you close it again and

go to all the trouble to bring ’im out?”

“I didn’t see him,” Hewitt answered, “but I’ve got good eyes. I saw the muzzle of his gun peering between those dresses, covering my belly. One move and I’d have been in two pieces. He must have had another gun hidden away here, and we interrupted him when he came back to get it.”

“Well, then,” protested the driver, who liked things explained to him, “why didn’t you just let fly at ’im through the door, instead of choking a person ’arf to—?”

“This may work sprinkled on the tail of a bird,” Hewitt grinned, taking the salt shaker out of his pocket and placing it on the table, “but I don’t think it would have stopped big, bad Louie.”

“ ’Oly mackerel!” gasped the driver. “And ’ere I’ve been shaking in me boots ’arf the night!”

“That’s what I want to get at,” said Hewitt. “How much do you think would repay you for the trials and tribulations you’ve been through?”

The driver wiped his nose coyly, first on one side, then the other. “Oh, I dunno. It’s a real pleasure ’elping a gent like you. Say, ten dollars.”

“Just sign this,” Hewitt told him. “It’s an agreement to split with me fifty-fifty on any money I can put you in the way of collecting. Your share will be five hundred. Steady,” he added, supporting the reeling driver by an elbow, “I want the signature legible. Now help me lug this bozo out to your cab. We’re going down to see the Managing Editor of the *Eagle*.”

Just 24 hours after he had left for Montreal, Hewitt’s two friends back in New York got a Special Delivery letter from him:

“Enclosing money order for $1500. I increased my six-bit capital two thousandfold since yesterday. You can add it to the two thousand coming to me from you two birds. It seems I was wanted by the police for a while last night, so a taxi driver friend of mine collected a thousand for turning

me over to one of the dailies here. Then I got a thousand myself for turning in a guy named Louie, who had been wanted for a long time. The Managing Editor, at last reports, is having a nervous breakdown in a sanitra um. I won't be back for a while, as I am to be chief state's witness when the trial comes up, but meanwhile am staying at the best hotel in town at the city's expense. Was I right? All it takes is brains."

The End

PICK UP THE PIECES

The assistant manager, who had come up in person, opened the door and stood aside to let Mr. Smith see the room he had just bought. “This has two exposures, cross-ventilation, circulating ice-water; you can’t hear a pin drop this high up,” he babbled. “I think you’ll like it. You going to be with us long, Mr. Smith?” He ground his hands together expectantly.

Mr. Smith came in after him carrying a small satchel. He showed no interest whatever in the advantages just pointed out to him, in fact did not even look about him. He put the small satchel down.

“Just for tonight,” he said briefly. “It’ll do. My wife’ll be up in about half an hour.”

The assistant manager’s face fell a little.

“Oh, just overnight?” he said disappointedly. “In that case I’m afraid the rate will be a little higher—”

“That’s immaterial,” said Mr. Smith impatiently. “Put me down for whatever you think it’s worth.” He rested one hand on the door as though waiting for the man to go.

The manager’s face had brightened again. “Yes, Mr. Smith. Hope you’ll be comfortable, Mr. Smith.” He pointed toward an outlet in the wall with a cord dangling from it. “There’s a three-station radio there, to help you pass the time.”

“I’m not in the mood for music,” said Mr. Smith tartly.

The assistant manager left the room backwards and closed the door after him. Mr. Smith promptly went over to his satchel, unlatched it, and took out a pair of pajamas, a bathrobe, bedroom slippers, and a toothbrush in a holder. The satchel, empty, he kicked under the bed. He opened the door, glanced at the number on the outside of it, and closed it again. Then he went over to the phone and put through a call. While he was waiting, he opened a flat hammered-silver case and took out a cigarette. The initial on the case was not S, any more than was the monogram on the pajamas and robe. Mr. Smith evidently spelled his name different from most people.

"Hello, this the agency?" he asked. "This is Walters. You can send the young lady over whenever you're ready. I'm in room fourteen-ten. . . . What?. . . . Oh, Smith, of course. I wasn't in the mood to pick a fancy name." He hung up.

Mr. Smith's statement to the manager about his wife's arrival proved accurate. Mr. Smith evidently had that rarest of all things, a wife who didn't keep him waiting. Her knock sounded on the door half an hour after he had checked in, almost to the very minute. He had meanwhile discarded his coat, vest and necktie, unbuttoned his shirt at the throat, and put on the robe over it. The pajamas he left neatly folded on the bed beside a corner of the turned-down covers. Mr. Smith said "Come in" and the door opened. Mrs. Smith entered the room.

She was blonde, blue-eyed and almost twenty-two—a good five years younger than her husband. Her swagger black-and-white checked coat was tightly belted around the waist, and in one hand she carried the feminine counterpart to his own satchel, a patent-leather overnight-case. The Smiths traveled light, it seemed.

"Good evening," she said formally, and closed the door behind her.

"How do you do?" her husband answered with equal formality. "Make yourself at home."

She had gone ahead, however, without waiting for his permission. She placed the overnight-case on the opposite side of the bed from his pajamas and began to unpack it. From it she took a cobwebby negligee, frilly pajamas, mules with pompons, a nail file, and no less than five magazines of the motion-picture type, plentifully illustrated. She wasn't, evidently, counting on his being very good company while they were in the room together.

"Those your own things?" he asked with a faint flicker of curiosity. "Or do they lend them to you?"

"Oh, we're supposed to supply our own," she answered matter-of-factly, slinging the lingerie over her arm. "But if you take care of them like I do mine, they last a long time. I don't wear them at home; you see, that saves them." She went toward the bathroom. "I'll change in here," she said, and closed the door after her.

When she came out again, she looked attractive enough to wreck anybody's home. The bare room had become suddenly intimate, cozy, with this vision in peach-color chiffon shuffling across it, hanging up her dress and coat in the closet, sinking comfortably into a chair, and fluttering the pages of a magazine, one leg crossed over the other. She reached for a cigarette without taking her eyes off what she was looking at. Mr. Smith extended his case toward her, but she was already lighting one of her own.

"Thanks just the same," she said. "I always bring a pack with me—some of 'em smoke cigars." She looked up. "I would like to use the phone though. Do you mind?"

"Help yourself." Mr. Smith waved his hand generously.

She got up, went over to it, and asked for a number with a Washington Heights exchange. "They sent me out in such a hurry," she apologized. "I didn't have time to make this call before I left. Trouble is they charge ten cents in a place like this—"

"Forget it," Mr. Smith condoned.

Someone got on the line and she called eagerly: “Oh, hello, is that you, Mrs. Conway? Yeah, this is me . . . Listen: I’ll be working late again tonight; will you see that Mickey drinks his Ovaltine before he goes to bed? . . . I left it on the stove already mixed. Thanks, will you?” She hung up and found Mr. Smith’s eyes fastened upon her curiously. “My little boy,” she explained. He sat up a little in his chair. “Sure,” she insisted, smiling fondly but not at Mr. Smith. “Don’t you believe I have a little boy? Three years old. One of the neighbors looks after him when I’m out on a case.”

The bigamous Mr. Smith cleared his throat tactfully. “Your husband—er—living?”

She showed no emotion whatever. “He took a powder,” she said flatly. She returned to her chair and they sat facing one another from opposite sides of the room.

“Care for a drink?” he asked.

She shook her head firmly. “I never drink while I’m working.” She looked around thoughtfully. “But you ought to have a bottle in the room for atmosphere; most of them do. They might flash pictures or something.”

“Oh, Lord no!” he said. “Nothing like that. Everything’s under control.”

She shrugged. “It wouldn’t make any difference to me whether they did or not. They always give me time to cover my face with a handkerchief or something anyway. It wouldn’t be fair not to,” she explained.

“I’ll send down for a quart and two set-ups,” he said, getting up. “Have you had any supper? Would you like something to eat?”

“Oh, don’t bother,” she said politely. “I usually stop in at a cafeteria on my way home and get myself something—”

”May as well have it now while we’re waiting,” he urged. “There’s lots of time.”

“Just a ham on rye then,” she said, almost bashfully.

When the bellboy had brought the order, he glanced at the distance that separated the two chairs. He didn’t

venture to grin outright, but it was easy to see there was a grin on his mind. He seemed to be under the mistaken impression that their aloofness had something to do with his presence, would thaw the minute his back was turned.

It didn't. Mrs. Smith sat on the edge of one chair, nibbling her sandwich in a ladylike manner. Mr. Smith leaned back in the other, all the way across the room, slowly sampling a very little rye in a great deal of ginger ale. The desultory remarks they exchanged from time to time were purely of a professional nature, had nothing sentimental about them whatever.

"This Mrs. Conway that takes care of your little boy, does she know what you—uh—work at?"

"Of course!" She gave him a surprised look. "It's an honest living—what's wrong with it? My name's never mentioned. I'm always 'an unknown blonde.' I don't have to put up with half the familiarity a taxi-dancer does, and I don't have to take off as much as I would on a burlesque runway—" He seemed to have hurt her feelings. "It's not my fault if people can't get along with each other. If they'd loosen up the laws of this state a little, there wouldn't have to be any set-ups like this. But as long as there has to be, why should I turn down good money? It's just a form of acting really, anyway, only instead of using a stage it's done in a hotel room with detectives for an audience. I get a commission on each assignment."

His mouth twitched a little at that, but he steadied it with his lower teeth.

"How can you be sure you're not being gypped?" he wanted to know.

"They know better than to hold out on me," she declared. "All I'd have to do would be to step up to the referee, whisper 'collusion,' and the client's case would be thrown out and the lawyer disbarred maybe." She brushed the crumbs of the late sandwich off her fingers. After a while she said: "You're younger than most of the cases I get."

“Yes,” he sighed, “I guess I’m not so old.” He looked down into his highball. “But young or old, I lost my drag it seems.” She studied him in silence for a while. Finally she asked: “Is she coming herself or just the detectives?”

“She’ll be here with them. Take a look at her; let’s see what you think of her.”

“You used to be awfully proud of her, didn’t you?” she said quietly.

“How do you know that?” He laughed wryly.

“I could tell by the way you said that just now. I bet you used to go around when you were first married saying ‘Take a look at her. Isn’t she swell?’ Maybe you didn’t say it, but you thought it just the same.”

He looked down at his glass again. “Doesn’t everybody feel about like that—at first?”

She studied him some more and again they fell silent. Presently she asked: “Is she in on it or will she really think —?”

“It was her own idea,” he said, “or at least a friend of hers.” He poured a thimbleful more rye into his glass, drowned it with ginger ale, stuck his tongue into it. Then he sat warming it between his two hands.

She narrowed her lids at him shrewdly. “You can shut me up if I’m out of order,” she murmured, “but you still love her, don’t you?” It was a statement, not a question. His own eyes narrowed back at her.

“Little one,” he said abruptly, “mind-reading isn’t what you’re here for tonight.”

“All right, it’s your party,” she agreed tonelessly, “and none of my business. But you’re not fooling me any; it’s written all over your face. I’ve been present at too many post mortems. How do I know? Because you’re the first one hasn’t tried to pass the buck and tell me how misunderstood you are.”

His color mounted a little and he set down his glass with an impact.

“Suppose we go back to talking about you or the weather or the World’s Series,” he suggested pointedly.

She kept smiling, though. “You’re the boss, Sir Walter Raleigh.”

“Why do you call me that?” he wanted to know.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe to show you I’m not as dumb as I seem to be.” Then she asked innocently: “Wasn’t he the one got down in the mud and let some dame walk all over him?”

He was getting more annoyed by the minute. “As far as I’m concerned,” he said curtly, “he’s just a cigarette!” Then, to get back at her possibly, he snapped: “And who doubled for you, by the way, when your own affair went boom? I forgot to ask you that.”

“I never got one for myself,” she said quite simply. “Oh, no. I don’t believe in divorce. You see, I’ve seen so much of it.”

He was still trying to recover from the shock of that when the long-awaited pounding on the outside of the door came at last. She was sitting there demurely shaping her nails with the file when it sounded; he was sitting in his own chair across the room, staring thoughtfully at her, thinking about what she had just said. He signaled warningly with one finger. “Here they are!” She tossed the file away, dragged the negligee invitingly down off one shoulder. He grabbed his highball-glass, jumped up, and went to perch intimately on the arm of the chair she was in. He bent over her lovingly, slipped his free hand behind her back. “Let’s give it some music,” she whispered, and plugged in the radio-outlet. Then she let her head fall caressingly against his shirt-front. The whole thing was done in a minute.

The thumping wasn’t repeated a second time. A pass-key turned in the lock, the door shot open, and two men and a woman came in. They stopped just over the threshold and stood there looking. The two in the chair didn’t stir. “Well?” said Mr. Smith quietly.

One of the men turned up his palm; the middle of it showed silver instead of pink; then he put it back in his pocket again.

“This your husband?” he said to the woman.

The second Mrs. Smith was a little older than the first, a good deal prettier, and unquestionably better dressed. A silver-fox piece was looped dashingly over her shoulder. She was not angry; in fact she even had a whimsical little smile for Mr. Smith, as though there was some understanding they shared between them.

“Unquestionably,” she said in a clear, cool voice. “But maybe you’d better ask him yourself, hear what he has to say about it.” The detective was too busy poking at the pajamas on the bed and taking in the peach negligee to notice the peculiar smile on her lips. He indicated her with his head.

“This lady your wife?” he asked.

“You heard what she said,” admitted Mr. Smith.

At this point his companion in the chair gave a phoney little peep, took her head off his chest, and struggled to her feet. She shrank back against the wall and tried to look guiltily embarrassed without being any too good at it. Even the best of actresses, however, need a minute or two to warm up.

“Well,” said the detective, making notes on the back of an envelope, “I guess that about covers everything. Pardon the intrusion. Shall we go now, Mrs. Walters?”

The second Mrs. Smith was still smiling at the corners of her mouth. “You can wait for me down in the lobby,” she said. “I’ll be right down.” The detective went out and closed the door after him. The minute he was gone, her smile broadened. “Let’s all have a drink together to show there are no hard feelings. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

“And here,” spoke up the second of the two men who had come in with her, “is the wherewithal.” He held up the

bottle of rye and sniffed it critically.

The second Mrs. Smith laughed indulgently.

“Just leave it to Fred,” she remarked knowingly to her husband, “to find out if there’s any liquor in a room.”

“You were the one suggested a drink, Peggy,” Fred reminded her with a grin.

“You’re using Fred for a witness, I suppose?” her husband asked.

“Yes, but he’s not writing any of it up in his paper, are you, Fred?”

“Good old Fred!” said the husband sardonically, throwing a cold look at him. The first Mrs. Smith glanced at him searchingly as he said it. Then abruptly she went to the closet, removed her dress and coat, and locked herself into the bathroom. Neither of the three paid any attention to her. When she came out, dressed, they each held a glass in their hands. Mr. Smith offered her one.

“Join us?” he invited. Mrs. Smith the second was smiling fatuously, her arm linked in Fred’s. The first Mrs. Smith took the glass that was handed to her and crossed the room toward him. “Don’t say hello or anything to me, Fred,” she complained bitterly. “That’s right, act like you never saw me before!” He stared at her open-mouthed in surprise. “I didn’t mind your not speaking to me while the detective was in the room, but now that he’s cleared out, I think the least you might do is say good evening, after what we’ve been to each other—and for so long!” The second Mrs. Smith had stopped smiling all at once. “Have you two met before?” she queried with a puzzled look.

“Have we! Have we!” The girl in the plaid coat was getting into her stride now, face flushing with excitement as she turned again to Fred. “What’s the matter, don’t you want them to know you know me? Ain’t I good enough to associate with any more? Maybe you think you’re going to get rid of me that easy!”

Fred’s face had gone from white to red and back to white again.

He finally managed to get his breath back.

“What do you mean?” he shouted angrily. “I never saw you before in my life! I never set eyes on you at all until I came into this room tonight! Either you’re crazy or—or—” He began to shake with excitement. “What’s your racket anyway? What is this, a frame-up?”

The second Mrs. Smith had slipped her arm from his, however.

“You should have told me, Fred,” she murmured in a low hurt voice.

“I tell you, Peggy, I never saw the girl before; I don’t even know her name!”

“Just listen to that! Just listen to that, will you?” cried his accuser shrilly, filling the room with her voice. “I wish I had a penny for every time he’d called me Janey!”

“You’re a damn liar!” exploded the man.

Mr. Smith rose from his chair. “Listen, Fred,” he said wearily, “would you and your girl-friend mind getting out of my room and doing your fighting someplace else? We’ve got our own troubles.” The second Mrs. Smith had turned her back to them and gone over by the window, holding her gay handkerchief to her chin.

“Yes, I think you’d better go, Fred,” she said in a muffled voice.

“I certainly don’t want to be dragged into that kind of a mess.” The deadly blonde in the checked coat delivered the coup de grace. “But don’t think you can come back to me!” she squalled violently. “Little Mickey and I can get along beautifully without you! We don’t want any part of you if that’s the way you feel about us.” She got the door open, slipped out, and raced headlong toward the elevators.

He caught up with her outside on the street, just as she crossed to the other side and looked back to stare up at the hotel windows. “Hey, wait a minute!” he said wrathfully.

“You little four-flushing, double-dyed—!” He knotted his fist and held it under her nose. “If you were a man I’d—!”

“Don’t try any rough stuff,” she advised coolly. “There’s a cop just down the street; one well-placed scream and he’ll be on your neck.” She gazed across at the hotel entrance. “There goes your friend the detective,” she remarked contentedly, “on his way home alone. She must have phoned down and told him not to wait.”

“I want to know what your idea was, doing that!” he bellowed. “You know you never set eyes on me before tonight!”

“I know that and you know it,” she admitted calmly, “but you couldn’t get her to believe that, not now any more, for love or money.”

He took her by the arm and started to shake her back and forth. “You’re coming back up there with me and tell her the truth, d’you get me?”

She paid no attention to him; she was judiciously counting the hotel windows from the street up.

“—thirteen, fourteen. Those must be the windows of the room, up there.” As she spoke, two of the lighted squares suddenly went black. “Sure, those are them all right.” She turned to him then. “I wouldn’t disturb them now if I were you. I think they’d rather be alone. No use waiting around either, pal; she won’t be down any more tonight.”

THE CLOCK AT THE ASTOR

It was raining and the lights of Broadway gleamed upside-down from the shiny sidewalk. She came hurrying along from the direction of the Fifties, hanging on to a dog-eared suitcase with one hand. It was fairly large but it must have been fairly empty, for it swung lightly against her thigh with every step she took. She kept her head down to keep the flying drops out of her eyes. There wasn't anything about her to attract attention; she was dressed just like everyone else. Her skirt just missed her kneecaps by about an inch and her hat looked like an inverted bowl jammed down on her head. A flashing sign across the street proclaimed "Garbo talks!" Another one a few blocks down retorted "Barthelmess sings!" There were hardly any silent pictures being shown any more.

The illuminated news-belt around the middle of the *Times* building was laboriously quoting President Hoover. Something about two chickens in every pot. News vendors, hugging doorways to keep out of the rain, were selling papers date-lined 1929.

She didn't pay any attention to any of this as she hurried along, grip in hand, bucking the traffic that cut across her path at each side-street. It was nothing to her. She was leaving it for good. "For better or worse" was the way the words went. She'd hear them said to her, right to her face, by a man holding an open book in his hand, tomorrow about this time, a thousand miles away from here, where they

used lights just to read by and not to turn night into day on the streets. That was what he'd promised, and she believed him; she didn't care what anyone said.

"But if he is the quaint old-fashioned marrying kind," her chum had said, with eyebrows way up to here, "why not do it right here? What's the matter with New York? Why go all the way out to the sticks?"

"Because," the girl had tried to explain, "he's had a job offered to him in his home town and he's taking me back with him; he wants his folks to be there at the ceremony."

Even her landlady, when she had checked out of the rooming-house just now, had warned her: "You better bite that minister and make sure he's not stuffed with straw before you go through with it."

All of which fell on deaf ears as far as she was concerned. She knew what was the matter with them. Broadway had gotten under their skin; they thought there was a catch in everything. That was why she wanted to get away while the getting was good, before she herself got that way.

A taxi-fender just grazed the calf of her leg as she scurried across Forty-fifth Street. Ahead the marquee of the Astor offered shelter, had kept a big patch of sidewalk dry under it. She was going in there anyway; that was where he'd told her to wait for him. He was bringing the tickets with him and had promised to pick her up at eight-twenty at the latest. Their bus pulled out at eight-thirty. Now that this rain had come up, she was glad he'd made it the Astor instead of the bus-terminal itself. It was just an alley between two buildings; bus-lines didn't have much in the way of accommodations yet, and you had to take pot-luck with the weather. As she guided her valise in through the revolving glass door ahead of her, she looked very young and rather inexperienced—at least for Broadway.

She looked around her as she entered the lobby. He wasn't there. There was the usual crowd, standing, sitting, pacing back and forth, lounging against the columns,

everybody waiting for somebody else. The Astor lobby has always been New York's favorite meeting-place and probably always will be until the building comes down around it. Tonight the rain had increased their numbers. She went through to the back as a precaution, first of all, and glanced up and down the transverse alley that runs through Forty-fourth to Fifth. He wasn't there either. He'd said the front anyway. She went back and she was in luck. Somebody's appointee showed up just then and one of the big chairs fell vacant. The girl with the valise sank into it, tucked her grip under her legs, crossed her knees and relaxed with a sigh. Any minute now he'd be here.

But he wasn't. Minute ticked after minute into eternity and the glass door facing her kept turning endlessly, and yet he didn't show. The group about her changed imperceptibly. All the faces that had been there when she arrived had been called for and delivered one by one, and Broadway kept feeding it new ones. She had no wrist-watch to consult like most of the others. Even that dollar-and-a-quarter alarm back in her room had gone out of whack weeks ago. She had to keep turning around and looking over her shoulder at the clock high up on the wall behind her. It was so imposing one didn't dare dispute it. A million pairs of eyes have sought it in their time and tried to read their fate by it: "I haven't been stood up, have I? . . . Is he through? . . . Doesn't she care any more?" And still the hands go slowly round through the years, ticking off New York's evenings. Still the same two gilt cupids hover lovingly above it, one on each side, heartless under their gold-leaf.

More frequently and yet more frequently she began to turn and glance at it, each time with more of a jerk of the head. The five-minute intervals became one-minute intervals; then she was looking every thirty seconds, twisting and untwisting a handkerchief that had come out of her pocketbook. Eight-twenty-eight . . . eight-twenty-nine. . . . They couldn't make the bus now, not even if they

broke their necks hurrying. Eight-thirty—the bus had gone. What was the matter—what had happened to him? If she only knew where to reach him! But he'd checked out of his own room hours ago just as she had hers. Maybe he'd been run over on the wet street—

Panic lapped at her slim ankles but she kicked it back, took a grip on herself. No use losing one's head. Maybe there was a later bus; maybe he hadn't been able to get reservations on the first one. Still, why didn't he come and tell her, why did he let her stew here like this in her own juice? He knew where to reach her; he knew she was waiting here for him. Didn't he want to go through with it? Was he backing out? Needles of ice ran up and down her spine. He wouldn't, he couldn't do a thing like that to her! He knew she'd given up her job last Saturday, let her show start out on the road without her, on his account, and that there was no chance of getting another until the beginning of the new season. He knew she'd given up her room tonight and told everyone the reason why, and that she couldn't go back there and face them, tell them she'd been ditched. The few things she'd bought she'd blown all her savings on. He'd stranded her high and dry, and if he didn't come through, where was she?

Twenty-five to, twenty to, a quarter to. Her small chest was moving up and down like a bellows now, with fright and resentment and scorn all mixed up together. The things they'd said to her, her friends and the landlady and the stage manager, all came back to her now and got in their dirty work at last. Sure, they'd been right, why hadn't she listened, why had she let him make a fool out of her? Broadway mightn't trust its own mother, but at least Broadway knew its human nature.

She'd stopped looking now; there was no use any more, and people had begun watching her curiously, especially that elderly guy over there with the black ribbon holding his glasses and the stock-broker set-up. She was steeped in

dismal apathy now, and without knowing it her chin was low, just missed the five-and-ten crystals round her neck. As the hands behind her up on the wall passed the quarter-hour and went into the homestretch toward nine, she clung to one last shred of hope. It wasn't much consolation, but it was all she had now. It was this: he had no reason yet for doing this. If she'd given in to him last night or the night before, or any of the other nights he'd tried so hard to get to first base, the motive would have been clear. But there wasn't any so far. She'd heard of them getting cold feet after they'd got what they wanted, but never, until now, before.

Little by little the fear subsided, left her. This wouldn't kill her, she'd live through it, she'd pull through. Suppose she had no job and suppose she had no room, tomorrow always came. At least he hadn't had the last laugh on her, that last masculine laugh that has gone echoing down Broadway through the years. She could hold her head up! But replacing the first fright that was gone now came a fine walloping anger. A little home of their own with a porch and a front lawn! Yeah! And morning-glories round the door! Yeah! And chickens in the back yard! Yeah! And his mother and sisters would love her, would show her how to bake her own pies; she'd be one of the family! Yeah! God, how she hated him!

"Pardon me, you dropped your handkerchief." The benevolent-looking old gentleman with the glasses had finally worked himself up to the point of tackling her. She didn't blame him at that. Twenty-after. She'd been here a full hour now. People didn't come to an appointment that much ahead of time; he knew the coast was clear.

"Thank you," she said, and took it back. She could hardly see him at all through the waves of heat that were coming out of her smoldering eyes. But visible or not, he didn't go away.

“Would you be insulted if I asked you to join me in a bite?” And then very quickly, before she could show her claws, “I don’t mean any harm.”

“That’s just as well,” she said in a flat voice that she’d never heard herself use before, “because it wouldn’t do you any good even if you did.”

“I can assure you I don’t make a habit of this,” he faltered, “but there was something about you as you sat here, you seemed so disappointed—shall we say?—that it made me come over and speak to you almost against my will.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” she said stonily. “You fought and you fought until finally you had to give in.” She gazed morosely out through the glass door. “It’s still raining,” she said absently. Her words meant nothing—her thoughts were far away.

“I have a car,” he murmured deprecatingly.

Her lips twisted into a peculiar bitter sort of smile. “And don’t you want me to look at your etchings? No? Well, you will later.” Suddenly she had risen to her feet. She heard herself talking the way she had heard other girls talk in the show she’d worked in. “Save the build-up. I’m ahead of you every step of the way. You have a car. And I haven’t had any supper.”

“Boy!” he motioned commandingly. “Check this grip for the young lady. It will be called for later.”

She preceded him out through the revolving glass door just as the hands of the clock reached nine-twenty.

The town car drew up in front of the Astor. It was raining, and again the pavements glistened with the reflected lights. News vendors were peddling papers date-lined 1936. She stepped out, dropped a careless word to the chauffeur, and went up the steps into the lobby. Heads turned as she went

by. The sleek fur that draped her shoulders was mink; the flower pinned to it was an orchid; the flashing at her wrist was diamonds encircling a watch. She still looked young but not inexperienced.

The usual evening crowd was there and instantly she became the center of all eyes. She acted used to that. She glanced around her, evidently didn't see whoever it was she had come to meet. A chair was offered her and she sank into it with a nod of thanks as though such attention was hers by right. She frowned slightly as though she were not used to being kept waiting. The spiked heel on one custom-made shoe tapped a little on the marble, the manicured nail of one forefinger drummed on the arm of her chair. That light at her wrist flashed, and she glanced at her watch.

The man who had been watching her more closely than all the rest edged nearer. He seemed to be trying to place her. There was a startled, questioning expression in his eyes. She seemed to become aware all at once that someone was standing directly in front of her. She looked up.

"I—I don't suppose you remember me?" he faltered.

She didn't answer for a long cold minute while her eyes bored into his. Then like the crack of a whip she uttered the single word:

"Perfectly!"

"I—I thought it was you," he said, or something like that. Again she didn't say anything for a long time, seemed to be about to ignore him altogether. There was a look of cold disdain on her face. Her eyelids drooped with indifference.

"The same place and the same time," she said finally, "but you're just seven years late. What detained you?"

He looked surprised. "Don't you think it's up to me to ask you that? I waited here right on the spot that night until the bus had gone and it was too late. No sign of you."

She sat up a little straighter in the chair. "I had my grip all packed. I waited here a full hour. One of us is lying."

They both forgot themselves a little, were back in the past, intimate again, not just strangers, in the heat of contention.

“Twenty after eight I came—!”

“You couldn’t have, I tell you! That’s just when I got here. And it was twenty after nine when I walked out of here!”

“Wait a minute!” he said suddenly. He turned and looked up at the two gilt cupids on the wall. “Did you go by that thing?” His hand shot out and touched her.

“Of course! I had no watch of my own.”

“It was in April, wasn’t it?”

She nodded. “It was in April, but why bring that up now?”

“Because don’t you see? I know what happened now! That was the night they changed to daylight-saving time. I remember they warned me when I bought the tickets. And they forgot to adjust the clock here. You came an hour too soon and left just before I got here!”

Her mouth dropped open. She glanced at her wrist, then compared it to the clock on the wall.

“It’s an hour slow,” she breathed in amazement. “The same thing must have happened tonight again!”

He glared up at it and his face contorted. “Damn the clock at the Astor!” he muttered.

She glanced down at the orchid nestling on her own shoulder, at the diamonds on her wrist; she rubbed her chin lovingly against the soft mink of her collar. She suddenly felt how much life meant to her.

“God bless the clock at the Astor!” she answered thoughtfully. She smiled a little. “Tell the truth,” she said. “That was a set-up, wasn’t it? You can tell me now; I’ve been around.”

“Yeah,” he admitted at last, “it would have been a frame.”

She shrugged philosophically. “Well,” she said, and got up and moved away as the glass door spun around and the gentleman with the black ribbon on his eye-glasses came in. He looked a good deal older but as prosperous as ever. She

was frowning as she went to meet him. “You’re a nice one! You can’t treat me this way! Remember, I’m your wife, not one of those floozies you used to run around with!”

THE LIVING LIE DOWN WITH THE DEAD

The Depression had given Miss Alfreda Garrity a bad fright. The one of ’93, not the last one. She saw banks blow up all around her, stocks hit the cellar, and it did something to her common-sense, finishing what a knock-out blow from love had begun ten years before; it made the round-topped, iron-hooped trunk lying in a corner of her hotel-room look good.

Her father, the late railroad president, Al Garrity, had left her well-provided-for for life, but when she got through, everything she owned was in that trunk there in the room with her—$90,000 in old-fashioned napkin-size currency. She had a new lock put on it, and a couple of new bolts on her room-door, which she hadn’t been through since the night she was jilted, wedding-dress and all, five hundred and twenty weeks before. She’d taken a considerable beating, but no depression could get at her from now on, and that was that.

So far so good, but within a year or so a variation had entered her foolproof scheme of things. Some blood-curdling rumor of inflation may have drifted in to her from the world outside. There was a guy named Bryan doing a lot of talking about silver. Either that, or the banknotes, beginning to show the wear and tear of being taken out, pawed over and counted every night at bedtime, lacked

attractiveness and durability for purposes of hoarding. After all, she lay awake worrying to herself, they were only pieces of printed paper. One day, therefore, she cranked up the handle on the wall-telephone (’96) and called one of the better-known jewelry firms down on Maiden Lane.

The manager himself showed up that afternoon, bringing sample-cases under the watchful eye of an armed guard. A $5,000 diamond brooch found its way into the trunk to glisten there unseen under all the dog-eared packets of crummy banknotes. Pretty soon they were just a thin layer solidly bedded on a sparkling rockpile. By 1906 she had to quit that—she’d run out of money and the rocks went to work for her. Their value doubled, tripled, quadrupled, as the price of diamonds skyrocketed. In that one respect, maybe she hadn’t been so batty after all.

Meanwhile, she never stepped out of the room, and the only one she allowed in it was an old colored maid who brought her meals to her—and never dreamed what was in that mouldy old trunk in the corner. But all during the Twenties, sometimes at night an eery figure would glide silently about the room, flashing prismatic fire from head to foot, a ghost covered with diamonds. There wasn’t space enough on the rustling white bridal-gown to put them all, so she’d spread the rest around her on the floor and walked barefooted on a twinkling carpet of pins, brooches, bracelets, ring-settings, getting the feel of them. Sometimes tiny drops of red appeared on the sharp points of the faceted stones.

She knew her number was going to be up soon, and it got so she couldn’t bear the thought of parting from them, leaving them behind. She called her lawyer in, the grandson of the man who had been her father’s lawyer, and told him her wishes in the matter, made out her will. She was to be buried in the vault her father had built for himself fifty years before; she was to go into it in her bridal-dress, face veiled, and no one must look at her face once the

embalmers were through with her. There must be a glass insert at the top of the coffin, and instead of being placed horizontally as in Christian burial, it was to be left standing upright like the Egyptians used to do. And all the diamonds in the trunk were to be sealed into the tomb with her, were to follow her into the next world; she wanted them left directly in front of the glass-slitted sarcophagus, where she could look at them through all eternity. She had no heirs, no relatives, nobody had a claim on them but herself, and she was taking them with her.

"I charge you," she wheezed hectically, "on your professional honor, to see that this is carried out according to my instructions!"

He had expected something dippy from her, but not quite as bad as all that. But he knew her well enough not to try to talk her out of it, she would only have appointed a different executor—and good-bye diamonds! So the will was drawn up, signed, and attested. He was the last one to see her alive. She must have known just when it was coming. The old colored crone couldn't get in the next morning, and when they broke down the door they found her stretched out in her old yellowed wedding-gown, orange-blossom wreath, satin slippers, and all. This second bridegroom hadn't left her in the lurch like the first.

The news about the diamonds leaked out somehow, although it was the last thing the lawyer had wanted. The wedding-dress bier set-up was good copy and had attracted the reporters like flies to honey in the first place. Then some clerk in his law-office may have taken a peek while filing the will and let the cat out of the bag. The trunk had been taken from the room, secreted, and put under guard, but meanwhile the value of its contents had spurted to half a million, and the story got two columns in every evening paper that hit the stands. It was one of those naturals. Everybody in the city was talking about it that first night, to forget about it just as quickly the next day.

Unfortunately for the peace of Miss Garrity's soul, there were two who took a professional interest in the matter instead of just an esoteric one. Chick Thomas' eye lighted on it on his way to the back of the paper where the racing charts were. He stopped, read it through once, and looked thoughtful; then he read it a second time and did more thinking. When he'd given it a third once-over, you could tell by his face he had something. He folded the paper tubularly to the exclusion of everything else but this one item and called it to the attention of Angel Face Zabriskie by whacking it ecstatically across his nose. There was no offense in the blow, only triumph. "Get that," he said, sliding his mouth halfway toward his ear to pronounce the two words.

Angel Face read it and got it, just the way Chick wanted him to. They looked at each other. "How d'ya know it ain't just a lot of malarkey? Her mouth won't admit or deny it, it says here."

"Which proves they're going through with it," opined the cagey Chick. "He don't want it advertised, that's all. If they weren't gonna do it, he'd say either yes or no, one or the other. Don't you know mouths by now? Anytime one of 'em won't talk it means you've stolen a base on him."

Angel Face resumed cutting his corns with a razor-blade. "So they're turning over the ice to the worms. So what's the rush? Let her cool off a while first before we get busy on the spade-work—if that's what you got in mind."

Chick got wrathful. "No wonder I'm stuck here in a punk furnished-room, teaming up with you! You got about as much imagination as the seat of my pants! Don't you know a haul when you see one? 'What's the rush?' he mimicked nasally. "No rush at all! Wait a week, sure, why not? And then find out somebody else has beat us to it! D'ya think we're the only two guys reading this paper tonight? Don't you think there's plenty of others getting the same juice out of it we are? Five hundred grand ain't unloaded into a

cemetery every day in the week, you know. If I'd listen to you we'd prob'ly have to get in line, wait our turn to get near it—"

Angel Face tossed aside the razor-blade, shook a sock out and began putting it on. "Well, what's the answer?" he asked not unreasonably. "Hold up the hearse on its way out there? How do we know it'll be in the hear—"

"Naw," snapped Chick, "it won't be in the hearse in the first place, and there'll prob'ly be enough armed guards around it to give an imitation of a shooting-gallery if we tried that; that mouth of hers is no fool. And point that kick of yours the other way, will ya, it's stuffy enough in here already!" Angel Face obligingly swiveled around the other way on his chair while he finished clothing his pedal extremity. "Naw, here's the idea," resumed Chick, "it come to me just like that while I was reading about it." He snapped his fingers to illustrate the suddenness of the inspiration. "To be johnny-on-the-spot and ring the bell ahead of all the other wise guys, one of us goes right into the burial-vault all dressed in wood instead of the stiff they think they're planting. That's one angle none of the others'll think of, I bet!"

Angel Face threw a nauseated look up at him from shoe-level. "Yeah? Well, as long as you thought of it, you're elected."

His roommate squinted at the ceiling in exasperation. "They ain't burying her in sod! Don't you know what a mausoleum is yet? They're like little stone or marble houses. I've seen some of 'em. They got more room inside than this two-by-four rat-hole we're in now. They're just gonna leave her standing up in there. Wait, I'll read it over to you—"

He swatted the paper across his thigh, traced a finger along the last few lines of print at the bottom. "The burial will take place at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning at the Cedars of Lebanon Cemetery. The services will be strictly

private. To discourage curiosity-seekers, Mr. Staunton has arranged for a detail of police to bar outsiders from the grounds both before and during the ceremonies, Whether the fantastic provisions of the will are to be carried out in their entirety and a huge fortune in jewelry cached in the crypt, could not be learned. It is thought likely, however, that because of the obvious risks involved it will be allowed to remain in the vault only a short time, out of regard to the wishes of the deceased, and will then be removed to a safer place. Funeral arrangements completed at a late hour last night, it is learned on good authority, call for the use of a specially constructed coffin with a glass ‘pane’ at the top, designed and purchased several years ago by Miss Garrity herself and held in readiness, somewhat after the old Chinese custom. The body is to be left standing upright. Pending interment, the remains have been removed to the Hampton Funeral Parlors—”

Chick flicked his hand at the paper. “Which just about covers everything we needa know! What more d’ya want? Now d’ya understand why we gotta get right in with it from the beginning? Outside of a lotta other mugs trying to muscle in, it says right here that they’re only liable to leave it there a little while before they take it away again, maybe the very next day after, for all we know. We only got one night we can be dead sure of. That’s the night after the funeral, tomorrow night.”

“Even so,” argued Angel Face, “that still don’t prove that two guys can’t get at it just as quick from the outside as they can if one’s outside and one’s in.”

“Where’s yer brains? If we both stay outside we can’t get to work until after dark when the cemetery closes, and even then there’s a watchman to figure on. But if one guy’s on the inside along with a nice little kit of files and chisels, he can get started the minute they close the works up on him, have the whole afternoon to get the ice out of the strongbox or trunk or whatever they put it in. Y’don’t think they’re

gonna leave it lying around loose on the floor, do ya? Or maybe," he added witheringly, "you was counting on backing an express-van up to the place and moving it out trunk and all?" He spat disgustedly at an opening between two of the floor-boards.

"Well, if the shack is stone or marble like you said, how you gonna crack it?"

"It's got a door just like any other place, ain't it?" roared Chick. Then quickly dropping his voice again, "How d'ya get at any door, even a bronze one? Take an impression of the key that works it! If we can't do that, then maybe we can pick the lock or find some other way. Anyhow that part of it's the least; it's getting the ice all done up ready to move out in a hurry that counts. We gotta be all set to slip right out with it. We can't hang around half the night showing lights and bringing it out a piece at a time."

"Gee," admitted Angel Face, "the way you tell it, it don't sound so bad, like at first. I kept thinking about dirt being shoveled right on top of the coffin, and all like that. It ain't that I'm yellow or anything—"

"Naw," agreed his companion bitingly, "orange! Well we'll settle that part of it right-off before we do anything else, then we'll go up and look the place over, get a line on it." He produced a shining quarter, newly minted, from somewhere about his person. "I'll toss you for who goes in and who stays out. Heads it's you, tails it's me. How about it?"

Angel Face nodded glumly. The coin flashed up to within half a foot of the ceiling, spun down again. Chick cupped it neatly in his hollowed palm. He held his hand under the other's nose. Miss Liberty stared heartlessly up at them.

"O.K. Satisfied?" Chick dropped the coin back into a vest-pocket, not the trouser-pocket where he kept the rest of his small change. He'd had it for years; it had been given to him as a souvenir by a friend who had once been in the business, as an example of the curious accidents that beset

even the best of counterfeiters at times. It had come from the die with a head stamped on each side of it.

Angel Face was a little white around the gills. “Aw, I can’t go through with it, Chick, it’s no use. It gives me the heebies even to think about getting in the box in her place.”

“Take a little whiff of C before you climb in, and it’ll be over with before you know it. They don’t even lie you down flat, they just stand you up, and you got glass to look through the whole time—it’s no different from being in a telephone-booth.” Then, still failing to note any signs of enthusiasm on the other’s face, he kicked a chair violently out of the way, flung back his arm threateningly. “All right, blow, then! G’wan, ya yellowbelly, get outa here! I’ll get me another shill! There’s plenty of guys in this town would do more than that to get their mitts on a quarter of a grand worth of ice! All y’gotta do is stand still with a veil on your dome for half a day—and you’re heeled for the rest of your life!”

Angel Face didn’t take the departure which had been so pointedly indicated. Instead he took a deep abdominal breath. “All right, pipe down, d’ya want everyone in the house to hear ya?” he muttered reluctantly. “How we gonna get in the place to look it over, like you said?”

Chick was already down on his heels unbuckling a dog-eared valise. “I never believe in throwing away nothing. I used to have a fake press-card in here someplace. I never knew till now why I hung onto it. Now I know. That and a sawbuck oughta fix it for us to see this grave-bungalow. We’re a couple reporters sent up to describe it for our paper ahead of time.” He shuffled busily through a vast accumulation of pawn-tickets, dummy business cards, fake letters of introduction, forged traveler’s checks, dirty French postcards, and other memorabilia of his salad days. Finally he drew something out. “Here it is. It got me on a boat once when the heat was on, and I ducked across the pond—”

“Can two of us get by on one?” Angel Face wanted to know, studying it.

“Naw, cut out a piece of cardboard the same size and scribble on it, stick it in your hatband. I’ll just flash this one, the gateman up there prob’ly won’t know the diff.” He kicked the valise back under the bed. “Let’s go. Stick a pencil behind your ear and scratch something on the back of an envelope every now and then—and keep your trap shut; I’ll do the rest of it.”

They went trooping down the rickety rooming-house stairs, two gentlemen bound on engrossing business. They checked on the Cedars of Lebanon Cemetery in a directory in a candy store on the corner, and Chick bought three or four bars of very inferior milk-chocolate done up in tinfoil, insisting that it be free of nuts, raisins, or any other filling. He stuck one piece in each of his four vest-pockets, which was as close to his body as he could get it.

“It’ll melt and run on ya,” warned Angel Face as they made their way to the subway.

“Whaddya suppose I’m doing it for?” gritted the master mind tersely. “Will ya shuddup or d’ya want me to hang one on your loud-talking puss!”

“Aw, don’t get so tempermental,” subsided Angel Face. Chick was always like this when they were on a job. But he was good just the same, had that little added touch of imagination which he himself lacked, he realized. That was why he teamed with him, even though he almost always was the fall-guy.

They rode a Bronx train to the end of the line, walked the rest of the distance on foot. Chick spoke once, out of the side of his face. “Not so fast, relax. These newspaper punks never hurry.”

The cemetery was open. They slouched in, strolled up to the gatekeeper's lodge. Angel Face looked about him in surprise. He had expected rows of mouldering headstones, sunken graves, and cockeyed crosses. Instead it looked just like a big private estate. It was a class cemetery, no doubt about it. The most that could be seen from the perimeter was an occasional group of statuary, a tasteful pergola or two, screened by leaves and shrubbery. There were even rustic benches of hewn logs set here and there along the winding paths. It was just like a park, only cleaner. Tall cypress trees rustled in the wind. The set-up perked him up a lot. It wasn't such a bad place to spend a night—salary, $250,000. He let go a bar or two of *Casey Jones* and got a gouge in the ribs from Chick's elbow.

The gatekeeper came out to them and Chick turned on the old personality. "Afternoon, buddy. We been sent up here to get a story on this tomb the old crow with the di'monds is going into tomorrow. We been told not to come back without it, or we lose our jobs." He flashed the press-card, jerked his head at the one in Angel Face's hatband, put his own away again.

"What a way to earn a living," said the gatekeeper pessimistically. "Nearly as bad as my own. Help yourselves. You follow this main path all the way back, then turn off to your left. The Garrity mausoleum is about fifty yards beyond. You'll know it by the—"

Chick's paw dropped fraternally on the old codger's shoulder. "How about giving us a peek inside? Just so we can get a rough idea. You know yourself we haven't got a chance of getting near the place tomorrow. We don't want to take pitchers or anything, you can search us, we have no camera." Angel Face helpfully raised his arms to frisking position, dropped them again.

"I couldn't, gents, I couldn't. The gatekeeper stroked the silver stubble on his face. "It would cost me my job if the trustees ever got wind of it." He glanced down sideways at

the ten-spot poking into his breast-pocket from Chick's dangling hand. "How's chances?" the latter slurred.

"About fifty-fifty." The old man grinned hesitantly. "Y'know these plots are private property. I ain't even supposed to butt into 'em myself—" But his eyes were greedily following the second sawbuck going in to join the first. Even Angel Face hadn't seen his partner take it out, he was that smooth.

"Who's gonna know the difference, it won't take a minute. We'll be out again before you know it." A third tenner was tapped down lightly on top of the other two.

The old man's eyes crinkled slyly. "I ain't supposed to leave my post here at the gate, not till we close up at six—" But he was already turning to go back into the lodge for something. Chick dropped one eyelid at Angel Face. The old man came out again with a hoop of thick ponderous keys slung over his arm. He looked around him craftily. "Come on before anyone sees us," he muttered.

They started down the main path one on each side of him; Chick took the side he was carrying the keys on. He took out a chocolate-bar, laid open the tinfoil, and took a very small nibble off one corner. Then he kept it flat up against his moist palm after that, holding it in place with his thumb.

"See that you get all this now," he ordered Angel Face across their guide's shoulders. "The Captain's putting himself out for us." Angel Face stripped the pencil from his ear, held the back of an envelope in readiness. "He takes the rough notes and I polish 'em up, work 'em into an article," explained Chick professionally.

"You young fellas must get good money," remarked the old man.

"Nothing to brag about. Of course, the office foots the bill for any extra expenses—like just now." Even an old lame-brain like this might figure thirty-dollars a pretty stiff tip coming from a legman.

“Oh, no wonder,” crackled the old fellow shrewdly. “So that’s it!”

Chick secretly got rid of the distasteful morsel of sweet stuff he’d been holding in his mouth, took out a second chocolate-bar and stripped it open, nipped it between his teeth. The gateman didn’t notice that he now had two, one in each hand. He kept his palms inward and they didn’t extend beyond his fingertips.

They turned off the main path without meeting anyone, followed a serpentine side-path up over a rise of ground, and just beyond came face-to-face with a compact granite structure, domed and about ten feet high. The path ended at its massive bronze door, flanked by two hefty stone urns and guarded by a reclining angel blowing a trumpet.

“Here she is,” said the gatekeeper, and once again looked all around. So did Chick, but for a different reason. Not very far ahead he could make out the tall iron railing that bounded the cemetery; the Garrity mausoleum, therefore, was near its upper limits, on the side away from town. He peered beyond, searching hurriedly for an identifying landmark on the outside by which to locate it. It wasn’t built up out there, just open country, but he could make out a gray thread of motor highway with a row of billboards facing his wav. That was enough, it would have to do. He counted three of them, then a break, then three more.

He turned his attention quickly to the key the old man was fitting into the chunky door, lavishly molded into bas-reliefs of cherubs and what-not but grassgreen from long exposure to the elements. The old man was having a lot of trouble with it, but Chick didn’t dare raise his eves to watch what was going on, kept his head down. When it finally opened and the key dropped back to the ring again, his eve rode with it like something stuck to it, kept it separate from all the rest even after it was back in with them again, told it off from the end ones on each side of it. It was the fifth from one end of the bunch and seventh from the other, unless

and until the old man inadvertently shifted the entire hoop around, of course—which would have been catastrophic but wasn't very likely. The hoop was nearly the size of a bicycle-wheel.

Chick tilted his head out behind the old man's back, caught Angle Face's eye and gave him the office. The gatekeeper was lugging the squealing, grinding door open with both arms, and the keys on the ring fluttered like ribbons with every move he made. Angel Face said, "Here, I'll help ya," as the door gave an unexpected lurch outward and he fell back against the gatekeeper. It was the old jostle-and-dip racket, which they'd had down to a science even before they were in long pants. Chick flipped that one certain key out from the rest with the point of his nail, deftly caught it on one bar of soggy chocolate, and ground the other one down on top of it. "Oops, sorry!" said Angel Face, and jerked the gateman forward again by one lapel, as if he'd been in danger of falling over, which he wasn't. Chick separated the two slabs, the released key fell back in line again, and by the time he had trailed into the dank place after the other two he had the tinfoil folded back in place again and his handkerchief wrapped around the two confectionery-bars to protect them from further softening through bodily warmth; they were in his breast-pocket, now, which was least liable to be affected.

The gatekeeper didn't linger long inside the place with them, but that wasn't necessary now any more. The floor of the vault was three feet below ground level, giving it a total height of about thirteen feet on the inside. Half a dozen steps led down from the doorway. The interior was in the shape of a cross, outlined by bastions of marble-faced granite that supported the dome. The head and one arm already contained coffins supported on trestles, Al Garrity and his wife respectively. Hers was evidently to go into the remaining arm. Macabre purple light filtered downward from a round tinted-glass opening in the exact center of the

dome, so inaccessible from the floor that it might have been on some other planet. Even so, you could hardly see your hand in front of your face a short distance away from the open door. The place was icy cold and, once the door was closed, apparently air-tight. Chick wondered how long the supply of oxygen would last if anyone were shut up in there breathing it. Probably a week; certainly more than twenty-four hours. It was too leading a question to put the gatekeeper, especially in Angel Face's presence. He kept the thought to himself.

"You'd think," he heard the latter complain squeakily in the gloom, "they'd punch a winder or two in a place like this, let some light in."

"This one's about fifty years old," the old man explained. "Some of the newer ones they put up since has more light in 'em. There's one even has electric tapers at the head of the bier, going day and night, worked by battery."

"Ain't it unhealthy to leave the coffins above ground like this?" Chick asked.

"The bodies are preserved, embalmed in some way, I understand, before they're put in these kind of places. I s'pose if you was to open up one of these two they got here already you'd find 'em looking just like the day they got here. They don't change any, once there here."

A sound resembling *"Brrh!"* came from Angel Face's direction; he retreated toward the doorway rather more quickly than he'd come in. Chick took note of that fact, he could see that more buildup was going to be in order.

On the way out he sized up the thickness of the wall, where the entrance cut through it. A good solid two feet. And where the bastions encroached on the interior, God only knows! Pickaxes and even dynamite would have been out of the question. The only possible way was the one he'd decided on.

Angel Face was scribbling away industriously on the back of an envelope when he came out after him, but his face

looked pretty strained. Chick pointed to the inner side of the bronze door, which faced outward while it stood ajar; the keyhole ran all the way through. He furtively spread two fingers, folded them again. A key for each, that meant. If it was intended for encouragement, it didn't seem to do much good, and Chick didn't care to risk asking the old man whether a key used from the inside would actually work or not. Who the hell had any business letting themselves out of a tomb? And apart from that, he had a hunch the answer would have been no anyway.

"Well," said the old man as he took leave of them at the door of his lodge, "I hope you two young fellas hev gotten what you came out here after."

Chick slung an arm about his shoulder and patted him reassuringly. "Sure did, old-timer, and much obliged to you. Well, be good."

"Hunh " the old reprobate snorted after them, "fat chance o' being anything but around these diggin's!"

They strolled aimlessly out the way they had come in, but with the ornamental stone and iron gateway once behind them Chick snapped into a sudden double-quick walk that rapidly took them out of sight. "C'mon, pick up your feet," he ordered, "before he feels for that pocket where he thinks he's got something!" He thrust the three tenners that he had temporarily loaned the old man back into his own trousers.

"Gee!" ejaculated Angel Face admiringly.

"He's too old to enjoy that much dough anyway," his partner told him.

It was dusk already when they came out of the subway. Chick, who was somewhat of a psychologist, wisely didn't give his companion time to argue about the undertaking from this point on. He could tell by the other's long face he

was dying to back out, but he wouldn't give him the chance to get started. If he stayed with the idea long enough, he'd get used to it, caught up by the rush of their preparations.

"Got dough?" he demanded as they came out on the sidewalk.

"Yeah, but listen Chick—" quavered the other.

"Here, take this." Chick handed him two of the tens. "Go to a hardware store and get an awl and a screw-driver, good strong ones; better get each one separately in a different place."

"Wha—what's the idea?" Angel Face's teeth were clicking a little, although it was warm by the subway entrance.

"That's to let air in the coffin; shut up and let me do the talking. Then get a couple of those tin boxes that workmen carry their lunches in; get the biggest size they come in"—he saw another question trembling on his partner's lips, quickly forestalled it—"to lug the ice away in, what d'ya suppose! If two ain't enough, get three. Get'm so one'll fit inside the other when I bring 'em out there tomorrow night. Now y' got that? See that y' stick with it. That's your part of the job. Mine'll be to take these candy-bars to a locksmith, have a pair of duplicate keys made, one for each of us—"

This, judging by the change that came over Angel Face's incorrectly named map, was the first good news he had heard since they had scanned the paper that morning.

"Oh, that's different," he sighed, "as long as I get one, too —"

"Sure, you can take it right in with you, hang it round your neck on a cord or something, just to set your mind at rest. That's what

I tried to tip you off back there just now, the keyhole goes all the way through. But don't try using it ahead of time and ditching me, or I'll make you wish you'd stayed in there—"

"So help me, Chick, you know me better than that! It's only in case something goes wrong, so I won't be left bottled up in there for the rest of me—"

“Y’ got nothing to worry about,” snarled Chick impatiently. “I’ll contact Revolving Larry for you and getcha a few grains of C. By the time you’re through dreamin’ you’re Emperor of Ethiopia you’ll be on your way out with the sparklers.”

Angel Face even seemed to have his doubts about this angle of it. “I dunno—I never been a user. What does that stuff do to ya?”

“It’ll make you stay quiet in the box, that’s all I’m interested in. Now g’wan and do what I told you, and wait for me back at the room. I’ll meet you there by twelve at the latest. This corpse beauty-parlor she’s at oughta be closed for the night by then. We got a jimmy home, haven’t we?

He didn’t wait to be told but left with a jaunty step, bustling. Angel Face moved off slowly, droopily, like someone on his way to the dentist or the line-up.

Chick knew just where to have the keys made. He’d had jobs done there plenty of times in the past. It was in the basement of a side-street tenement and the guy kept his mouth closed, never asked questions, no matter what kind of a crazy mold you brought him. Chick carefully peeled the tinfoil off the warped chocolate-bars.

“Big fellow, ain’t it,” said the locksmith, examining the impression. “How many you gonna need?”

“Two, but I want ’em made one at a time. Bring the mold out to me after you finish the first one, the second one’s gotta be a little different. “He wasn’t putting anyone in the way of walking off with half-a-million dollars’ worth of jewels under his nose, maybe only an hour before he got there. To hand Angel Face a key that really worked was like pleading for a double-cross. He’d see that he got out all right, but not till he was there to let him out.

“Take about twenty minutes apiece,” said the locksmith.

“I’ll wait. Get going on ’em.”

The locksmith came back with one completed key for inspection, and the two halves of the mold, which he had to glaze with some kind of wax. “Sure it works, now?” Chick scowled.

“It fits that, that’s all I can tell you.”

“All right, then here’s what you do now.” He scraped a nailful of chocolate off the underside of each bar, trowelled it microscopically into the impression, smoothed it over, obliterating one of the three teeth the key had originally possessed. “Make it that way this time.” He tucked the first one away to guard against confusion.

The locksmith gave him the mold back when he’d finished the job; and Chick kneaded the paraffined chocolate into a ball, dropped it down the sewer. Angel Face’s key had a piece of twine looped to it, all ready to hang around his neck. An amulet against the horrors, that was about all it was really good for. At that, probably even the real one wouldn’t work from the inside, so the deception was just an added touch of precaution.

Chick knew just where to put his finger on the peddler known as Revolving Larry, a nickname stemming from his habit of pirouetting to look all around him before making a sale. Chick passed him on the beat where he usually hung out, gave him the office. They met around the corner in a telephone booth in a cigar store about five minutes later. “Does C give you a jerky or a dreamy kick?” Chick breathed through a slit in the glass.

“Depends on how strong the whiff is,” muttered Larry, thumbing through a directory hanging on a hook.

“Gimme a couple grains the kind you sell the saps, all baking soda.”

Larry did his dervish act, although there was no one in the place. “Lemme in a minute,” he muttered. Chick changed places with him in the booth, and Larry bent his leg and did something to one of his heels, holding the receiver to his ear with one hand. He handed Chick a little folded paper packet through the crack in the door, and Chick shoved a couple of bills in to him behind his back, turning to face the front of the store. Then he walked out, ignoring the frantic pecks on the glass that followed him. “Wholesale price,” he growled over his shoulder.

The Hampton Funeral Parlor was on Broadway, which gave him a pretty bad jolt at first until he happened to glance a second time at the classified listing in the directory he was consulting. There was a branch chapel on the east side; it was the nearer of the two to the hotel she’d lived in. He played a hunch; it must be that one. A conservative old crow like that wouldn’t be prepared for burial in a district full of blazing automobile sales-rooms. Even the second one, when he went over to look at it, was bad enough. It was dolled up so that it almost looked like a grill or tap-room from the outside. It had a blue neon sign and colored mosaic windows and you expected to see a hat-check girl just inside the entrance. But after midnight it was probably dark and inconspicuous enough for a couple of gents to crack without bringing down the town on their heads. He managed to size up the lock on the door without exactly loitering in front of it. A glass-cutter was out; in the first place the door-pane was wire-meshed, and in the second place it had to be done without leaving any tell-tale signs, otherwise there might be an embarrassing investigation when they opened up in the morning. Embarrassing for Angel Face, anyway. A jimmy ought to do the trick in five minutes; that kind of place didn’t usually go in for electric burglar-alarms.

When he went back to the room he found Angel Face pacing back and forth until the place rattled. At least he’d

brought in the lunch-boxes, the awl, and the screw-driver. Chick examined them, got them ready to take out, looked over the jimmy and packed that too. Angel Face's frantic meandering kept up all around him. "Quit that!" he snapped. He opened a brown-paper bag crammed with sandwiches he'd brought in with him. "Here, wrap yourself around these—"

Angel Face took out a thick chunk of ham and rye, pulled at it with his teeth once or twice, gave up the attempt. "I ain't hungry, I can't seem to swaller," he moaned.

"You're gonna be hungry!" warned Chick mercilessly. "It's your last chance to eat until t'morra night about this time. Here's your key, hang it around your neck." He tossed over the dummy with the two teeth. "I got some C for you too, but you take that the last thing, before you step in."

When they let themselves out of the house at one a.m., Angel Face followed docilely enough. Chick had also done a little theatrical browbeating and brought up a lot of past jobs which Angel Face wouldn't have been keen to have advertised. It hadn't seemed to have occurred to him that neither would Chick, for that matter. He wasn't very quick on the uptake. Chick glanced at him as they came out the front door of the rooming-house, swept his hat off with a backhand gesture and let it roll over to the curb. "They don't plant 'em in snap-brim felts, especially old ladies—and I ain't wearing two back when I leave!" Angel Face gulped silently and cast longing eyes at his late pride and joy. "You can get yourself a gold derby by Wednesday, like trombones wear, if you feel like it."

They had walked briskly past the Hampton Chapel, now dark and deserted, as if they had no idea of stopping there at all, then abruptly halted a few yards up the side-street. "Stay here up against the wall, and keep back," breathed

the nerveless Chick. “Two of us ganged up at the entrance’d make too much of an eyeful. I’ll whistle when I’m set.”

Chick’s cautious whistle came awfully soon, far too quickly to suit him. He sort of tottered around to where the entrance was and dove into the velvety darkness. Chick carefully closed the door again so it wouldn’t be noticeable from the outside. “It was a pushover,” he whispered, “I coulda almost done it with a quill toothpick!” He went toward the back, sparingly flickering a small torch once or twice, then gave a larger dose to the room beyond. “No outside windows,” he said. “We can use their own current. Turn it on and close the door.”

Angel Face was moistening his lips and having trouble with his Adam’s apple, staring glassy-eyed at the two shrouded coffins the place contained. Otherwise it wasn’t so bad as it might have been. Black and purple drapes hung from the walls, and the floor and ceiling were antiseptically spotless. The embalmers, if they actually did their work here, had removed all traces of it. Of the two coffins, one was on a table up against the wall, the other on a draped bier out in the middle, each with an identifying card pinned to its pall.

“Here she is,” said Chick, peering through the glass pane, “all ready for delivery.” Angel Face looked over his shoulder, then jerked back as though he’d just had an electric shock. A muffled veiled face had met his own through the glass. He turned sort of blue.

Chick went over to the second one, against the wall, stripped it, and callously sounded it with his knuckles. “This one’s got somebody in it too,” he announced jubilantly.

He unburdened himself of his tools, went back to the first coffin, and started in on the screws that held the lid. He heaved it a little out of line so that it overlapped the bier. “Get down under it and get going on some air-holes with that awl. Not too big, now! They’ll have to be on the bottom so they won’t be noticeable.”

“Right while—while she’s in it?” croaked Angel Face, folding to his knees.

“Certainly—we don’t wanna be here all night!”

They gouged and prodded for a while in silence. “You ain’t told me yet,” Angel Face whimpered presently, “once I’m in it, how do I get out again? Do I hafta wait for you to come in and unscrew me?”

“Certainly not, haven’tcha got any sense at all? You take this same screw-driver I’m using in with you, under your arm or somewhere. Then you just bust the glass from the inside, stretch out your arms, and go to work all down the front of it yourself.”

“I can’t reach the bottom screws from where I’ll be, how am I gonna bend—”

“Y’don’t have to! Just get rid of the upper ones and then heave out, it’ll split the rest of the way. I’m not gonna put them back all the way in.”

He was still down underneath when he heard Chick put down the screw-driver and dislodge something. “There we are! Gimme a hand with this.” He straightened up and looked.

A rather fragile doll-like figure lay revealed, decked in yellowed satin and swathed from head to foot in a long veil. They stood the lid up against the bier. “Get her out,” ordered Chick, “while I get started on that second one over there.” But Angel Face was more rigid than the form that lay on the satin coffin-lining, he couldn’t lift a finger toward it.

“When the second coffin was unlidded, Chick came back and without a qualm picked up the mortal remains of Miss Alfreda Garrity with both arms. He carried her over to the second one, deposited her exactly on top of the rightful occupant, whipped off the veil, and then began to push and press downward like a shipping-clerk busily packing something in a crate. Angel Face was giving little moans like a man coming out of gas. “Don’t look, if y’feel that way

about it," his partner advised him briskly. "Get in there a while and try it out."

It took him ten minutes or so to screw the lid back on the one that now held the two of them, then he carefully dusted it with his handkerchief and came back. Angel Face had both legs in the coffin and was sitting up in it, hanging onto the sides with both hands, shivering but with his face glossy with sweat.

"Get all the way down—see if it fits!" Chick bore down on one of his shoulders and flattened him out remorselessly. "Swell!" was the verdict. "You won't be a bit cramped. All right, did you punch them air-holes all the way through the quilting? If you didn't you'll suffocate. Now we'll try it out with the lid and veil on. Keep your head down!'

He dragged the veil over from beside the other coffin, sloshed it across the wincing Angel Face's countenance, and then began to pack it in and straighten it out around him, like a dutiful father tucking his offspring into bed. Then he heaved the heavy lid up off the floor, slapped it across the coffin, and fitted it in place. He peered down through the glass pane, studying the mummified onion-head that showed below. He retreated and gauged the effect from a distance, came back again on the opposite side. Finally he dislodged the lid once more. Angel Face instantly sat up, veil and all, like a jack-in-the-box. He tossed the veil back and blew out his breath.

"D'ja have any trouble getting air?" Chick wanted to know anxiously.

"There coulda been more ventilation."

"All right, stay there, we'll let a few more in to be on the safe side. Rest your head again, the closer I can bring 'em to your muzzle the better." He went to work from below with the screwdriver.

Angel Face suddenly yelped "Ow!" and reared up again, rubbing his ear.

“Good!” said Chick. “Right next to your face. If I put any more in the bottom’d look like a Swiss cheese. All right, get out and stretch, it’s your last chance. Here’s your bang of C. Sniff it quick.”

Angel Face took the small packet, gratefully scrambled over the side.

Chick was examining the glass insert in the lid. “It’s kinda thick at that. I think you better take something in with you to make sure of smashing it. I lamped one of them patented fire-extinguishers outside, wait a minute—”

When he came back he had a small iron mallet with two or three links of filed-off chain dangling from it. “Just a tap from this’ll do the trick for you. There’s room enough to swing your arms if you bring ’em up close to you. One more thing and we’re set: watch your breathing, see that it don’t flutter the veil. I’m gonna bulge it loose around you, so it won’t get in the way of your beak.” He scrutinized the other shrewdly. “Gettin’ your kicks yet?”

Angel Face was standing perfectly still with a foolish vacant look on his face. There hadn’t been enough cocaine in the dose to affect anyone used to it, but he wasn’t an addict. “No wonder they call ’em attics,” he admitted blithely. “I’m way up over your head. Gee, everything looks pretty!”

“Sure,” agreed Chick. “Lookit the pretty coffin. Wanna get in? Come on.”

“Oke,” said Angel Face submissively. He climbed back in of his own accord. “How do I steer it?” he wanted to know.

“Just by lying still and wishin’ where y’wanna go,” the treacherous Chick assured him. He tucked in the large screwdriver, point-downward, under one armpit, the iron mallet under the other, once more arranged the veil about his henchman’s head and shoulders, this time leaving a large pocket through which he could draw breath without moving it. “I’m in Arabia,” was the last thing the voluntary corpse mumbled. “Come over’n see me sometime.”

“Don’t forget to have the ice loose when I show,” ordered Chick. “See ya t’morra night about this time.” He put the lid back on, and ten minutes later it was screwed as firmly in place as though it had never been disturbed. One coffin was as silent as the other. He gathered up his remaining tools and turned to go, with a backward glance at the one bier in the center. He could hold out, sure he could hold out. The C would wear off long before the funeral in the morning, of course, but that was all to the good. In his own senses he’d be even surer not to give himself away.

Chick turned the lights out and silently eased out of the room. He locked the front door on the inside, so they wouldn’t even know it had been tampered with, let himself out of one of the ornamental windows on the side-street, pulled it closed after him. They’d probably never even notice it had been left unlatched all night.

He was standing across the street next morning at half past ten when the funeral procession started out for the cemetery. So were a sprinkling of others, drawn by curiosity. The dumbells probably thought the jewels were going right with her in the coffin. Fat chance. He saw it brought out and loaded onto the hearse, the tasselled pall still covering it. So far so good, he congratulated himself; they hadn’t tumbled to anything after opening the parlor for the day, not even the air-holes on the bottom, and the worst was over now. Forty minutes more, and even the worst boner Angel Face could pull wouldn’t be able to hurt them. He could bust out and stretch to his heart’s content.

Only one car followed the hearse, probably with her lawyer in it. Chick let the small procession get started, then flagged a taxi and followed. Even if outsiders hadn’t been barred during the duration of the services, he couldn’t have risked going in anyway, on account of the danger of running

into that gatekeeper again, but it wouldn't do any harm to swipe a bird's-eye view. The hearse and the limousine tailing it made almost indecent time, considering what they were, but he didn't have any trouble keeping up with them. He got out across the way from the main entrance just as they were going through, and parked himself at a refreshment-stand directly opposite, over a short root-beer.

The gates were closed again the minute the cortege was inside, and the two guys loitering in front were easily identifiable as dicks. Chick saw them turn away several people who tried to get in. Then they came forward, the gates swung narrowly open again, and a small armored truck whizzed through without slowing down. There, Chick told himself, went Miss Garrity's diamonds. Smart guy, her lawyer; nobody could have tackled that truck on the *outside* without getting lead poisoning.

He hung around until the hearse, the limousine, and the truck had come out again, about twenty-five minutes later. They were all going much slower this time, and the gates stayed open behind them. It hadn't taken them long. You could tell the old doll had no relatives or family. The two dicks swung up onto the limousine running-boards and got in with the lawyer—and that was that. He and Angel Face had gotten away with it! Now there could no longer be any possible slip-up.

At midnight, with the big tin lunch-box that held two other ones under his arm, he bought more sandwiches. Not to feed the imprisoned Angel Face, but to spread out on top of the rocks when they were packed in the boxes, in case any nosey cops decided to take a gander.

It was a long ride to the end of the line, but he knew better than to take a taxi this time. The stem along the motor highway around and to the back of the Cedars of

Lebanon, to where those billboards faced the mausoleum, was even longer, but he had all night. In about thirty minutes he caught up with them, three and then a blank space and then three more, lighted up by reflectors.

He turned off the road to his right and went straight forward, and in about ten minutes more the tall iron pike-fence of the cemetery blocked him. There wasn't a living soul for miles around; an occasional car sped by, way back there on the road. He pitched the telescoped lunch-boxes up over the fence, then he sprang for the lateral bar at the top of the railing, and chinned himself up and over. It wasn't hard. He dropped down soundlessly on the inside, picked up the lunch-boxes, and in another five minutes he was slipping the key into the bronze door.

You could tell how thick it was by how far the key went in. It went in until only the head showed, and the head was an awkward size—not quite big enough to slip his whole fist through and turn, and yet too big for just thumb and fingers to manage like an ordinary key. He caught it between the heels of his palms and tried grinding it around. It wouldn't budge. No wonder the gatekeeper had had a tough time of it yesterday afternoon! He gave it more pressure, digging in the side of his feet to brace him as he turned.

Had they changed the lock after the services? Had the chocolate-mold gotten just a little too soft and spread the impression? Maybe he should have brought a little oil with him. He was sweating like a mule, half from the effort and half from fright. He gave a final strangling heave, and there was a shattering click—but it wasn't the door. He was holding the key-handle in his bruised paws, and the rest of it was jammed immovably in the lock, where it had broken off short.

No one had ever been cursed the way that locksmith was for bungling the job. He swore and he almost wept, and he clawed and dug at it, and he couldn't get it out—it was wedged tight in the lock, not a sixteenth of an inch

protruded. Then he thought of the glass skylight, up on the exact center of that rounded inaccessible dome. He went stumbling off through the darkness.

It was nearly three when he was back again, with the length of rope coiled up around his middle under his coat. He unwound it, paid it out around him on the ground. There weren't any trees near enough, so he had to use that angel blowing a trumpet over the door. He put a slip-knot in the rope, hooked the angel easily enough, and got up there on the periphery of the dome. Then he brought the rope up after him. He got up on the dome by cat-walking around to the opposite side from the angel and then pulling himself up with the rope taut across the top. One big kick and a lot of little ones emptied the opening of the violet glass. The crash coming up from inside was muffled. It was pitch-black below. He dropped the rope down in, gave it a half-twist around his wrist, let himself in after and began to swing wildly around going down it.

Suddenly all tension was out of the rope and he was hurtling down, bringing it squirming loosely after him. He would have broken his back, but he hit a large wreath of flowers on top of a coffin. One of the trestles supporting it broke and it boomed to the floor. He and gardenias and leaves and ribbons and velvet pall all went sliding down it to the mosaic floor. An instant later the stone angel's head dropped like a bomb a foot away from his own. It was enough to have brained him if it had touched him.

He was scared sick, and aching all over. "Angel!" he rasped hoarsely, spitting out leaves and gardenia petals, "Angel! Are y'out? J'get hit?" No answer. He fumbled for his torch—thank God it worked!—and shot streaks of white light wildly around the place, creating ghastly shadows of his own making. Her mother's coffin was there in one wing and her father's in the other, like yesterday, and the rocks were there in an old trunk, with the lid left up. And this—this third coffin that he'd hit, that he was on now. Angel

Face should have been out of it by now, long ago—but it was still sealed up! Had he croaked in it?

Bruised as he was he scrambled to his feet, widly swept aside the leaves and flowers and the velvet pall, flicked his beam up and down the bared casket. A scream choked off in his larynx—there was no glass insert, no air-holes. It was the other coffin, the one he'd put her in with the unknown!

What followed was a madhouse scene. He set the torch down at an angle, picked up the chipped angel's head, crashed it down on the lid again and again, until the wood shattered, splintered, and he could claw it off with his bare, bleeding hands. There beneath his eyes was the gaunt but rouged and placid face of Miss Alfreda Garrity, teeth showing in a faintly sardonic smile. She could afford to smile; she'd put one over on them, even in death—landed in her own tomb after all, through some ghastly blunder at the mortician's. Maybe he'd been the means of it himself: those two palls, each with a little card pinned to it. He must have transposed them in his hurry last night, and the box with the two in it weighed as much as the big one she'd ordered for herself. And they hadn't looked! Incredible as it sounded, they hadn't looked to make sure, had carried it out with the pall over it, and even here hadn't uncovered it, in a hurry to get rid of the old eccentric, forgetting to give her the eternal gander through the glass at her rocks that she'd wanted!

What difference did it make how it happened, or that it had never happened before and might never happen again after this—it had happened now! And he was in here, bottled up in his stooge's place, with a broken rope and nothing to cast it over, no way of getting back up again! Not even the mallet and screwdriver he'd provided the other guy with! The scream came then, without choking off short, and then another and another, until he was out of them and his raw vocal cords couldn't make any more sounds and daylight showed through the shattered skylight, so near

and yet so out of reach. He began banging the angel's head against the bronze door, until it was just little pebbles and the muscles of his arms were useless.

It was afternoon when they cut through the door with blow-torches. Cops and dicks had never looked so good to him before in his life. He wanted twenty years in prison, anything, if only they'd take him out of here. He was, they told him, pretty likely to get what he wanted—with his past record. He was groveling on the floor, whimpering, half batty, picking up shiny pieces of jewelry and letting them dribble through his fingers again. They almost felt sorry for him themselves.

Her lawyer was there with them, too, breathing smoke and flame—maybe because some little scheme of his own had miscarried. "Outrageous! Sickening!" he stormed. "I knew something like this was bound to happen, with all that damnable publicity her will got—"

"Other coffin," the haggard Chick kept moaning, "other coffin." His voice came back when someone gave him a shot of whisky, rose to a screech. "The other coffin! My partner's in it! There's a living man in it, I tell you! They got them mixed. Phone that place! Stop them before they—"

One of the dicks raced off. They met him near the entrance, as they were leading Chick out. His face was a funny green color, and he could hardly talk either now. "They—they planted it at three o'clock yesterday afternoon, at Hillcrest Cemetery, out on Long Island—"

"In the ground?" someone asked in a sick voice.

"Six feet under."

"God in Heaven!" shuddered Staunton, the lawyer. "What abysmal fools these crooks are sometimes! All for a mess of paste. They might have known I wouldn't put the real ones in there, will or no will! They've been safely tucked away in a vault since the night she died." He broke off suddenly. "Hold that man up, I think he's going to collapse."

JOHNNY ON THE SPOT

The clock on the wall of the cafeteria said quarter to four in the morning when he came in from the street. He wasn't even twenty-eight yet, Johnny Donovan. Any doctor in town would have given him fifty more years. Only he himself knew better than that. He didn't even have fifty days left; maybe only fifty hours, or maybe fifty minutes, depending on how good he was.

There hadn't been anyone in sight on the street when he came in just now, he'd made sure of that, and this place was half the island away from where anyone would expect to find him; that was why he'd started coming here for his food the past few nights. And that was why he'd told Jean to meet him here tonight, after her last show at the club, if she couldn't hold out any more; if she had to see him so bad. Poor kid, he sure felt sorry for her! Married at seventeen, and a widow at eighteen—any minute now. There was one thing he was glad of, that he'd managed to keep her out of it. She knew about it, of course, but they didn't know about her; didn't even know she existed. And dancing twice nightly right at one of Beefy Borden's own clubs, the prettiest girl on the floor! Taking fifty every Saturday from Beefy's "front" down there, while Beefy had guys out looking for him all over town, and would have given ten times that much just to connect with him! It made him laugh every time he thought of it—almost, not quite.

But it wasn’t so surprising at that. Beefy was one of those rare domesticated big-shots who, outside of killing-hours, thought there was no one like that silver-blond wife and those two daughters of his. Johnny, when he used to drop in their Ocean Avenue apartment on business in the old prohibition days, plenty of times found him there helping his kids with their homework or playing with them on the floor, maybe a couple of hours after he’d had some poor devil buried alive in quicklime out in the wilds of Jamaica or dumped overboard from one of his runners with a pail of cement for shoes. That being the case, even a lovely number like Jean couldn’t be expected to make a dent in him, often as he must have seen her trucking around on the hardwood down at the Wicked Nineties. Otherwise he would have asked questions, tried to find out something about her. But to him she was just a Jean Marvel—her own idea of a stage-tag at sixteen—just a name on one of the dozen payrolls he checked once a month with his various fronts. Not even that. She just wasn’t. She was: “No. 9—@ 50 = $200.” She’d told Johnny that she’d said “Good evening” to Beefy one night leaving the club—after all, he was her bread-and-butter—and he’d turned around and asked someone, “Who the hell wazzat?”

He was sick of dodging them; had a bellyful of trying to save his precious hide. He had it up to his neck, this business of sleeping all day in movie houses and bolting meals at four in the morning and keeping just one jump ahead of them the whole time. The way he felt tonight he almost wished they’d catch up with him and get it over with! What was so awful about choking yourself to death in a gunnysack anyway? You couldn’t do it more than once.

But there was Jean. Outside of wanting him straight, which had started the whole mess, she also wanted him alive—for some wacky reason or other. He could hear her now, like she had been the last time they’d stolen a brief get-together riding hidden on the back platform of the

Shuttle. That was last Sunday. She had laced it into him, eyes flinty, voice husky with scorn:

"Yellow. No, not even yellow, orange! A quitter. And that's what I married! Ready to take it on the chin, aren't you?" And then pointing to her own lovely dimpled one: "Well, this is your chin!" And pounding herself furiously: "And this is the chest that gets the bullets when you stand up to 'em! Don't I count? No, I get left behind—without my music, without my rhythm, without my guy, for all you care! Not while I know it! Who is this Beefy Borden—God?" Then suddenly nearly breaking in two: "See it through for me, Johnny. Stay alive. Don't welsh on me now. Just a few days longer! The dough will come through by the end of this week—then we can both lam out of this hell-hole together!" And after the train had carried her back to the Times Square end and he'd lost himself in the Grand Central crowd, hat down over his mouth, he could still hear it ringing in his ears: "Stay alive for me, Johnny. Stay alive!" Well, he'd done his best, but it couldn't keep up forever.

There was a taxi driver dozing in the back of the place. He was the only other one in there. Have to quit coming here after tonight; he'd been here three nights in a row now; time to change to another place. He loosened the knot of his necktie and undid the top button of his shirt. Hadn't changed it in ten days and it was fixing to walk off his back of its own accord.

He picked up a greasy aluminum tray and slid it along the triple rails that banked the counter. He hooked a bowl of shredded wheat, a dwarf pitcher of milk, and some other junk as he went along. When he got to the end where the counterman was, he said, "Two, sunnyside up." He hadn't eaten since four the night before. He'd just gotten through collecting a meal in a place of Sixth Avenue around two

when he’d spotted someone over in a corner that looked familiar from the back. He had had to get up and blow—couldn’t risk it.

The counterman yapped through a hole in the wall behind him, “Two—on their backs!” and something began spitting. Johnny picked a table all the way in the rear and sat down with his back to the street. He couldn’t see who was coming in that way, without turning, but it made him harder to recognize from outside through the plate-glass front. He turned his collar up in back to hide the shape of his neck.

He took out a much-folded newspaper, fished for a pencil, and while crunching shredded wheat began to fill in the blank squares of a crossword puzzle. He could do that and mean it! You go arm-in-arm with death for ten days or a couple of weeks, and it loses most of its sting. Even the answer to what is “a sap-giving tree” can be more interesting for the time being—help you forget.

He didn’t see the maroon car that drew up outside, and he didn’t hear it. It came up very soft, coasting to a stop. He didn’t see the two well-dressed individuals that got out of it without cracking the door behind them, edged up closer to the lighted window-front and peered in. They exchanged a triumphant look that might have meant, “We’ll eat in here, this is our dish.”

He was half-dozing over his puzzle by this time, splinters of shredded wheat clinging to his lips. On the other hand, the somnolent taxi driver, peculiarly enough, suddenly came wide awake and seemed to remember something that required his presence in the washroom. He slipped in there very deftly without making a sound; got as far away from the door as possible, and then just stood around like he was waiting for something to be over. He passed the time away counting over a fairly solid wad of fins and sawbucks. Then he met his own eyes in the mirror and he quickly turned his head away, like he wasn’t glad to meet himself, for once.

The two came in, and they weren't in a hurry, and they weren't trying to sneak up on the quarry now any more. They didn't have to, they had him. One of them, who went in for artistic flourishes, even hung back a step behind the other and deliberately yanked two bright-green pasteboards from the box near the door, which made a dyspeptic bell sing out a couple of times; as if to show how law-abiding, how house-broken, he and his friend could be when they came in a public place. It was like a rattlesnake warning before it strikes. It couldn't have made any difference anyway; they each had a right hand stuck deep into their coat pockets, and both pockets were sort of stiff and weighted down.

The bell woke Johnny without registering; by the time his eyes opened, he'd forgotten what did it. Then he saw them sitting at the table with him, one opposite and one right next to him, shoulder to shoulder, so close the loaded pocket dug into his hip. The one across the china table top had his pocket up too, just sort of resting on the lip of the table, pointing Johnny's way. The counterman was busy transferring pats of butter to little paper rosettes; it wouldn't have mattered even if he hadn't been.

Johnny looked from one face to the other, and his own whitened a little. Just for a second, then the color came right back; he'd been expecting this for too long to stay scared.

They looked like three brothers, or three pals, sitting there huddled over the table together, intimate, familiar.

"Put it on the table in front of you," suggested the one next to Johnny. "Keep the newspaper over it."

Johnny reached under his left arm and took out something. If his coat hadn't been buttoned, he could have turned it around and fired through the cloth. He would have gone, but he could have taken one of them with him. But there wasn't room enough to turn it under his coat, it faced outward where there was nothing but a glass caseful

of desserts to get at. He slid it under the newspaper and the one opposite him hauled it out on the other side and it disappeared into his clothing without the light once getting at it.

When this tricky feat had been accomplished satisfactorily, the first one said, “We wanna see you, Donovan.”

“Take a good look,” Johnny said in a low voice. “How does a guy that’s gone straight appeal to you?”

“Dead,” answered the party across the table.

“I’ve got something you can’t kill,” Johnny said. His eyes lit up like radio dials and all of a sudden he was proud of himself for the first time since he was in long pants. “I’m straight now. I’m on the level. Not all the bullets in all the gats in New York can take that away from me.”

“They can make you smell a lot different in twenty-four hours,” the one next to him said. And the one across the way put in: “He thinks he’s gonna get bullets, no less! Wake up, pogie, this ain’t 1919. You’ll beg for bullets. You’ll get down on your knees and pray for ‘em before we get through with you!”

Johnny smiled and said, “When the State turns on the heat, they give a guy a last meal; let him order his head off. This being my last meal, let’s see if you’re big enough to lemme finish what I ordered.” He took up his spoon in his left hand.

“We got all night,” one assured him. “We’ll even pay your check for you. Sing Sing has nothing on us.”

The other one looked at the shredded wheat and laughed. “That’s a hell of a thing to croak with in your guts!”

“They’re my guts,” observed Johnny, chewing away, “and it’s my party.” He took up the pencil in his right hand and went ahead with the puzzle. “What’s a five-letter word for the goddess of love?” he asked nonchalantly.

They exchanged a dubious look, not in reference to the goddess of love however. “Can’t you see he’s stalling you?”

one growled. “How do we know what this place is? Let’s go.”

The ticket bell at the door rang and a very pretty girl came in alone. Her face turned very white under the lights, like she’d been up all night. But she wasn’t logy at all. She seemed to know just what she was doing. She glanced over her shoulder just once, at the maroon car outside the door, but did not look at the three men at the table at all. Then she picked up a cup of coffee from the counterman and brushed straight by them without a look, sat down facing them one table further back, and, like any respectable girl that hour of the night, kept her long lashes down over her eyes while she stirred the java with a tin spoon.

Johnny looked at her and seemed to get an inspiration. “Venus,” he said suddenly, “that’s the word! Why didn’t I think of it?” But instead of “Venus” he scribbled on the margin of the diagram: “Stay back—I’m covered. Goodbye.”

The others had been taking a short, admiring gander at her too. “Momma!” said one of them. “Is that easy to take!”

“Yeah,” agreed the other. “Too bad we’re on business. Y’never see ‘em like that when you’re on y’own time!”

“What’s a three-letter word—” Johnny began again. Then suddenly losing his temper, he exclaimed: “Jeeze! I can’t do this damn thing!” He tore the puzzle out of the paper, crumpled it irritably into a ball, and tossed it away from him —toward the next table.

The girl sitting at it dropped her paper napkin at that minute, then stooped to pick it up again.

The three men got up from the table together and started toward the front of the place. They walked fairly slowly, Johnny in the middle, one on each side. Their three bodies were ganged at the hips, where the coat pockets were. The one on the inside, although he hadn’t eaten anything, helped himself to a toothpick from the counter from force of habit and began prodding away with one hand. The washroom door opened on a crack, a nose showed, and

then it prudently closed again. The girl at the table was very white and kept stirring her coffee without tasting it, as if she didn't know what her wrist was doing at all.

The counterman just then was further down the line, hauling a platter of fried eggs through the hole in the wall. It was exactly ten minutes since Johnny Donovan had first come in, five to four in the morning. The short-order cook must have had to heat up the frying pan first.

"Two bright-side up!" bawled the counterman. Then he looked at the table and saw that they weren't there any more. They were all the way up by the cash register. He came up after them, behind the counter, carrying the eggs. "Hey!" he said. "Don't you want your eggs?"

"Naw, he's lost his appetite," one of them said. "Get in the car with him," he murmured to his companion. "I'll pay his check."

He let electric light in between himself and Johnny, fished out some change, and tossed down the three checks, two blank and one punched. Johnny and the other fellow went out the door, still shoulder to shoulder, drifted across the sidewalk, and got into the back of the maroon car. The door slapped smartly and the curtains dropped down behind the windows.

The counterman didn't like people who just came into his place to warm chairs and then walked out again on blank checks. He made the mistake of charging for the eggs which hadn't been eaten. The girl in the back had gotten up now and was moving with a sort of lazy walk toward the man who had stayed behind. She'd tacked on a bright-red new mouth with her lipstick and suddenly didn't seem so respectable any more.

"So I'm paying for the eggs, am I?" barked the man at the counter. "Okay, hand 'em over." He pulled the plate away from the counterman, tilted it upward on his palm, fitted it viciously across the other's face, and ground it in with a sort

of half turn. Egg yolk dripped down in yellow chains. “Have ‘em on me, you mosey sap!” he magnanimously offered.

The girl gave a shrill, brazen laugh of approval that sounded like her voice was cracked. “Gee, sweetheart,” she said, “I could go for a guy like you. How does it look for a little life in your car? I been stemming all night and my dogs are yapping.” She deliberately separated a nickel of his change and skimmed it back across the glass to pay for her coffee, then nudged him chummily with her elbow. “You and me and a flock of etchings, how about it?” she invited.

“Some other time, momma,” he said tersely. “Got no time tonight.” He pocketed the rest of his change and stalked out. The counterman was shaking French fried potatoes out of his collar, but he knew enough not to say anything out loud.

The girl went out after the fellow who had just turned her down, like some sort of a magnet was pulling her toward the car.

He’d already gotten in at the wheel when she got over to it. “C’mon, whaddya say?” she pleaded hoarsely. “Don’t be selfish. Just a couple blocks lift would be a life saver.“She put one foot up on the running board, put one hand to the latch of the door. Her face was all damp and pasty-looking, but it took more than that amount of dishevelment to fog its beauty.

The one at the wheel hesitated, with the motor already turning over. He looked over his shoulder into the darkness questioningly, even longingly. Evidently she’d gotten under his skin. “How about it?” he said to the other one. “Drop her off at your place and then come back for her when we’re through?” He wanted the answer to be yes awfully bad.

She had the door open by now. One more move and she would have been on the front seat next to him. The answer did not come from the one he’d put it up to at all. It came from their “guest.” It was Johnny Donovan’s voice that answered, that put the crusher on it, strangely enough. A

word of warning, a single cry for help from him, and they would have been compelled to take her too, in self-defense, because she would have caught on to what they were doing. He knew enough not to do that. Instead, he said almost savagely: “Kick her out—or is this part of what I get too?”

There was a vicious slap from the rear of the car, but the remark snapped the driver out of it, showed him what a fool thing he’d been about to do. That twist had magnetism or something. He gave her a terrific shove at the throat that sent her skittering backwards off the running board and very nearly flat on her back, grunting: “Where’s ya manners? Don’t crowd like that!” And a minute later the car was just a red tail light a block down, and then it wasn’t even that.

She was still lurching from the push he’d given her. She said, “Johnny, oh my God, Johnny, you’ve killed yourself!” But she said it very low, so low that the taxi dryer who had come out just then and was standing beside her looking in the same direction she was, didn’t even hear her.

They weren’t going to kill him—it was he who had killed himself! Didn’t he know she could have saved him? Didn’t he know she’d brought a little gun of her own in her handbag to this last meeting of theirs? Didn’t he know all she needed was to get into that car with them, and wait for a favorable opportunity, and she could have pulled the trick? She saw where she had made her mistake now; she should have used it right in the cafeteria while she still had the chance. But in there there’d been two of them covering him, in the car only one while the other was at the wheel. That was why she’d waited, used her eyes on them for all she was worth, been within an ace of getting away with it—and then at the last minute he himself had to snatch the chance away from her, cut himself off from help.

She knew why he’d done it, and she cursed that habit in men of sparing their women. Didn’t they know women? Didn’t they know there was nothing on God’s earth could be

so terrible, so remorseless, as a woman when the one she loved was in danger? The toughest triggerman was a Salvation Army lassie compared to a woman at such a time.

"They're not going to have him!" Jean Donovan whispered into the night that surrounded her, eyes hard as mica and so big they seemed to cover her whole face. "They're not—going—to—take—him away from me!" One look at her expression and the taxi driver, who had been considering taking up acquaintanceship where the other two had left off, changed his mind and slunk away. You don't try to make dates with a tiger.

He took a deep belly breath of relief as he saw the guy in front push her off the car and nearly on her ear. "Thank God," he said to himself, "she stays out of it!" They hadn't, evidently, either one of them recognized her from the Club; Beefy had two or three, and the Long Island City one was where they did most of their hanging out when they did any. It had been chiefly a Long Island outfit from the beginning. But one peep from her just now, one "Johnny!" and she would have been sunk. He'd been scared stiff that she'd give herself away. It was okay now though. She'd look pretty in black, poor little monkey. She looked pretty in anything. He turned his head around and looked back at her through the diamond-shaped rear pane as they zoomed off, then covered himself by grating, "Damned little bum, trying to horn in! I like to die private."

The one next to him gave him another slap, backhand across the eyes, and they filled with water. "You're gonna," he promised.

They followed St. Nick to 168th, cut west, and connected with Riverside. "Y'got pretty far uptown for a Brooklyn fella," the one at the wheel mentioned, "but not far enough."

“Is Ratsy gonna be burned!” laughed his mate. “The Big Boy sends him all the way to Buffalo on a phony tip day before yesterday. And Ratsy hates Buffalo, he went to Reform School there! And while he’s gone we snag the son right here!”

There wasn’t a car in sight on the Drive at that hour; the lights of the bridge were like a string of pearls hanging up in the air behind them. They turned south, slowed, and drew up almost at once. “As quick as all that?” thought Johnny, thankfully. “Then I’m not going to get the trimmings! There wouldn’t be time, out in the open like this.”

The one in front cut the dashboard lights, said: “Hurry it up now! We don’t wanna be hanging around here too long —”

“We shoulda brought that dame after all,” the other one said. “She coulda fronted for us.” He took his gun out, turned it, swung back, and brought the butt down on the side of Johnny’s head with a pounding crash. Johnny groaned but didn’t go right out, so he smashed him again with it, this time on the other side, then went on: “That gal coulda made it look like a necking party, while we’re standing still here like this.”

“Get busy, and we don’t need to be standing still!” was the answer. “Got the blanket? Fix it so it looks like he’s soused.”

The one in back took out copper wire from the side pocket, caught the limp figure’s wrists behind him, coiled it cruelly around them. The skin broke instantly and the strands of the wire disappeared under it. Then he did it to his ankles too. Then he propped him up in the corner, took the lap robe and tucked it around him up to his neck. He took out a bottle of whisky, palmed a handful, sloshed it across Johnny’s face, sprinkled the blanket with it. “Let’s go,” he muttered. “He smells like a still. He oughta be good for a hundred fifty traffic lights now!”

The lights went up, the driver kicked his foot down, and they arched away like a plane taking off. “It musta been great,” he lamented mournfully, “in the old days before they had traffic lights!”

“They had no organization in them days,” said his companion scornfully. “They went to jail like flies—even for cracking safes, mind ya! Take it slower, we’re getting downtown.”

Johnny came to between two redhot branding irons just as they swerved out onto the express highway at Seventy-fourth. The outside of his mouth was free, but a strip of tape fastened to his upper gums clamped his tongue to the roof of his mouth. The only sounds he could make sounded like the mumblings of a drunk. He saw the black outline of the Jersey shore skimming by across the river.

They took Canal Street across, then followed the Bowery, which still showed signs of life; he knew it by the El pillars shuffling past. Then the wire lacework of one of the bridges. Brooklyn probably. A tug bleated dismally way under them. There hadn’t been, strictly speaking, any traffic lights all the way down; they’d all gone out hours ago. It was the streetlights flickering in and out of the car they were on guard against. They had to slow up once, in downtown Brooklyn, for a street accident, and there must have been a cop near. They both got very talkative and solicitous all at once. “Head still going round and round, Johnny?” the one in front asked. “Never mind, you’ll be home in bed in no time now.”

“What he needs,” said the one in back, gun out under cover of the blanket, but not pointing at Johnny this time, “is a good strong cup o’ black coffee.”

“Looks like your friend can’t hold his liquor,” said a third voice, outside the car, and a face peered jocularly in at him, under a visor.

“Ing, ing, ing,” Johnny panted, sweat coursing down his face. He reared desperately toward the silhouette.

The face pulled back again. “Ouch, what a breath! I could get lit myself on that alone.”

“I told him not to mix his drinks.” They swerved out, then in again, sloshed through some water, sped on. The one next to him caught him by both cheeks with one hand, dragged them together, heaved his head back into the corner of the seat. His lower lip opened and blood came out. “That cop,” he observed calmly, “don’t know how lucky he is he didn’t get what you were trying to tell him!”

“Did he lamp the plates?” he asked the driver.

“I turned ‘em over just as we came up.” He did something to the dashboard and there was a slapping sound from the rear fender.

The lights got fewer, then after awhile there weren’t any more; they were out in the wilds of Jamaica now, Beefy’s happy hunting ground. A big concrete building that looked like a ware house or refrigerating plant showed up. “Well, anyway,” one of them said to Johnny, “we gave you your money’s worth; it wasn’t one of those short hauls!” When he looked closer he saw that Johnny was out again; he’d been lying on his mangled wrists at an acute angle ever since they’d left the place where they met the cop.

They drove into the building, car and all, and got him out between them, and a new guy took the wheel of the car and an elevator took it down below some place out of sight. Yet this wasn’t a garage. When Johnny Donovan regained consciousness for the second time that night, it was with the help of a fistful of shaved ice being held between his eyes. He was up in the loft of this building, a big barn of a place, half of it lost in shadows that the row of coned lights overhead couldn’t reach; it was cold as a tomb, sawdust on the floor, and a row of porcelain refrigerator doors facing him gleamed clinically white, dazzled the eyes.

Beefy Borden was there, with a white turtle-neck sweater under his coat jacket, perched on a tall three-legged stool, gargoyle-like. The two that had brought Johnny had turned

their coat collars up against the cold, but him they promptly stripped to the waist as soon as he had opened his eyes. The skin on his stomach and back crawled involuntarily, half dead as he was, and contracted into goose pimples. They had left him upright for a moment, and his knees immediately caved under him, hit the sawdust. He held his spine straight by sheer will power and stayed that way; wouldn't go down any further.

Beefy lit a cigarette, handed his two henchmen one, studied Johnny interestedly, seemingly without hatred. "So that's how they look when they go straight," he murmured. "Why, I thought I'd see something—pair of wings at least, or one of these here now halos shining on top of his conk. I don't notice anything, do you, boys? I wouldn't gotten up at this hour and come all the way out here if I'da known." All very playful and coy, with a wink for each one.

One of them jerked his head back by the hair, pried his mouth open, and tore out the tape. A little blood followed, from the lining of the cheeks. They took away the copper wire from his wrists next.

Beefy flicked ashes from his cigarette, drawled: "Well, I'll tell you, I think he's had enough, don't you? We just set out to frighten him a little, didn't we, boys? I think he's learned his lesson. Whaddya say we let him have his clothes back and send him home?" He gave them each a long, meaning look so they got the idea. "Only first, of course, he's gotta show the right spirit, ask for it in the proper way, say he's sorry and all like that. Now suppose you crawl over here, right in front of me, and just ask, beg real hard—that's all y'gotta do, and then we'll call it quits."

Johnny saw his foot twitch; knew it was loaded with a kick for his face when and if he did. It wasn't the obvious phoniness of the offer that held him back, even if it had been genuine, even if it had been as easy as all that to get out of it—he still wouldn't have done it. Life wasn't that

precious. Man has a soul—even a kid from nowhere whom nobody would miss, trapped in a ref rigerating plant.

He writhed to his shackled feet and hobbled a little way toward Beefy. One of them was holding his coat and shirt up for bait, but Johnny didn't even glance that way. He stared into the pig-eyes of the Big Shot. Then suddenly, without a word, he spat blood and saliva full into his face. "That's the cleanest thing ever touched you," he said hoarsely. "Gimme death, so I won't have to keep on seeing and smelling you! Those are my last words. Now try to get another sound out of me!"

They knocked him down flat on his back, and he just lay there looking at the ceiling. Beefy got down from the stool very slowly, face twitching all over and luminous with rage. He wiped the back of his hand across one cheek, motioned with the other. "Hand me that belt of his." They put it in his hand. He paid it around, caught it at the opposite end from the thin, flat silver buckle. "Go down below and bring up a sack of salt on the elevator with you." His eyes never left Johnny's face. He addressed the remaining one: "Put your foot on his neck and hold him down. When I tell you to, you can turn him over on the other side." Then he spoke directly to Johnny: "Now listen while you're still able to, listen what's coming to you. You're gonna be beaten raw with your own belt. The salt—that's so you'll know it. That'lI keep the blood in too, so you'll last awhile, an hour or two anyway. Stinging and smarting to death."

Johnny didn't answer. Beefy stripped off his coat, swung the buckled strap back in a long hissing arc, brought it over and down again with the velocity of a bullet. His assistant steadied his foot against the spasm that coursed through what he was holding down. There wasn't a human sound in the place from then on.

It wouldn't be listed in the phone book, of course, so she didn't even bother looking it up. Every second counted. The wheels of that death car were raging around like mad

under him this very minute, and here she was stuck way up here on the edge of creation, miles from anywhere. But that bloated swine that was behind all this, he had a home somewhere, he lived somewhere in this town, there was somewhere she could reach him. Oh, it was too late by now to beg or plead for Johnny's life—the ride had started already—and even if it hadn't been, she knew how much good it would have done her, but at least she could put a bullet through him!

The police? Weren't they those men in blue that directed traffic at crossings? They'd find Johnny's body eventually—that was about where they fitted in. And even then—that Druckman case awhile back, for instance. There was only one man who could stop what was going to happen in time, and that was the man who had started it. Thank God, she knew that much at least; knew which direction the blow had come from. She had wangled the whole set-up out of Johnny weeks ago.

She darted out into the roadway, where anything on wheels would have to stop for her, and began to run crazily along. A pair of heads twinkled across from left to right at the next intersection, half a block down, and she screamed at them, brought them around in a half circle to a stop. It was a private machine with a "girl scout" in it. "Wanna lift?"

She came up panting. "Fifty-eighth Street—oh, for the love of God, get me down there!"

"Whoa! That's not the right spirit. Y'wanna look at this thing a little more socially. I'm not in the hacking business —" But she'd fled onward already.

She got her cab a minute later, it had turned in toward her. "The Wicked Nineties," she strangled. "No, never mind your meter. I'll give you twenty dollars flat, twenty-five, anything, only get me there. Cut loose!" She took out the hard-earned money that was to have gotten them to Miami, shook it at him. "It's a matter of life and death, d'you understand?"

She took out the gun, fixed it, while they lurched down the endless lengths of St. Nicholas Avenue. Bannerman, her boss, Beefy's "front" down here—he'd know; he'd be able to tell her where to reach him, if she had to shoot him to get it out of him.

"Good boy!" she breathed fervently as he tore into the park at 110th instead of taking Fifth. Fifth was straight and the park had curves, but he knew what he was doing; you could make any speed you wanted to in there at this dawn hour. When they came out at Fifty-ninth, the street lights had just gone out all over town. Two two-wheeled skids more and they were in front of where she worked, not a light showing outside of it any more.

"Here's thirty," she said, vaulting out. "Now stay there, wait—you've got to take me some place else yet! You'll get all the rest of this, if you'll only wait!"

She ran down the long carpeted foyer, past her own picture on the walls, burst into the room beyond like an avenging angel. The last customer was out, the lights low, the tables stacked, the scrubwomen down on their knees. If he'd gone already, Bannerman, if she'd missed him! His office door flew open at her push, so he was still around somewhere. He wasn't in there; she could hear him washing his hands in his little private cubbyhole beyond. He heard her, but she beat him to the lavatory door, locked him in from the outside.

"Hey, you!" He began to pound.

She went through the desk like a cyclone, dropping papers and whole drawers around her. She couldn't find it; it wasn't left lying around like that. Then she saw he'd hung his coat up on a hook before he went in; it was in a little private memorandum book in the inside pocket of that. Both of them, the home address and the telephone number. Just the initials, B. B. But that was it. Way over in Brooklyn somewhere.

She grabbed up the hand-set and began to hack away at it. Dead. More grief, the club operator had gone home long ago. She picked up Bannerman's bunch of keys, found the one to the office door, slipped out, and locked that up after her too. A minute later she heard a crash as he busted down the lavatory partition. She was already around at the main switchboard off the foyer, plugging in her call herself. Not for nothing had she once done a stretch of that.

No answer—but then it was a 5 AM. call. "Keep it up, operator, keep it up!" She turned her head and yelled at one of the terrified scrubwomen: "Keep away from that door, you! He's drunk as an owl in there!"

Suddenly there was a woman's voice in her ears, sleepy, frightened too. "Hello, who—who do you want?"

"Lemme talk to Borden. Borden, quick! Got an important message for him!"

"He's not here—"

"Well, where can Ireach him! Hurry, I tell you, I'm not kidding."

"He didn't say where he was going—he never does—he —"

"Who is this? Speak up, can't you, you fool! No one's gonna bite you!"

"This is his wife. Who are you? How'd you know where he lives? No one ever rings him here—"

"I'm the girl with the dreamy eyes! And I'm coming over there and give the message myself!"

The driver was still turning the three tens over and over when she landed in back of him. "Ocean Avenue—and just as fast as ever!"

Bannerman got to the club entrance all mussed-looking just as they went into high. Breaking down two doors in succession had spoiled the part in his hair.

It was a skyscraper apartment house on Brooklyn's Fifth Avenue, the number that had been in Bannerman's memo book, and naturally he'd have the roof—she didn't need the night operator to tell her that. She gave the hackman another thirty. "Now wait some more. I know you think I'm crazy, but—but maybe you once loved someone too!"

"It ain't my business," he said agreeably, and began thumbing his sixty lovingly.

She wasn't coming back this time, at least she didn't think so then, but it wouldn't hurt to have him handy. "Certainly I'm expected," she told the hallman. He didn't like the hour, but he'd already made a half-turn toward the second of two elevators. "Well, just a minute until I find out." He went over to the house phone.

It was Beefy's private lift, no doors in the shaft up to the penthouse, and it was automatic; by keeping her thumb pressed to the starter he couldn't reverse it and get her down again. He'd bring cops in right away; they were probably eating out of Beefy's hand for miles around here, too.

The elevator slide let her right out into the apartment, and the hallman was already buzzing like mad from below to warn them. Borden's young wife was heading for the instrument from the room beyond, in pattering bare feet, as Jean got there. She'd thrown a mink coat over a nightgown. She stopped dead for a minute, then went right on again under pressure.

"Don't make me do something I don't want to," Jean said softly. "Just say it's all right; that you were expecting me. Well, go on, say it!" She motioned with the little gun.

"Sallright, was expecting her," the woman slobbered into the house phone. Jean clicked it off for her.

"Now, where is he?"

"Uh-uh-uh," the Borden woman sputtered, stalling for time.

“Come on! Can’t you tell by my face not to fool around with me?”

She didn’t know. He’d been gone since about ten that evening. He never told her anything about his business.

“Business—ha!” There was more to be leery of in the laugh than there had been in her anger. “He’s got my man in a spot—right now, this very minute—and I’m going to pay him back in his own coin! Either you help me head him off in time or you get it yourself!”

“He doesn’t do things like that, not my Beefy. You’ve got him wrong. They’ve given you a bum steer. Now wait a minute, honey; don’t lose your nice ways! Honest, if I knew where he was I’d tell you. One of his club managers, Bannerman, he might know.” Her loosened hair fell down over her face.

“That’s what I’m thinking too,” Jean said curtly. “I just came from Bannerman, but I didn’t have any—inducement—then, to get him to tell me. We’ll try our luck now—but not from here. Come on. You’re coming with me—back to my own place! Pick up that house phone! What’s the guy’s name down there? Jerry? Say, Jerry, will you come up here a minute? Take the public elevator.”

The gun raised her to her feet like a lever. “Jerry, will you come up here a minute? Take the public elevator.” Then she said craftily, “Yes.”

Jean’s hand sealed the orifice like a flash. “He asked you if there was anything wrong, didn’t he?” She raised the gun. “Make it, Yes, we think we see a man outside on the terrace.” She tore her away from it. “Now, come on!” She began pulling her after her to the waiting private elevator.

“My feet are bare!” the captive wailed.

There was a pair of galoshes standing near the elevator. Jean scuffed them into the car. “Stick ‘em in those going down!” Further back, in a recess, a red-glass knob had lighted up warningly.

They started down. Again Jean kept the ball of her thumb on the button. He couldn't cut them off from above. The lobby was deserted. She pulled Mrs. Borden, in nightgown, galoshes, and mink coat, into the cab after her. "Manhattan!" she clipped at the avaricious driver. "And this time you're really going to get dough!"

It was getting lighter by the minute now, but was still too early for anything to be open. She stopped him at an all-night drug store down near Borough Hall, hauled her furred freight in after her. "This woman's real sick," she threw at the sleepy clerk, and the two of them crushed into one phone booth, Mrs. Borden on the inside.

She didn't know where to reach Bannerman at his home, any more than her prisoner did (and she believed her), but she was praying he'd stayed on at the Nineties on account of those two smashed doors and to see if she'd lifted anything from his office. She rang the club. He answered himself.

"Now listen, and listen carefully! Get Beefy Borden on the wire from where you are—I don't care where he is, but get him—and keep the line open, waiting! I'm going to call you again in ten minutes, from some place else. You better have him when I do! And he better have Johnny Donovan still alive for me!"

"I don't know whatcha talking about," he tried to say. "Who's Johnny Donovan? And for that matter, who's Beefy Borden?"

"He thinks I'm ribbing!" she raged at Mrs. Borden. "Tell him about it yourself!"

"Dave, for God's sake, do what she says!" the haggard blonde croaked into the transmitter. "It's June, can't you hear me? June! She's taken me off with her in a cab and she's got a gun on me!"

Jean pushed her aside. “Do you know who that was or don’t you? Ten minutes,” she warned him, and hung up. They went hustling out again, Jean’s right fist buried deep in the rich mink, and got back into the cab again.

They lived on Fifty-eighth, she and Johnny; at least he had until two weeks ago. All his things were still up there, and it had broken her heart nightly for fourteen nights now just to look at them. Just one-room-and, but in a fairly slick place, the Parc Concorde.

She brought out all the rest of the Miami money, spread it out fanwise in her hand, offered it to the driver. “Help yourself—and forget all about what you’ve seen tonight!” Mrs. Borden was too near prostration by now to budge, even without a gun on her.

“One from each end and one from the middle,” he gloated, picking them out, “and I get a radio put in.”

She crammed the rest of it back into her bag. There was still more than enough left to get them to Miami—the thing was, would she get the chance to use it?

Too late, in the elevator, June Borden came to. “Don’t let her take me in there! She’s—I dunno what she’s gonna do!”

“All this row just because I bring you home to put you under a cold shower! You will mix your drinks!” She slipped a ten into the hailman’s hand.

He grinned reassuringly. “You’ll be all right in the morning, lady.” He gave Jean the office. “Mrs. Donovan would not think of hurting ya, wouldja, Mrs. Donovan? You just do what she tells ya!”

Jean closed the door after them and locked it. “Sit down in that chair and let’s find out if you live or die.”

She got the Wicked Nineties back, calmly stripping off her hat and coat while she waited. She opened her bag with one hand, and took the gun out.

Bannerman had a voice waiting for her on another wire, but they couldn’t connect the two lines. She hadn’t thought

of that in time. So near and yet so far! “Plug me through the club switchboard!” she rasped.

“I don’t know how, I never worked it!” He tried it and she found herself talking to a produce market up in the Bronx. She got him back again, her heart turning inside out. “Is he alive—only tell me that, is he alive?”

“I can’t swing it while both lines stay open. Gimme your number, then hang up a minute, let them call you—”

Mrs. Borden came over, starting to cry. “Dave, Dave, do what she says! You gotta get Beefy, I tell you!”

“Listen,” Jean said. “Pull out his plug on your callboard, got that? Then cut mine into the socket you got his out of—that’s all you’ve got to do!”

There was a click, and then another voice came on. It was Borden’s. She knew it just by that one “Who the hell wazzat?” he’d thrown after her in the club alley one night. It echoed hollowly, as though he was in some sort of a big hall or arena. “All right, twist. What’s all this jalappy you’re handing out?”

“You’ve got Johnny Donovan there with you. I’ve got June Borden here with me. Do we swap, or don’t we?”

“Trying to do, throw a scare into me? You’ll wish you’d never been born when I get through with—”

“I know you’re checking this number like blazes while you’re trying to string me along. Listen, you could be right at the door now and you wouldn’t be in time to save her. Matter, don’t you believe I’ve got her here? Don’t you believe Bannerman? All right, help yourself.” She motioned her prisoner over. “Sell yourself!”

“Max! Max!” his wife bleated. “I’m alone with her here—she came and took me out of my bed. Max, don’t you know my voice? Max, you’re not gonna let me—Hou-hou-hou—” She dropped the phone and went staggering around in a sort of drunken circle, hands heeled to her eyes.

Jean picked it up again. His voice was sort of strained now. “Now, wait a minute. Don’t you know you can’t get

away with—”

“You’re gonna hear the shot right over this wire—” Then she heard something that went through her like a knife. The scream of a man in mortal agony sounded somewhere in the background, muffled, blurred in transmission. She moaned in answer to it.

Borden said, almost hysterically, “Wait a minute, wait a minute, that wasn’t him, that was one of my own men—he, he got hurt here!”

“Then put him on the phone,” she said. “I’ll count five. Come over here, you! I’m holding the gun right at her!” She began to count, slowly, remorselessly. The woman was half-dead already, with sheer fright.

She could hear his breathing across the wire, hoarse, rasping. The tension was almost unendurable; she could feel her mind slipping.

“Four,” she heard herself say. “Better put him on the phone quick!”

“I can’t,” came from the other end. “He’s gone—half an hour ago. You’re—too late!” There was a choked terror about the way he said it that told her it was true. She let the receiverdrop to the end of its cord like a shot.

His wife read her doom in her eyes. She gave a single, longdrawn scream of nameless terror that hung in the air. Then the pounding at the door told Jean why he’d come out with it like that just now, made no bones about it; they’d traced her fast, all right. They’d gotten here already—her address was on tap at the club—but just the same, he’d timed himself wrong. They weren’t in yet, there was still a door between, and a pin can fall on cartridge much quicker than a door can swing open! She’d been half an hour too late—but he’d been half a minute too soon! They’d both lost, and the winner was the same old winner—death.

A passkey turned in the door and a voice from the other world groaned, “Jean!”

She shivered all over and turned to look, and the hallman was holding Johnny up in the doorway. He was naked uflder a coat, and his feet were hobbled with copper wire, but his eyes were alive and he groaned it again, “Jean!“as the man brought him into the room, leaning on him. He’d kept his word, he’d stayed alive!

She saw through the open coat what they’d done to him, and choked back a scream. “They strapped the hell out of me,” he said, and smiled a little, “but—but—I left before the finals—” And he fainted.

“Whisky!” she said. “Bandages—they’re in there! Quick!”

Yet it wasn’t as bad as it had looked. Cut-up wrists and ankles, a flaming chest and abdomen—but he’d stayed alive, he’d come back from a ride. The very same maroon death car was at the door right now! She pitched the gun into a corner. Mrs. Borden was sitting there snuffling a little, slowly calming down. She didn’t make a move to go; seemed to be lost in thought—unpleasant thought.

He opened his eyes again, gave a deep sigh, like pain was a habit by this time. She gave him the cigarette he asked for, then went ahead washing and bandaging. Tears were slowly coursing down her cheeks, tears of gratitude. “No—no cops,” she said to the hallman. “You see, it wouldn’t do us any good. We’re going to Miami. Can you make Penn Station with me, darling?”

He didn’t tell her what they had intended doing; just told her what they’d actually done. “They kept sprinkling salt, as the belt buckle opened the skin. I gave a heave, I guess, I don’t know; threw the one that was holding me down with his foot off balance, sort of forward. The buckle coming down caught him, tore his eye out. He went mad with pain, went for Beefy; picked up a sharp knife they had waiting for me. They had a terrible time with him. My arms were free, but my feet weren’t. I kept rolling over and over—just to ease the burning at first—then I rolled right onto this flat freight-elevator that had no sides, pulled the rope and went

all the way down, into the basement without knowing it. The car was there they'd brought me in, and the mechanic was dozing. I cracked him with a wrench, dragged myself in, drove it onto the elevator and managed to get off with it at street level. Then I drove it all the way back here with a blanket around me, so I wouldn't get pinched for indecent exposure. The open air sort of kept me going—"

"It's my fault. Are you sorry," she sobbed, "you went straight?"

"No," he murmured. "It was worth it—even if I hadn't come back. Just help me with a pair of socks and shoes, and I can still make the train with you—"

Mrs. Borden was saying, in a strange smoldering voice, "I never thought he'd go that far—do that to any human being. At home he wouldn't hurt a fly—" She covered her eyes suddenly, as if to shut out the memory of Johnny's frayed, reddened skin before the bandages hid it from sight. "He—he would've killed you, if you hadn't gotten away!"

"That," said Johnny tersely, "seems to have been the chief idea."

"Why?" she wanted to know.

"Because I knew too much."

She seemed to be talking to herself more than to the two of them. "Oh, I'm not a plaster saint, God knows," she groaned. "I knew our money wasn't straight. I've always known it. Too much of it too quickly. I knew he was in beer back in the Twenties, and I know that lately he's been running clubs and sending girls on South American vaudeville tours—"

"Is that the new name for it?"

"But still and all," she went on, "I never thought he'd try to take someone's life. Oh, if someone doesn't stop him, he'll kill someone yet!"

All Johnny said was, "Yet?"

She stood up suddenly, staring at him. “Then you mean he has—already? Me and the kids, we been living on blood money! I guess I know the reason now why so many times the morning paper has whole columns torn out of it when I come to read it.” She stared at the mink coat; suddenly sloughed it off, horrified. “What’s that trying to tell me? It’s turned red, look at it, bright red!” she screamed. “I’ve been living in the same house with a killer—sleeping with a murderer! He’s gonna end up in the chair yet—”

“He’s ten years overdue,” Johnny muttered. “It’s pretty late in the day to—”

“But it’s not too late! I love him! I don’t care what he’s done! I’ll save him from that. Anything but that! I’ll put him where he’s safe! If I can’t have him, the chair won’t get him either!” She picked up Jean’s phone. “Get me the district attorney’s office,” she sobbed.

Jean was buttoning her husband’s coat. “Lean on me, darling,” she whispered. “We’ve got a date with ourselves down in Miami.”

“Mrs. Maximilian Borden,” the woman at the phone was saying as they limped out of the room arm-in-arm and quietly closed the door behind them. “You tell the attorney I want a personal interview with him—in strict confidence!”

HIS NAME WAS JACK

The room was adorable, a dainty boudoir all in coral and gray. The girl waiting there in the room was adorable. The tea-rose moon that shone outside the window was adorable. Everything was adorable but one thing—the way those two hands on the clock were pointed, at 3 and at 6. Half-past three in the morning.

Three-thirty isn't necessarily a tragic hour. But when you've been waiting alone since midnight for a husband that doesn't come home, it isn't exactly a consoling hour either. And when the husband's an almost new one, dating only a year or so back, it's more than tragic. It's catastrophic. At any rate you don't feel like laughing about it. Sharlee Milburn wasn't laughing; she was prone across the bed crying her poor little nineteen-year-old heart out. The tangerine satin negligee rippled as her childish shoulders shook under it; one pomponned mule had fallen off, the other clung by just one toe. A Madame Pompadour doll perched at the head of the bed looked commiseratingly down on her as if it too would have liked to cry. This was her fifteenth crying spell since twelve o'clock, and still he didn't come.

The first one had started in almost the minute she closed the door on the last of the gay housewarming guests. A fine housewarming of the new apartment that had been—without a husband! Why, she'd had to smile and lie to them through the long endless hours, keeping the tears back.

“Oh, Craig’ll be here any minute now. He—he had to go out on business.” Gulp. “At least that’s what he said.” Which wasn’t what he really said at all.

What he said, when she timidly asked him where he was going, was “That’s my business!” There is, you will notice, a slight difference between the two statements, but it was the best she could do; she wasn’t very good at deceit. And at that it failed to be very convincing. She saw them all look at one another and change the subject. She knew they must think it strange. But she didn’t care what they thought if only they’d go. If only they’d go and leave her alone! She couldn’t hold out much longer; that glazed smile was cracking her lips and any minute the tears were going to come. Then finally they went, with their banter and their laughter and their good wishes and their noise, and she got the door closed after them. She tore into an adorable but empty boudoir, bounced on the bed, and cried as she’d never cried before.

Then right in the middle of it Stella Hart had to come back for something she’d forgotten and caught her at it. She knew it wasn’t Craig; he had his key; he wouldn’t have knocked. She just had time to powder her nose and snatch a cigarette for an alibi before she let Stella in. Stella was a funny sort of person, cynical and hard-boiled, wearing her divorces like beads around her neck, a sort of up-to-date rosary which she told off with the least encouragement and absolutely no embarrassment. She’d been watching Sharlee closely all through the evening; maybe that was why she’d purposely left her gloves behind.

“Oh, it’s you again, Stella,” Sharlee managed in a strangled little voice at the door.

“Forgot my gloves,” said Stella. But she didn’t seem in any hurry to look for them. Instead she kept scrutinizing Sharlee’s tear-bright eyes and nodding to herself as if she’d expected that.

Sharlee tried to bluff it out. “I—I just had a coughing fit on this cigarette,” she explained feebly, holding it up to show Stella.

“Peculiar,” said Stella, “seeing it isn’t lit at all. What do you do, chew them like gum? Who do you think you’re fooling?” she said harshly. Harshly but with an undertone of kindness. She didn’t wait for Sharlee to answer. “Not me anyway. Now just say the word and I’ll butt out again. I know this is none of my business, but I’m ten years older than you, and I hate to see anything as good-looking as you suffer on account of one of those things that wears a necktie and goes around talking way down deep. That’s what it is, isn’t it? Me, I’ve made ’em suffer. I’ve got nothing coming to me. I’ve collected. But I’d like to help you. I’m great for sex-solidarity. Why don’t you tell sister what he’s doing to you? Sister’ll put a few bees in his bonnet!”

Sharlee tried to be loyal to her year-old husband to the bitter end.

“Help me?” she tried to say coolly. “Why, I don’t know what you mean!” Instead all that came was a new gush of tears, and before she knew it, Stella’s arm was around her consolingly and she was sobbing out the whole story. “Why does he treat me like this? I don’t know what I’ve done to him! Comes home at all hours, blind drunk! I think he must have married me to spite somebody else, that’s what I think!”

“But you’ve only been married a year!” Stella gasped.

“Every night he leaves me upstairs alone and he’s down at the bar until they had to carry him up to our suite. When it began, I used to phone down, but he’d send back word that he’d come when he was good and ready. So I stopped that. Then he got a telegram; I think it was from her, whoever she is! Then we moved to this apartment Daddy and Mom had fixed up for us—”

”Do they know?”

“No, thank heavens, they couldn’t come to the housewarming tonight. I wouldn’t dare tell them either—Daddy would kill him!”

“Then what are you going to do?” asked Stella. “Are you going to buck this thing alone?”

“It’s my marriage so I guess I’ll have to.” Sharlee sighed. “I’ve never thought much of girls who ran home to mother the minute anything went wrong. I couldn’t face them at home. I want to be so proud of him—and he won’t let me!”

“To be proud of him,” said Stella acidly, “you’d have to have a helluva good imagination, if you’ll pardon my French.” She pondered for a while, puffing at a cigarette. “Suppose we try the old jealousy racket,” she said finally. “It works wonders, you’d be surprised! You know, what’s sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose, that sort of thing.”

“What would I have to do?” Sharlee looked sort of doubtful.

“Nothing, I’ll do it all for you; just leave it to me. I tried it on my third, no, I guess it was the second, and I had him eating out of my hand in no time! Now let’s see, we’ll start with—Does he smoke cigars?”

“No, never,” Sharlee assured her, mystified.

“Good, then we’ll start with that.” She went to the house phone and called the doorman. “Run out and get me a good ten-cent cigar,” she commanded. “Just one will do—and bring it up here, Mrs. Milburn’s apartment.” This must have surprised him a good deal, although apartment-house doormen usually expect anything and everything. Next Stella stalked into the dining-nook, studied it gravely, then decided. “This is as good a place as any. We’ll set the scene of your misdeeds in here. Got any champagne in the house?”

“No, but somebody brought a bottle of Scotch to the house-warming.”

“We’ll use that then. Bring two empty glasses in here—and two of everything else, plates, napkins, left-over

sandwiches. Now, while I'm fixing the table so it will have that guilty, give-away look, you take a piece of stationery and scribble this on it: 'Jack, darling, come back after the others have left and I'll give you your answer. The door will be on the latch.' Can you remember that?"

"Jack darling, come back after the others have left and I'll give you your answer, door will be on the latch," Sharlee repeated, looking at the ceiling.

"Better sign your name to it too, so there'll be no mistaking who it came from," the satanic Stella added. "Then bring it to me and I'll show you what to do with it."

"But I don't know anyone named Jack!" protested Sharlee.

"Of course you don't! But how does he know that? Go ahead and do what I told you."

Sharlee flitted out and Stella arranged the table. Into one glass she poured a drop or two of Scotch, smearing it around so it would make it sticky and the odor would cling. That was "Jack's." Then into the other she poured a regulation highball and let it stand. That was Sharlee's, who didn't drink much whiskey but had poured herself one just to keep "him" company. She took a bite out of each sandwich, then dropped them on the plates that way, with half-moon dents in them. That meant they'd been too much in love to bother with food.

By the time she was through, the hallman had come to the door with a long black cigar wrapped in cellophane. She tipped him, then ordered crisply:

"Strip it, bite off the end, light it up, and pull on it until you've got it going."

"Chee, thanks, lady," he murmured gratefully.

"Wait a minute," she forestalled, grabbing him by the arm. "Don't go away. I'm not making you a present of it!" She withdrew it from his teeth, closed the door in his face, and carried it in with her to the table. His reactions to this

strange behavior must have been highly informative had anyone been out there to listen.

Stella parked the smoking cigar in an ashtray beside "Jack's" glass. It would burn undisturbed for hours, she knew, turning slowly to ash but not crumbling. Her fourth husband had been a heavy cigar-smoker; that's how she knew.

Sharlee came in with the lover's note and Stella proofread it, then instructed her:

"Now drop it just inside the door, written-side up, where he's bound to see it when he comes in. The idea being that Jack dropped it out of his coat pocket as he was leaving. If it doesn't work that way and he misses it, then here's a surefire way to make it register. You give a little scream, snatch it up and hide it behind you, looking guilty, until he demands to know what it is." Stella evidently knew how it was done.

"You think of everything," Sharlee sighed admiringly.

"Now I'd better get out before he finds me here; he's liable to show up at any minute—" Stella bustled toward the door, Sharlee trailing after her, mewing questions.

"But—but suppose he really believes I've done something wrong behind his back? Should I tell him then that it was all a trick?"

"Under no circumstances!" snapped Stella. "Anyway, not for days or even weeks! Until he's stopped this business of staying out all hours of the night and treating you like a door-mat. Mind you, be careful not to admit there was anyone here, no matter how he storms and raves, but don't deny it either—let him form his own conclusions. That ought to give him something to worry about, make him appreciate you a little more. If he gets too nasty about it, just throw this other woman up to him! That ought to hold him. It's the swellest come-back you could want!"

"And if—if it doesn't work, if he doesn't seem to care?"

Stella threw up her hands. “Then it’s hopeless and you may as well give up. You’re nineteen and a raving beauty; there are other men in the world, thousands of ’em. I’d just walk out the door in that case and pitch your whole marriage over your shoulder if I were you.” She gave her a peck on the cheek. “Well, lots of luck, little Sharlee. Call me up sometime and let me know how it worked out.”

It was one by then. Sharlee closed the door on her fellow-conspirator and for a while felt considerably braced up. She went in, put on a dab of lipstick, touched a drop of Chypre to each ear, changed to one of her trousseau negligees, daringly pulled it down off one shoulder so she’d look flustered when he showed up. Then she just sat back and waited nervously while the note lay face-up just inside the door and the cigar filled the dining-nook with acrid fumes and the clock ticked on and on.

By two she was beginning to wilt again a little, now that Stella’s moral support was lacking. Not that little Sharlee Milburn was any dope or slouch herself under ordinary circumstances, but anyone very much in love is working under a terrific handicap. By quarter after two the tears were already playing a return engagement, and from then on they took nothing but curtain-calls until the clock reached three-thirty.

There was a lurch against the outside door; it banged open and there he was—the object of all the plotting. His hat was shoved to the back of his head, and he was in one of those “cold” drunks, that is, knew everything he was doing and saying and was ready to show his true colors. He wasn’t lovely to look at, but then he wasn’t handsome even when he was sober. His mouth had a sullen, cynical twist to it, and only the slight stagger with which he moved betrayed his condition.

Sharlee had gotten off the bed but had no time to dry her eyes before he was standing there looking in at her. He saw that she’d been crying—tactical error number one.

“Oh,” he said resentfully, “the water-works again, eh? I can see what kind you’re going to turn into in a couple years’ time, one of these cry-baby wives!”

He spotted the note when he turned back to close the door which he’d left open. She saw him pick it up and squint at it. She remembered Stella’s instructions; she squealed, ran out, jerked it away from him, tried to look properly guilty.

“Who the blazes is Jack?” he asked indifferently.

“Jack is—is Jack!” she stammered, looking at him with big round eyes. It didn’t seem to be going over any too well so far.

He sniffed the air, traced the odor to the dining-nook, went in. The cigar was mostly ashes. “Whew!” he said disgustedly. “Tell him I’ll treat him to a good cigar next time he comes around. This one smells like fried fish.” He dumped it out, noted the careful stage-effect on the table. “Little party, eh?” he commented. “Good for you! That’s the spirit!”

She nearly sank through the floor. Oh, something was wrong; didn’t he care at all? Wasn’t there even a spark of jealousy somewhere in his make-up for her? She averted her head, more bitterly humiliated than he could have guessed.

“It doesn’t seem to matter to you—what I do,” she said in a low voice.

“It’s all to the good,” he told her. “You have your little parties and I’ll have mine, and heigh-ho the merrio! But yours didn’t seem to turn out much of a success judging by the way you were bawling just now when I came in. Or is that the reaction you always get, moral indigestion after you’ve eaten your cake?”

“I’m not sorry for—for whatever I may have done tonight,” she flung at him defiantly. She would have died now rather than have him find out the whole thing was a frame-up. “Can you look me in the face and say the same,

with somebody's face-powder all over your shoulders and a lipstick-smear at the corner of your mouth and one of your garters trailing down over your shoe top?"

"Yes, I can say the same!" he bellowed angrily. "I can go even further than that! I was not only with someone just now, but I'm going to be tomorrow night and the night after and every night! How do you like that?"

"What did you marry me for?" she fairly screamed.

"On the rebound!" he said callously. He picked up "Jack's" highball-glass and took a gulp from it. He sneered at her over the rim. "Who do you think you're fooling anyway? I wasn't born yesterday! I've had this tried on me before—it's a racket with your sex! You should have a lover—you, married a year and crying every time I step out the door! There isn't any Jack and you know it! You cooked up the whole thing yourself to try and get under my skin. Tell you how I know—if you'd really been guilty, you wouldn't have been so damn careless, leaving things around wholesale like this! That cigar alone, you can smell it all the way down in the vestibule. The first thing you would have done would be to air the place if there'd really been a man here. Your technique," he said scornfully, "is lousy."

But she wasn't in the room any more with him; her face was white now, and she didn't look nineteen any more, and she was in the boudoir, getting dressed at a mile a minute.

"I'll show him!" she panted. "I'll show him whether there was someone or not! I'll throw myself at the first man I meet outside that door tonight! Heigh-ho the merrio is right!"

Off came the tangerine satin negligee, splitting down its seam in her hurry; off came the pomponned mules with a vicious kick. There remained practically nothing to speak of for a moment, but friend husband wouldn't have been interested even if he had been in the room at the time; he liked them thirty, experienced, and well-rounded—as he might have put it himself. Not nineteen and straight up-and-

down like willows. On went what she considered the suitable costume for a young wife leaving her home in the small hours to throw herself away on the “first man she met”: a little blue tailored suit, pumps, a jabot, a funny little hat with a feather, and a purse with thirty-five cents in it.

He had finished “Jack’s” highball by the time she got the front door open but was still in the same derisive mood.

“Going home to mother, eh?” he called out to her. “Give her my regards.”

“I am not!” she wailed. “I’m—I’m going to him! And you’ve driven me to it! You’ve made your own wife into a—a two-timer!”

“Hah!” he laughed insultingly. Below them somebody began rapping on the steam-pipe. “You’ll probably wind up at the nearest Y.W.C.A. Be sure to look under the bed before you turn the light out; that’s your speed! Well, come back when you’re tired of play-acting, you little lame-brain! I’m going to bed, and I’m not getting up to answer any doorbells either so you better take your key with you!”

She closed the door with a shattering boom and stood there with her finger on the elevator push-button, heaving with anger. “The first man I meet!” she kept hissing. “The first man I meet!” A moment later, as the car came up for her, she realized there would have to be amendments. For instance, people like this hallboy—who was cross-eyed and had pimples—didn’t count; she’d better rule out all—er—employees and people like that, such as taxi-drivers, news-vendors and milkmen, or there was liable to be some kind of a catastrophe in no time at all. So the lift-man was eliminated, and she marched out into the before-dawn street head up and with a determined look in her eyes. She’d show him; she’d get even! Lame-brain, was she?

But the streets were not only deserted, they were chilly and misty and depressing as well. Still, she couldn’t show up at her parents’ at this hour, and she wasn’t going back so he could have the laugh at her. She could have gone to

Stella's, she supposed, but Stella was probably asleep hours ago, and she had a husband, and it seemed like an imposition. I suppose, she thought, the best place to—to throw myself at someone would be a night-club. But that was out too, for several very good reasons, the chief one of which was she only had thirty-five cents with her. And then she couldn't think of any night-club offhand, and even they were probably closing down by now too.

She began to wonder as she walked briskly along, getting further and further away from the apartment-house, what they meant by always saying it was so easy for women and young girls to go wrong, go to the dogs, become a prey to temptation. Here she was out looking for it, and it seemed to be avoiding her.

A policeman strolled past just then, and she could feel him turning around to stare after her as she went by. But she quickly ruled him out, he was a sort of city employee, wasn't he, and he hadn't looked like a very flirty sort either, in fact rather suspicious and hard-hearted if anything. After that she didn't meet anyone for several blocks until suddenly, of all things, she came upon a woman walking alone just as she was. They were coming toward one another, and as they drew abreast the other party addressed her.

"Pardon me, dearie," she said, "could I touch you for a cigarette?"

Sharlee stopped and murmured politely, "Oh, I'm so sorry. I don't think I have any with me."

"Skip it," said the other girl philosophically. Then she surveyed Sharlee from head to foot. "How are tricks?" she demanded, not unkindly.

"Terrible!" Sharlee blurted out without stopping to think twice. "I'm so sore and disgusted—I've just about got things up to my neck!"

"Tell me what your trouble is," the other commented critically. "You're going around looking like somebody's pet

corn. Y'wanna flash a big smile, see—like this, give 'em the bridgework. And what's the matter with your war-paint, did you run out of it? No wonder you're not getting any breaks! Here, come on over by this street-light; I'll lend you some of mine and fix you up. Now stand still—" She proceeded to take out a well-worn lipstick and an eyebrow pencil and began grinding them in on Sharlee's delicate features. What emerged was a terrifying mask of red, white and black that could be seen a mile off.

"And there's no flash to your clothes at all," she went on. "You look like you're going to a wake. Where'd you ever get that rig from? Tell you what I'll do. I'll trade this garden-hat for yours and that pocketbook, whaddye say?"

"All right," said Sharlee, "if you think they'd be more attractive on me."

"Think? I know what I'm talking about. Empty your purse and here goes!" She saw the thirty-five cents, shook her head, offered with sudden sympathy: "Want a loan of fifty cents? I'll never miss it."

"Thanks," said Sharlee, "but I don't think I'll need it." But she was grateful.

"Yeah, you'll be in the money in no time now," the other agreed. "I've improved you a million per cent." They parted and the girl went her way with the noble feeling of someone who has just performed a good deed.

Sharlee tipped the gigantic threadbare black velvet cartwheel over one eye and proceeded in the opposite direction. Wasn't she nice, she thought gratefully. I wonder what she was doing out so late?

For about five minutes more nothing happened, and then things began to happen with great rapidity. She was practicing the "bridgework flash" the other had suggested and not thinking much about her surroundings at all when suddenly a loud jovial voice assailed her:

"Well, look who's here! Come to poppa!" and a sailor was lurching toward her with both arms extended in an

intended bear-hug. Where he came from she never afterwards found out; he seemed to have sprung from the ground at her feet. Instantly he was ruled out. She seemed to be doing nothing but ruling people out, but he was an employee, an employee of the government or something like that, and he'd been drinking too much beer, and—she turned with a squeak and tried to flee but the bear-hug closed around her and he deposited a loud loving "smack" squarely between her eyes. The squeak turned to a loud screech and she squirmed and tried to kick at him. He seemed hurt by her lack of cordiality.

"Don't you 'member me?" he said thickly. "Don't you 'member your old flame Bilge Braddock? And after I had your name tattooed on me all the way from here to here! That's a woman for you!"

"I never saw you before!" she wailed. "I'm not your old flame!"

"I'd know your face anywhere! What're you trying to do, throw me down?" Hurt turned to indignation. "Deny that you're Lily from Honolulu! Stand up there and deny it to my face!"

"I do!" she howled, struggling to get away from him at a forty-five-degree angle. "I'm Sharlee from New York and I was never in Honolulu in my life!"

"So I ain't good enough for you any more!" he shouted wrathfully. "So you ain't been true to me, after I bought you them earrings with real imitation poils and brought you back a live humming-bird from Bonus Airs! Well, this is what I do to broads who try to ritz me—"

He swung one powerful arm back over his shoulder and got ready to pound some affection into her.

"Here, you!" a voice said sharply. They both looked around. A taxicab had halted nearby and a young man in evening clothes was leaning out of the open door, eyes fixed threateningly on the nautical Romeo. "Don't you let me catch you hitting her while I'm around," he added.

“She’s Lily from Honolulu and she’s my woman, at least she’s my favorite one, and I can do what I want with her,” the sailor growled truculently. He let go of her, however, and turned to face the intruder.

“She may be all of that, and she certainly looks it,” commented the young man not very flatteringly, “but if you were any kind of a man at all—”

But Sharlee put in her two-cents-worth at this point. “I’m not Lily from Honolulu and I’m not his woman and I never want to see him again!” And she punctuated it by taking a vicious dig at his instep with her sharp-pointed slipper.

“O-woo!” he bayed, and began to hop around on one foot, holding the other up with both hands.

Sharlee fled toward the cab for sanctuary. “Let me ride with you,” she pleaded urgently. “Just a block or two, so I can get away from him.”

He helped her in, slammed the door and said: “Go ahead, driver.” They left Bilge Braddock staring mournfully after them and shaking his fist.

“Well,” smiled Sharlee’s rescuer, “you seem to have a taste for cave-men.”

“Why, I never saw him before in my life!” she said indignantly.

“I know, I know, you’re just misunderstood,” he purred. And he dug the point of his elbow jocularly into her ribs. “You’re really just a lady-picket or something, aren’t you, but you forgot your sign, and after he saw you walk back and forth in front of him about twenty times, he got the wrong impresh—”

She stared at him curiously from under the brim of the big floppy hat. What was he driving at anyway? He sounded vaguely disrespectful; in fact, plain disrespectful without any vaguely about it.

“I think this is far enough,” she said suddenly. “We’re a mile away from him by now.” And she reached toward the latch on the door.

His hand suddenly covered hers. “What’s your hurry?” he grinned. “Why not drop in for a while? I’m a bach, perfectly all right!” And he added: “I like you. I really mean it, something a little different about you, don’t know just what it is.”

The funny part of it was she liked him a little too. He was a gentleman, and although he was being altogether too familiar on short acquaintance, somehow she wasn’t afraid of him. Not like with that menace a few minutes ago, for instance. And anyway, wasn’t this what she’d threatened to do? He wasn’t an employee; there really didn’t seem to be any excuse for ruling him out this time.

“It’s awful late,” she condescended formally, “but I’ll drop in for a little while if you insist.”

A minute later she wondered why he slapped his knee that way and bent over double, roaring with laughter as though she’d just said something very funny.

“You’re cute!” he gasped. “No matter what you are, you’ve got personality—that’s what counts with me.”

Which didn’t make very much sense, but she let it go. They got out in front of a rather swank apartment building, and she saw him exchange a wink with the doorman as he ushered her in. The doorman just said “Good night, Mr. Herndon” very respectfully, and that told her his name.

He had really a very tasteful apartment, more expensive than hers and Craig’s in some ways, but more subdued of course on account of being a bachelor’s.

“Like it?” he grinned disarmingly.

“Do you live here all by yourself ?” she wanted to know incredulously.

“The building furnishes maid-service,” he explained. “Take off your hat. What can I get you?” He opened one of those portable bars, and she’d never seen so many different decanters and flagons in her life.

“What’s that—that red one on the end?” She pointed blindly.

“Port,” he said, and she heard him comment to himself: “True to type all right.” He brought her a glassful and then perched on the arm of the big chair she was nestled in with a very weak and short Scotch in his own hand. He looked down at her and she looked up at him. “Poor kid,” he said suddenly, and rumpled her hair with his free hand. “You know, you’re much younger than I took you for at first.” He sighed and turned his head away. “I’ll be preaching at you in a minute if I’m not careful. Well, it’s your life, I suppose —” He got up and refilled his glass, brought her back another port. “You’d better drink this and go,” he said curtly. “I don’t feel right about the whole thing. Frankly, this isn’t my sort of stunt at all. I don’t go in for it, don’t know what got into me tonight, impulse I suppose.” Then he picked up her hand and folded something into it. When she tried to see what it was, he wouldn’t let her. “Skip it,” he said. “There’s something too damned innocent about your eyes.”

The port was making her sleepy. “First you ask me to drop in; then you ask me to drop out. You’re awfully funny, Herndon! I never had anyone treat me that way before.”

He pitched his glass over his shoulder and it smashed somewhere in back of him. Suddenly both his arms had folded around her. “Hell,” he growled close to her face, “I was only trying to be noble, not to take advantage of you—or something. Don’t forget I’m only human too.” But she didn’t hear the rest of it; her head tilted against his starched shirt-front and a minute later she was soundly, childishly asleep.

He stared at her in amazement. “Well, I’ll be—” he ejaculated. Then he picked her up in both arms and carried her inside to the next room. “Maybe some guys would wake you up and throw you out,” he said softly, “and maybe some would wake you up and not throw you out, but I haven’t the heart either way.” And when he came out again, closing the

bedroom door on her, he added: “I could like that little tramp an awful lot—worse luck!”

Sharlee opened her eyes in a strange room, in a strange bed—and with her clothes on under the covers. A clock staring her in the face said it was after eleven. She remembered Craig first of all. Then she remembered Stella. Then a very pleasant dream she’d had came back to her, about someone who’d put both arms around her.

She got up and looked at herself in the mirror and all but screamed. She looked a fright, her face was all cheap red and white. She bolted into the bathroom and there was a great sound of splashing and scrubbing. When she came out again, she was herself once more. She ran a comb through her hair a couple of times and then she opened the door and looked out into the other room. There was a form huddled on the sofa under a topcoat, dead to the world. She tiptoed over and looked closer. It hadn’t been a dream after all. But she was smiling as she straightened up again. The name came back to her suddenly, Herndon. So I did it after all, she thought elatedly. Even if nothing happened, I kept my word. And he was nice, from what I remember; I couldn’t have picked anyone nicer if I’d tried.

The usual thing to do in a situation of this kind, she recalled from somewhere or other, was to make breakfast for him and have everything all ready when he opened his eyes. But when she looked around, there wasn’t even a kitchenette in the place, or a crumb of bread. That, however, wasn’t going to keep her from showing the right spirit. She phoned down in an undertone and had breakfast for two sent up from the drugstore below. Then she shook him gently by the shoulder.

“Herndon, wake up!”

He took lots of shaking but finally he grunted, rolled over and sat up. When he looked at her, his eyes popped.

"Who—who are you?" Then: "My gosh, you can't be! Not that little hustler I brought in here last night!"

She gave him a mildly rebuking look. "One lump or two?" she asked.

He waved the coffee-cup aside and caught her by the wrist. "I've got to talk to you. What is all this? What's it all about?" Suddenly his face was flaming red. "I ought to have my face slapped! The things I've been saying! But why the masquerade, why the get-up? But why did you let me go ahead thinking what I did? Any fool can see you're not!" And then, almost savagely, "D'you know what could very well have happened to you here last night? Haven't you any brains at all?"

"If you'll let me get a word in," she protested, "and a mouthful of coffee, I'll explain." And she did.

"He oughta be shot!" he scowled when she was through. "And that woman-friend of yours oughta be horsewhipped. And you yourself—oughta be spanked!"

She went ahead spreading marmalade. "But if it hadn't been for them, I—we wouldn't have met each other. I'm not sorry I met you. Are you sorry you met me?"

He didn't answer, he couldn't, straining her to him the way he was. After a long time he said: "At midnight I didn't even know you, and at noon I—don't laugh at me—I very much think I love you." He gulped. "Damned if I don't!"

"I like you more than I ever liked anyone before," she breathed. "And I guess they call that love—the beginnings of it anyway."

Nestled there in his arms, somehow she knew what the ending of this was going to be. Oh, not today and not tomorrow but soon, someday very soon now. Craig and her marriage would be a thing of the past. An annulment or arrangement of some kind would take care of it. And then there'd just be herself and Hern.

“What’s your given name?” she murmured. “Here I am in your arms—and you haven’t even told me yet! Don’t you think I’d better begin practicing up on—”

“Jack,” he said. And then he looked at her in astonishment, the way she had thrown her head back against his shoulder and was laughing, laughing until the tears came. “What’s so funny?” he grinned. “You little feather-brain.”

But all he could get her to say was: “Doesn’t life play the craziest tricks on us sometimes?”

THE DILEMNA OF THE DEAD LADY

I

It was already getting light out, but the peculiar milky-white Paris street lights were still on outside Babe Sherman’s hotel window. He had the room light on, too, such as it was, and was busy packing at a mile-a-minute rate. The boat ticket was in the envelope on the bureau. All the bureau drawers were hanging out, and his big wardrobe trunk was yawning wide open in the middle of the room. He kept moving back and forth between it and the bureau with a sort of catlike tread, transferring things.

He was a good-looking devil, if you cared for his type of good looks—and women usually did. Then later on, they always found out how wrong they’d been. They were only a sideline with him, anyway; they were apt to get tangled around a guy’s feet, trip him up when he least expected it. Like this little—what was her name now? He actually couldn’t remember it for a minute, and didn’t try to; he wouldn’t be using it any more now, anyway. She’d come in handy, though—or rather her life’s savings had—right after he’d been cleaned at the Longchamps track. And then holding down a good job like she did with one of the biggest jewelry firms on the Rue de la Paix had been damned convenient for his purposes. He smiled when he thought of

the long, slow build-up it had taken—calling for her there twice a day, taking her out to meals, playing Sir Galahad. Boy, he'd had to work hard for his loot this time, but it was worth it! He unwrapped the little tissue-paper package in his breastpocket, held the string of pearls up to the light, and looked at them. Matched, every one of them—and with a diamond clasp. They'd bring plenty in New York! He knew just the right fence, too.

The guff he'd had to hand her, though, when she first got around to pointing out new articles in the display cases, each time one was added to the stock! "I'd rather look at you, honey." Not seeming to take any interest, not even glancing down. Until finally, when things were ripe enough to suit him: "Nice pearls, those. Hold 'em up to your neck a minute, let's see how they look on you."

"Oh, I'm not allow' to take them out! I am only suppose' to handle the briquets, gold cigarette cases—" But she would have done anything he asked her by that time. With a quick glance at the back of M'sieu Proprietor, who was right in the room with them, she was holding them at her throat for a stolen moment.

"I'll fasten the catch for you—turn around, look at the glass."

"No, no, please—" They fell to the floor, somehow. He picked them up and handed them back to her; they were standing at the end of the long case, he on his side, she on her side. And when they went back onto the velvet tray inside the case, the switch had already been made. As easy as that!

He was all dressed, even had his hat on the back of his skull, but he'd left his shoes off, had been going around in his stocking feet, hence the catlike tread. Nor was this because he intended beating this cheesy side-street hotel out of his bill, although that wouldn't have been anything new to his experience either. He could possibly have gotten away with it at that—there was only what they called a

“concierge” on duty below until seven, and at that he was always asleep. But for once in his life he’d paid up. He wasn’t taking any chances of getting stopped at the station. He wanted to get clear of this damn burg and clear of this damn country without a hitch. He had a good reason, $75,000-worth of pearls. When they said it in francs it sounded like a telephone number. Besides, he didn’t like the looks of their jails here; you could smell them blocks away. One more thing: you didn’t just step on the boat like in New York. It took five hours on the boat train getting to it, and a wire to Cherbourg to hold you and send you back could make it in twenty minutes. So it was better to part friends with everyone. Not that the management of a third-class joint like this would send a wire to Cherbourg, but they would go to the police, and if the switch of the pearls happened to come to light at about the same time.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up his right shoe. He put the pearls down for a minute, draped across his thigh, fumbled under the mattress and took out a tiny screwdriver. He went to work on the three little screws that fastened his heel. A minute later it was loose in his hand. It was hollow, had a steel rim on the end of it to keep it from wearing down. He coiled the pearls up, packed them in. There was no customs inspection at this end, and before he tackled the Feds at the other side, he’d think up something better. This would do for now.

It was just when he had the heel fitted in place again, but not screwed on, that the knock on the door came. He got white as a sheet for a minute, sat there without breathing. Then he remembered that he’d left word downstairs last night that he was making the boat train; it was probably the porter for his wardrobe trunk. He got his windpipe going again, called out in his half-baked French, “Too soon, gimme another ten minutes!”

The knocking hadn’t quit from the time it began, without getting louder it kept getting faster and faster all the time.

The answer froze him when it came through the door: “Let me in, let me in, Bebe, it’s me!”

He knew who “me” was, all right! He began to swear viciously but soundlessly. He’d already answered like a fool, she knew he was there! If he’d only kept his trap shut, she might have gone away. But if he didn’t let her in now, she’d probably rouse the whole hotel! He didn’t want any publicity if he could help it. She could make it tough for him, even without knowing about the pearls. After all, she had turned over her savings to him. Her knocking was a frantic machine-gun tattoo by now, and getting louder all the time. Maybe he could stall her off for an hour or two, get rid of her long enough to make the station, feed her some taffy or other.

He hid the screwdriver again, stuck his feet into his shoes without lacing them, shuffled over to the door and unlocked it. Then he tried to stand in the opening so that she couldn’t see past him into the room.

She seemed half-hysterical, there were tears standing in her eyes. “Bebe, I waited for you there last night, what happen’ ? Why you do these to me, what I have done?”

“What d’ya mean by coming here at this hour?” he hissed viciously at her. “Didn’t I tell you never to come here!”

“Nobody see me, the concierge was asleep, I walk all the way up the stairs—” She broke off suddenly. “You are all dress’, at these hour? You, who never get up ontil late! The hat even—”

“I just got in,” he tried to bluff her, looking up and down the passageway. The motion was his undoing; in that instant she had peered inside, across his shoulder, possibly on the lookout for some other girl. She saw the trunk standing there open in the middle of the room.

He clapped his hand to her mouth in the nick of time, stifling her scream. Then pulled her roughly in after him and locked the door.

He let go of her then. “Now, there’s nothing to get excited about,” he said soothingly. “I’m just going on a little business trip to, er—” He snapped his fingers helplessly, couldn’t think of any French names. “I’ll be back day after tomorrow—”

But she wasn’t listening, was at the bureau before he could stop her, pawing the boat ticket. He snatched it from her, but the damage had already been done. “But you are going to New York! This ticket is for one! You said never a word—” Anyone but a heel like Babe Sherman would have been wrung by the misery in her voice. “I thought that you and I, we—”

He was getting sick of this. “What a crust!” he snarled. “Get hep to yourself! I should marry you! Why, we don’t even talk the same lingo!”

She reeled as though an invisible blow had struck her, pulled herself together again. She had changed now. Her eyes were blazing. “My money!” she cried hoarsely. “Every sou I had in the world I turned over to you! My *dot,* my marriage dowry, that was suppose’ to be! No, no, you are not going to do these to me! You do not leave here until you have give it back—” She darted at the locked door. “I tell my story to the gendarmes—”

He reared after her, stumbled over the rug but caught her in time, flung her backward away from the door. The key came out of the keyhole, dropped to the floor, he kicked it sideways out of her reach. “No, you don’t!” he panted.

Something was holding her rigid, though his hands were no longer on her. He followed the direction of her dilated eyes, down toward the floor. His loosened heel had come off just now. She was staring, not at that, but at the lustrous string of pearls that spilled out of it like a tiny snake, their diamond catch twinkling like an eye.

Again she pounced, and again he forestalled her, whipped them up out of her reach. But as he did so, they straightened out and she got a better look at them than she

would have had they stayed coiled in a mass. “It is number twenty-nine, from the store!” she gasped. “The one I showed you! Oh, *mon Dieu,* when they find out, they will blame me! They will send me to St. Lazare—”

He had never yet killed anyone, didn’t intend to even now. But death was already in the room with the two of them. She could have still saved herself, probably, by using her head, subsiding, pretending to fall in with his plans for the time being. That way she might have gotten out of there alive. But it would have been superhuman; no one in her position would have had the self-control to do it. She was only a very frightened French girl after all. They were both at a white-heat of fear and self-preservation; she lost her head completely, did the one thing that was calculated to doom her. She flung herself for the last time at the door, panic-stricken, with a hoarse cry for help. And he, equally panic-stricken, and more concerned about silencing her before she roused the house than even about keeping her in the room with him, took the shortest way of muffling her voice. The inaccurate way, the deadly way. He flung the long loop of pearls over her head from behind like a lasso, foreshortened them into a choking noose, dragged her stumbling backward. They were strung on fine platinum wire, almost unbreakable. She turned and turned, three times over, like a dislodged tenpin, whipping the thing inextricably around her throat, came up against him, coughing, clawing at herself, eyes rolling. Too late he let go, there wasn’t any slack left, the pearls were like gleaming white nail heads driven into her flesh.

He clawed now, too, trying to free her as he saw her face begin to mottle. There wasn’t room for a finger hold; to pluck at one loop only tightened the other two under it. Suddenly she dropped vertically, like a plummet, between his fumbling hands, twitched spasmodically for an instant at his feet, then lay there still, face black now, eyes horrible

protuberances. Dead. Strangled by a thing of beauty, a thing meant to give pleasure.

II

Babe Sherman was a realist, also known as a heel. He saw from where he was that she was gone, without even bending over her. No face could turn that color and ever be alive again. No eyes could swell in their sockets like that and ever see again. He didn't even bend down over her, to feel for her heart; didn't say a word, didn't make a sound. The thought in his mind was: "Now I've done it. Added murder to all the rest. It was about the only thing missing!"

His first move was to the door. He stood there listening. Their scuffle hadn't taken long; these old Paris dumps had thick stone walls. Her last cry at the door, before he'd corralled her, had been a hoarse, low-pitched one, not a shrill, woman's scream. There wasn't a sound outside. Then he went to the window, peered through the mangy curtains, first from one side, then the other. He was low enough—third story—and the light had been on, but the shutters were all tightly closed on the third floor of the building across the way, every last one of them. He carefully fitted his own together; in France they come inside the vertical windows.

He went back to her, and he walked all around her. This time the thought was, appropriately enough: "How is it I've never done it before now? Lucky, I guess." He wasn't as cool as he looked, by any means, but he wasn't as frightened as a decent man would have been, either; there'd been too many things in his life before this, the edge had been taken off long ago. He had no conscience.

He stopped over her for the first time, but only to fumble some more with the necklace. He saw that it would have to stay; opening the catch was no good, only a wire clipper could have severed it, and he had none. He spoke aloud for the first time since he'd been "alone" in the room. "Y' wanted 'em back," he said gruffly, "well, y' got 'em!" A defense mechanism, to show himself how unfrightened he was. And then, supreme irony, her given name came back to him at last, for the first time since she'd put in an appearance, "Manon," he added grudgingly. The final insult!

He straightened up, flew at the door like an arrow almost before the second knocking had begun, to make sure that it was still locked. This time it *was* the porter, sealing him up in there, trapping him! "M'sieu, the baggages."

"Wait! One little minute! Go downstairs again, then come back—"

But he wouldn't go away. "M'sieu hasn't much time. The boat train leaves in fifteen minutes. They didn't tell me until just now. It takes nearly that long to the sta—"

"Go back, go back I tell you!"

"Then m'sieu not want to make his train—"

But he had to, it meant the guillotine if he stayed here even another twenty-four hours! He couldn't keep her in the damned place with him forever; he couldn't smuggle her out, he couldn't even blow and leave her behind! In ten minutes after he was gone they'd find her in the room, and a wire could get to Cherbourg four and a half hours before his train!

He broke for just a minute. He groaned, went around in circles in there, like a trapped beast. Then he snapped right out of it again. The answer was so obvious! His only safety lay in taking her with him, dead or not! The concierge had been asleep, hadn't seen her come in. Let her employer or her landlord turn her name over to the Missing Persons Bureau—or whatever they called it here—a week or ten

days from now. She'd be at the bottom of the deep Atlantic long before that. The phony pearls in the showcase would give them their explanation. And she had no close relatives here in Paris. She'd already told him that. The trunk, of course, had been staring him in the face the whole time.

He put his ear to the keyhole, could hear the guy breathing there on the other side of the door, waiting! He went at the trunk, pitched out all the things he'd been stuffing in it when she interrupted him. Like all wardrobes, one side was entirely open, for suits to be hung in; the other was a network of small compartments and drawers, for shoes, shirts, etc. It wasn't a particularly well-made trunk; he'd bought it secondhand. He cleared the drawers out, ripped the thin lath partitions out of the way bodily. The hell with the noise, it was no crime partly to destroy your own trunk. Both sides were open now, four-square; just the metal shell remained.

He dragged her over, sat her up in the middle of it, folded her legs up against her out of the way, and pushed the two upright halves closed over her. She vanished, there was no resistance, no impediment, plenty of room. Too much, maybe. He opened it again, packed all his shirts and suits tightly around her, and the splintered partitions and the flattened-out drawers. There wasn't a thing left out, not a thing left behind, not a nail even. Strangest of biers, for a little fool that hadn't known her man well enough!

Then he closed it a second time, locked it, tilted it this way and that. You couldn't tell. He scanned his boat ticket, copied the stateroom number onto the baggage label the steamship company had given him: 42-A. And the label read: NEEDED IN STATEROOM.

It couldn't go into the hold, of course. Discovery would be inevitable in a day or two at the most. He moistened it, slapped it against the side of the trunk.

He gave a last look around. There wasn't a drop of blood, nothing to give him away. The last thing he saw before he

let the porter in was the hollow heel that had betrayed him to her, lying there. He picked it up and slipped it in his pocket, flat.

He opened the door and jerked his thumb. The blue-bloused porter straightened up boredly. “Allons!” Babe said. “This goes right in the taxi with me, understand?”

The man tested it, spit on his hands, grabbed it. “He’ll soak you an extra half-fare.”

“I’m paying,” Babe answered. He sat down on the edge of the bed and finished lacing his shoes. The porter bounced the trunk on its edges out of the room and down the passageway.

Babe caught up with him at the end of it. He wasn’t going to stay very far away from it, from now on. He was sweating a little under his hat band; otherwise he was okay. She hadn’t meant anything to him anyway, and he’d done so many lousy things before now.

He’d never trusted that birdcage French elevator from the beginning, and when he saw Jacques getting ready to tilt the trunk onto it, he had a bad half-minute. The stairs wouldn’t be any too good for it, either; it was a case of six of one, half a dozen of the other. “Will it hold?” he asked.

“Sure, if we don’t get on with it.” It wobbled like jelly, though, under it. Babe wiped his forehead with one finger. “Never dropped yet,” the porter added.

“It only has to once,” thought Babe. He deliberately crossed his middle and index fingers and kept them that way, slowly spiraling around the lethargic apparatus down the stair well.

Jacques closed the nutty-looking little wicket gate, reached over it to punch the bottom button, and then came after him. They’d gone half a flight before anything happened. Then there was a sort of groan, a shudder, and the thing belatedly started down after them.

It seemed to Babe as if they’d already been waiting half an hour, when it finally showed up down below. He’d been

in and out and had a taxi sputtering at the door. The concierge was hanging around, and by looking at him, Babe could tell Manon had spoken the truth. He had been asleep until now, hadn't seen her go up.

The porter lurched the trunk ahead of him down the hall, out onto the Rue l'Ecluse, and then a big row started right in. One of those big French rows that had always amused Sherman until now. It wasn't funny this time.

The driver didn't mind taking it, but he wanted it tied on in back, on top, or even at the side, with ropes. The porter, speaking for Babe, insisted that it go inside the body of the cab. It couldn't go in front because it would have blocked his gears.

Sherman swore like a maniac. "Two fares!" he hollered. "Damn it, I'll never make the North Station—" A baker and a scissors-grinder had joined in, taking opposite sides, and a gendarme was slouching up from the corner to find out what it was about. Before they got through, they were liable to, at that.

He finally got it in for two and a half fares; it just about made the side door, taking the paint off it plentifully. The gendarme changed his mind and turned back to his post at the crossing. Sherman got in with it, squeezed around it onto the seat, and banged the door. He slipped the porter a five-franc note. "Bon voyage!" the concierge yelled after him.

"Right back at ya!" he gritted. He took a deep breath that seemed to come up from his shoes, almost. "Hurdle number one," he thought. "Another at the station, another at Cherbourg—and I'm in the clear!"

The one at the Gare du Nord was worse than the one before. This time it was a case of baggage car versus the compartment he was to occupy. It wasn't that he was afraid to trust it to the baggage car, so much—five hours wouldn't be very dangerous—it was that he was afraid if he let it go now, it would go right into the hold of the ship without his

being able to stop it, and that was where the risk lay. He couldn’t get rid of her at sea once they put her in the hold.

The time element made his second hurdle bad, too; it had narrowed down to within a minute or two of train time. He couldn’t buy the whole compartment, as he had the extra taxi fare, because there was already somebody else in it, one of the bulldog-type Yanks who believed in standing up for his rights. The driver had made the Gare as only a Paris driver can make a destination, on two wheels, and “All aboard!” had already been shouted up and down the long platform. The station-master had one eye on his watch and one on his whistle. Once he tooted that, the thing would be off like a shot—the boat trains are the fastest things in Europe—and Sherman would be left there stranded, without further funds to get him out and with a death penalty crime and a “hot” pearly necklace on his hands.

III

He kept running back and forth between his compartment and the stalled baggage hand-truck up front, sweating like a mule, waving his arms—the conductor on one side of him, the baggage-master on the other.

“Put it in the car aisle, outside my door,” he pleaded. “Stand it up in the vestibule for me, can’t you do that?”

“Against the regulations.” And then ominously, “Why is this trunk any different from all the others? Why does m’sieu insist on keeping it with him?”

“Because I lost one once that way,” was all Babe could think of.

The whistle piped shrilly, doors slammed, the thing started to move. The baggage-master dropped out. “Too

late! It will have to be sent after you now!” He turned and ran back to his post.

Sherman took out his wallet, almost emptied it of napkin-size banknotes—what was left of Manon’s savings—about forty dollars in our money. His luck was he’d left that much unchanged yesterday, at the Express. “Don’t do this to me, Jacques! Don’t make it tough for me! It’ll miss my boat if I don’t get it on this train with me!” His voice was hoarse, cracked by now. The wheels were slowly gathering speed, his own car was coming up toward them. They’d been up nearer the baggage car.

The conductor took a quick look up and down the platform. The money vanished. He jerked his head at the waiting truck-man; the man came up alongside the track, started to run parallel to the train, loaded truck and all. Babe caught at the next vestibule hand-rail as it came abreast, swung himself in, the conductor after him. “Hold on to me!” the latter warned. Babe clasped him around the waist from behind. The conductor, leaning out, got a grip on the trunk from above. The truckman hoisted it from below, shoved it in on them. It went aboard as easily as a valise.

They got it up off the steps and parked it over in the farther corner of the vestibule. The conductor banged the car door shut. “I’ll lose my job if they get wise to this!”

“You don’t know anything about it,” Babe assured him. “I’ll get it off myself at Cherbourg. Just remember to look the other way.”

He saw the fellow counting over the palm-oil, so he handed him the last remaining banknote left in his wallet—just kept some silver for the dockhand at Cherbourg. “You’re a good guy, Jacques,” he told him wearily, slapped him on the back, and went down the car to his compartment. Hurdle number two! Only one more to go. But all this fuss and feathers wasn’t any too good, he realized somberly. It made him and trunk too conspicuous,

too easily remembered later on. Well, the hell with it, as long as they couldn't prove anything!

His compartment mate looked up, not particularly friendly. Babe tried to figure him, and he tried to figure Babe. Or maybe he had already.

"Howja find it?" he said finally. Just that. Meaning he knew Babe had been working Paris in one way or another. Babe got it.

"I don't have to talk to you!" he snarled. "Whaddya think y'are, an income tax blank?"

"Tell you what I am, a clairvoyant; read the future. First night out you'll be drumming up a friendly little game—with your own deck of cards. Nickels and dimes, just to make it interesting." He made a noise with his lips that was the height of vulgarity. "Lone wolf, I notice, though. Matter, Surete get your shill?"

Babe balled a fist, held it back by sheer will power. "Read your own future." He slapped himself on the shoulder with his other hand. "Find out about the roundhouse waiting for you up in here."

The other guy went back to his Paris *Herald* contemptuously. He must have known he'd hit it right the first time, or Babe wouldn't have taken it from him. "You know where to find me," he muttered. "Now or after we're aboard. I'll be in 42-A."

The label on that wardrobe trunk of his outside flashed before Babe's mind. He took a deep breath, that was almost a curse in itself, and closed his eyes. He shut up, didn't say another word. When he opened his eyes again a minute later, they were focused for a second down at the feet of the guy opposite him. Very flat, that pair of shoes looked, big—and very flat.

The motion of the train seemed to sicken him for a moment. But this guy was going back alone. A muffed assignment? Or just a vacation? They didn't take 3,000-mile jaunts for vacations. They didn't take vacations at all!

Maybe the assignment hadn't had a human quarry—just data or evidence from one of the European police files?

The irises of the other man's eyes weren't on him at all, were boring into the paper between his fists—which probably meant he could have read the laundry mark on the inside of Babe's collar at the moment, if he'd been called on to do so. Federal or city? Babe couldn't figure. Didn't look government, though. The dick showed too plainly all over him—the gentleman with the whiskers didn't use types that gave themselves away to their quarry that easy.

"So I not only ride the waves with a corpse in my cabin with me, but with a dick in the next bunk! Oh, lovely tie-up!" He got up and went outside to take a look at his trunk. Looked back through the glass after he'd shut the door; the guy's eyes hadn't budged from his paper. There's such a thing as underdoing a thing; there's also such a thing as overdoing it, Babe told himself knowingly. The average human glances up when someone leaves the room he's in. "You're good," he cursed him, "but so am I!"

The trunk was okay. He hung around it for a while, smoking a cigarette. The train rushed northwestward through France, with dead Manon and her killer not a foot away from one another, and the ashes of a cigarette were the only obsequies she was getting. They were probably missing her by now at the jewelry shop on the Rue de la Paix, phoning to her place to find out why she hadn't showed. Maybe a customer would come in today and want to be shown that pearly necklace, number twenty-nine; maybe no one would ask to see it for a week or a month.

He went back in again, cleaned his nails with a pocket-knife. Got up and went out to look, in another half-hour. Came back in again. Gee, Cherbourg was far away! At the third inspection, after another half-hour, he got a bad jolt. A fresh little flapper was sitting perched up on top of it, legs crossed, munching a sandwich! The train motion gave him a

little qualm again. He slouched up to her. She gave him a smile, but he didn't give her one back. She was just a kid, harmless, but he couldn't bear the sight.

"Get off it, Susie," he said in a muffled voice, and swept his hand at her vaguely. "Get crumbs all over it, it ain't a counter."

She landed on her heels. "Oh, purrdon me!" she said freshly. "We've got the President with us!" Then she took a second look at his face. He could tell she was going mushy on him in another minute, so he went back in again. The flatfoot—if he was one—was preferable to that, the way he felt right now.

Cherbourg showed about one, and he'd already been out there in the vestibule with it ten minutes before they started slowing up. The train ran right out onto the new double-decker pier the French had put up, broadside to the boat; all you had to do was step up the companionway.

His friend the conductor brushed by, gave him the office, accomplished the stupendous feat of not seeing the huge trunk there, and went ahead to the next vestibule. The thing stopped. Babe stuck his head out. Then he found out he wouldn't even need a French middleman, the ship's stewards were lined up in a row on the platform to take on the hand-luggage for the passengers. One of them came jumping over. "Stand by," Babe said. The passengers had right of way first, of course. They all cleared out—but *not* the wise guy. Maybe he'd taken the door at the other end of the coach, though.

Then the third hurdle reared—sky-high. "In the stateroom?" the steward gasped respectfully. "That's out of the question, sir—a thing that size! That has to go in the hold!"

About seven minutes of this, two more stewards and one of the ship's officers—and he wasn't getting anywhere. "Tell you what," he said finally, groggy with what he was going through, "just lemme have it with me the first day, till I can

get it emptied a little and sorted out. Then you can take it down the hold." He was lighting one cigarette from another and throwing them away half-smoked, his eyebrows were beaded with sweat, the quay was just a blur in front of him.

"We can't do that, man!" the officer snapped. "The hold's loaded through the lower hatches. We can't transfer things from above down there, once we're out at sea!"

Behind Babe a voice said gruffly: "Lissen, I'm in there with him and I got something to say—or haven't I? Your objection is that it'll take up too much room in there, cramp the party sharing the cabin with him, right? Well, cut out this bellyaching, the lot of you, and put it where the guy wants it to go! It's all right with me, I waive my rights—"

IV

Babe didn't turn around. He knew what had just happened behind him though, knew by the way their opposition flattened out. Not another word was said. He knew as well as if he'd seen it with his own eyes: the guy had palmed his badge at them behind his back!

He would have given anything to have it go into the hold now, instead, but it was too late! He swallowed chokedly, still didn't turn, didn't say thanks. He felt like someone who has just had a rattlesnake dropped down the back of his neck while he's tied hand and foot.

He got down from the car, and they hopped in to get it. He didn't give it another look. He headed slowly toward the companionway he'd been directed to, to show his ticket, and was aware of the other man strolling along at his elbow. "What's your game?" he said, out of the corner of his mouth, eyes straight ahead.

There was mockery in the slurring answer. “Just big-hearted. Might even help you make out your customs’ declaration on what y’got in it—”

Babe stumbled over something on the ground before him that wasn’t there at all, stiff-armed himself against a post, went trudging on. He didn’t have anything in his shoulder for this guy before. He had something in his heart for him now—death.

He looked up at the triple row of decks above him while an officer was checking his ticket and passport at the foot of the companion way. It was called the *American Statesman.* “You’re going to be one short when you make the Narrows seven days from now!” he told it silently. “This copper’s never going to leave you alive.”

They maneuvered the trunk down the narrow ship’s corridor and into the stateroom by the skin of its teeth. It was a tight squeeze. It couldn’t, of course, go under either one of the bunks. One remaining wall was taken up by the door, the other by the folding washstand, which opened like a desk. The middle of the room was the only answer, and that promptly turned the cabin into nothing more than a narrow perimeter around the massive object. That his fellow passenger, who wasn’t any sylph, should put up with this was the deadest give-away ever, to Babe’s way of thinking, that he was on to something. Some of these punks had a sixth sense, almost, when it came to scenting crime in the air around them. He wouldn’t need more than one, though, in about a day more, if Babe didn’t do something in a hurry! It was July, and there were going to be two of them in there with it.

He tried half-heartedly to have it shunted down to the hold after all—although that would have been just jumping from a very quick frying pan to a slower but just as deadly fire—but they balked. It would have to be taken out again onto the quay and then shipped aboard from there, they pointed out. There was no longer time enough. And he’d

cooked up a steam of unpopularity for himself as it was that wouldn't clear away for days.

The dick didn't show right up, but a pair of his valises came in, and Sherman lamped the tags. "E. M. Fowler, New York." He looked out, and he saw where he'd made still another mistake. He'd bought a cabin on the A-deck, the middle of the three, just under the promenade deck; a C-cabin would have been the right one, below deck level. This one had no porthole opening directly above the water, but a window flush with the deck outside. But then he hadn't known he was going to travel with a corpse, and her money had made it easy to buy the best. Now he'd have to smuggle her outside with him, all the way along the passageway, down the stairs, and out across the lowest deck—when the time came.

He beat it out in a hurry, grinding his hands together. Should have thought of it sooner, before he'd let them haul it in there! He'd ask to be changed, that was all. Get the kind he wanted, away from that bloodhound and by himself. Sure they could switch him, they must have some last-minute cancellations! Always did.

The purser spread out a chart for him when he put it to him in his office, seemed about to do what he wanted; Sherman felt better than he had at any time since five that morning. Then suddenly he looked up at him as though he'd just remembered something. "You Mr. Sherman, 42-A?" Babe nodded. "Sorry, we're booked solid; you'll have to stay in there." He put the chart away.

Arguing was no use. He knew what had happened; Fowler and his badge again. He'd foreseen this move, beat him to it, blocked it! "You weren't bragging, brother, when you called yourself a clairvoyant!" he thought bitterly. But the guy couldn't actually *know* what was in the trunk, what was making him act like this? Just a hunch? Just the fact that he'd sized Babe up as off-color, and noticed the frantic way Babe had tried to keep the trunk with him when he

boarded the train? Just the way any dick baited anyone on the other side of the fence, not sure but always hoping for the worst? Well, he was asking for it and he was going to get it—and not the way he expected, either. He'd foreclosed his own life by nailing Babe down in the cabin with him!

Just the same, he felt the need of a good stiff pick-up. They were already under way when he found his way into the bar, the jurisdiction of the French Republic was slipping behind them, it was just that pot-bellied old gent now with the brass buttons, the captain. The straight brandy put him in shape; the hell with both sides of the pond! Once he got rid of her there wouldn't be any evidence left, he could beat any extradition rap they tried to slap on him. Water scotches a trail in more ways than one.

He spent the afternoon between the bar and 42, to make sure Fowler didn't try to tackle the trunk with a chisel or pick the lock while his back was turned. But the dick didn't go near the cabin, stayed out of sight the whole time. The sun, even going down, was still plenty hot; Sherman opened the window as wide as it would go and turned on the electric fan above the door. It would have to be tonight, for plenty of good reasons! One of the least was that he couldn't keep checking on the thing like this every five minutes without going bughouse.

A steward went all over the ship pounding a portable dinner gong, and Sherman went back to the cabin, more to keep his eye on Fowler than to freshen up. He wouldn't have put on one of his other suits now even if he could have gotten at it.

Fowler came in, went around on his side of the trunk, and stripped to his undershirt. Sherman heard a rustle and a click, and he'd turned off the fan and pulled down the shade. Almost instantaneously the place got stuffy.

Babe said, "What's the idea? You ain't that chilly in July!"

Fowler gave him a long, searching look across the top of the trunk. "You seem to want ventilation pretty badly," he

said, very low.

It hit Sherman, like everything the guy seemed to say, and he forgot what he was doing for a minute, splashed water on his hair from force of habit. When it was all ganged up in front of his eyes, he remembered his comb was in there, too, he didn't have a thing out. He tried combing with his fingers and it wouldn't work. He stalled around while the dick slicked his own, waiting for him to get out and leave it behind.

The dick did some stalling of his own. It started to turn itself an endurance, the second dinner gong went banging by outside the window. Sherman, nerves tight as elastic bands, thought: "What the hell is he up to?" His own shirt was hanging on a hook by the door, he saw Fowler glance at it just once, but didn't get the idea in time. Fowler parked a little bottle of liquid shoe-blackening on the extreme edge of the trunk, stopper out, right opposite the shirt. Then he brushed past between the two, elbows slightly out. He had no right to come around on that side; it was Sherman's side of the place. The shirt slipped off the hook and the shoe-polish toppled and dumped itself on top of it on the floor. The shirt came up black and white, mostly black, in his hand.

"Oops, sorry!" he apologized smoothly. "Now I've done it —have it laundered for you—"

Sherman got the idea too late, he'd maneuvered him into opening the trunk in his presence and getting a clean one out, or else giving up his evening meal; he couldn't go in there wearing that piebald thing!

He jerked the thing away from the detective, gave him a push that sent him staggering backward, and went after him arm poised to sock him. "I saw you! Y'did that purposely!" he snarled. He realized that he was giving himself away, lowered his arm. "Hand over one of yours," he ordered grimly.

Fowler shook his head, couldn't keep the upward tilt from showing at the corners of his mouth though. "One thing I never do, let anybody else wear my things." He fished out a couple of singles. "I'll pay you for it, or I'll have it laundered for you—" Then very smoothly, "Matter, mean to say you haven't got another one in that young bungalow of yours?"

Sherman got a grip on himself; this wasn't the time or the place. After all, he still held the trump in his own hands—and that was whether the trunk was to be opened or to stay closed. He punched the bell for the steward and sat down on the edge of his berth, pale but leering.

"Bring me my meal in here, I can't make the dining saloon."

Fowler shrugged on his coat and went out, not looking quite so pleased with himself as he had a minute ago. Sherman knew, just the same, that his own actions had only cinched the suspicions lurking in the other's mind about the trunk. The first round had been the detective's after all.

That thought, and having to eat with his dinner tray parked on top the trunk—there was no other place for it—squelched the little appetite he'd had to begin with. He couldn't swallow, had to beat it around the other side and stick his head out the window, breathing in fresh air, to get rid of the mental images that had begun popping into his dome.

"Going soft, am I?" he gritted. After a while he pulled his head in again. There were a few-minor things he could do right now, while the dick was in the dining room, even if the main job had to wait for tonight. Tonight Fowler would be right in here on top of him, it would have to be done with lightning-like rapidity. He'd better get started now, paving the way.

V

He closed the window and fastened it, so the shade wouldn't blow in on him. He set the untouched tray of food down outside the door, then locked it. The boat was a pre-war model reconditioned, one of the indications of this was the footwide grilled vent that pierced the three inside partitions just below the ceiling line—a continuous slitted band that encircled the place except on the deck side. It was the best they could do in 1914 to get a little circulation into the air. He couldn't do anything about that, but it was well over anyone's head.

He got out his keys and turned the trunk so that it opened *away* from the door. He squatted down, took a deep breath, touched the key to the lock, swung back the bolts, and parted the trunk. He didn't look up, picked up a handkerchief, unfolded it, and spread it over her face. He got out a couple of the shirts that had been farthest away, protected by other things, and his comb, and then he took a file that was in there and went to work on the pearls.

It was hard even to force any two of them far enough apart to get at the platinum wire underneath without damaging them in the filing, but he managed to force a split in their ranks right alongside the clasp, which stood out a little because of its setting. The wire itself was no great obstacle, it was just getting the file in at it. In five minutes the place he had tackled wore out under the friction, and it shattered to invisibility. Three pearls dropped off before he could catch them and rolled some place on the floor. He let them go for a minute, poised the file to change hands with it and unwind the gnarled necklace—and heard Fowler saying quietly: "What's the idea of the lock-out? Do I get in, or what?"

His face was peering in and down at Sherman through that damnable slotted ventilator, high up but on a line with the middle of the door, smiling—but not a smile of friendliness or good omen.

Sherman died a little then inside himself, as he would never die again, not even if a day came when he would be kneeling under the high knife at Vincennes or sitting in the electric chair at Ossining. Something inside him curled up, but because there was no blade or voltage to follow the shock, he went ahead breathing and thinking.

His eyes traveled downward from Fowler's outlined face to the top of the trunk in a straight line. Her handkerchief-masked-head was well below it on his side, her legs stayed flat up against her as he'd first folded them, from long confinement and now rigor. He thought: "He doesn't see her from where he is. He can't or he wouldn't be smiling like that!"

But the opening ran all around, on the side of him and in back of him. He must be up on a stool out there; all he'd have to do would be jump down, shift it farther around to where he could see, and spring up on it again. If he did that in time, he could do it much quicker than Babe could get the trunk closed. "He hasn't thought of it yet!" Babe told himself frantically. "Oh, Joseph and Mary, keep it from occurring to him! If I can hold him up there just a split minute, keep talking to him, not give him time to think of it —"

His eyes bored into Fowler's trying to hold him by that slight ocular magnetism any two people looking at each other have. He said very slowly: "I'll tell you why I locked the door like that; just a minute before you showed up—

Whang! The two halves of the trunk came together between his outstretched arms. The rest of it was just reflex action, snapping the bolts home, twisting the key in the lock. He went down lower on his haunches and panted like a fish out of water.

He went over to the door and opened it, still weak on his pins. Fowler got down off the folding stool he'd dragged up. If he was disappointed, he didn't show it.

“I didn’t hear you knock,” Sherman said. There was no use throwing himself at him right now, absolutely none, it would be a fatal mistake. “I’ll get him tonight—late,” he said to himself.

Fowler answered insolently. “Why knock, when you know ahead of time the door’s going to be locked? You never get to see things that way.”

“More of that mind-reading stuff.” Sherman tried to keep the thing as matter-of-fact as possible between them, for his own sake, not let it get out of bounds and go haywire before he was ready. “I don’t mind telling you you’re getting on my nerves, buddy.”

He spotted one of the pearls, picked it up before Fowler saw what it was, put it in his pocket. “First you gum up a good shirt on me. Then you pull a Peeping Tom act—” He kept walking aimlessly around, eyes to the floor. He saw the second one and pocketed that, too, with a swift snake of the arm. His voice rose to a querulous protest. “What are you, some kind of a stool pigeon? Am I marked lousy, or what?” Trying to make it sound like no more than the natural beef of an unjustly persecuted person.

Fowler said from his side of the trunk: “Couple little things like that shouldn’t get on your nerves—” pause —“unless you’ve got something else on them already.”

Sherman didn’t answer that one, there didn’t seem to be a satisfactory one for it. He couldn’t locate the third pearl either—if there had been one. He wasn’t sure any more whether two or three had rolled off her neck.

He flung himself down on his bunk, lay there on his back sending up rings of cigarette smoke at the ceiling. Fowler, hidden on his side of the trunk, belched once or twice, moved around a little, finally began rattling the pages of a magazine. The ship steamed westward, out into the open Atlantic. They both lay there, waiting, waiting.

The human noises around them grew less after an hour or so; suddenly the deck lights outside the window went out

without warning. It was midnight. A minute later, Sherman heard the door open and close, and Fowler had gone out of the cabin. He sat up and looked across the trunk. He'd left his coat and vest and tie on his berth—gone to the washroom. He listened, heard his footsteps die away down the oilcloth-covered passageway outside. That was exactly what Babe Sherman was waiting for.

He swung his legs down and made a beeline across the cabin, didn't bother locking the door this time, it was quiet enough now to hear him coming back anyway. He went through that coat and vest with a series of deft scoops, one to a pocket, that showed how good he must have once been at the dip racket. The badge was almost the first thing he hit, settling his doubts on that score once and for all—if he'd still had any left. New York badge, city dick. Sherman had no gun with him, didn't work that way as a rule. He thought, "He almost certainly has. If I could only locate it before he comes back—" He didn't intend to use it in any case—too much noise—but unless he got his hands on it ahead of time, it was going to be very risky business!

The fool had left one of his two valises open under the bunk, ready to haul out his pajamas! Sherman went all through it in no time flat, without messing it too much either. Not in it. It was either in the second one, or he carried it in a hip-holster, but probably the former was the case. Then one of those hunches that at times visit the deserving and the undeserving alike, smote him from nowhere; he tipped the upper end of the mattress back and put his hand on it!

A minute later it was broken and the cartridges were spilling out into his palm. He jammed it closed, put it back, and heaved himself back onto his own bunk just as the slap-slap of Fowler's footsteps started back along the passageway. "Now, buddy!" he thought grimly.

Fowler finished undressing and got under the covers. "Gosh, the air's stale in here!" he muttered, more to himself

than Sherman. “Seems to get ranker by the minute!”

“Whaddya want me to do, hand yuh a bunch of violets?” Babe snarled viciously. He got up and went out, for appearance’s sake, then stayed just outside the door, head bent, listening. Fowler didn’t make a move, at least not to or at the trunk. Sherman took good aim out through the open window that gave onto the little cubicle between their cabin and the next, let fly with the handful of bullets. They cleared the deck beautifully, every last one of them.

He went back in again, saw that Fowler already had his eyes closed, faking it probably. He took off his coat and shoes, put out the light, lay down like he was. The motion of the boat, and the black and orange frieze of the ventilator high up near the ceiling—the corridor lights stayed on all night—were all that remained. And the breathing of two mortal enemies, the stalker and the stalked.

Sherman, who had cursed the ventilator to hell and back after it had nearly betrayed him that time, now suddenly found that it was going to come in handy after all. It let in just enough light, once your eyes got used to the change, so that it wouldn’t be necessary to turn on the cabin light again when the time came to get her out. He couldn’t have risked that under any circumstances, even if it took him half the night to find the keyhole of the trunk with the key. This way it wouldn’t.

The guy was right at that, though, it *was* getting noticeable in here.

He planned it step by step first, without moving his shoulders from the berth. Get rid of her first and then attend to the dick later was the best way. She couldn’t wait, the dick could. They had six days to go yet, and the dick couldn’t just drop from sight without it backfiring in some way. Down here wasn’t the right spot either. They might run into heavy weather in a day or two, and if he watched his opportunity he might be able to catch the dick alone on the upper deck after the lights went out. Even raise a “Man

overboard!” after he went in, if it seemed advisable. Or if not, be the first to report his disappearance the day after.

So now for her. He knew the set-up on these boats. There was always a steward on night duty at the far end of the corridor, to answer any possible calls. He’d have to be gotten out of the way to begin with, sent all the way down to the pantry for something, if possible. Yet he mustn’t rap on the door here in answer to the call and wake up the flatfoot. And he mustn’t come back too quickly and catch Babe out of the cabin—although that was the lesser danger of the two and could always be explained away by the washroom. Now for it; nothing like knowing every step in advance, couldn’t be caught off-base that way.

VI

There is an art in being able to tell by a person’s breathing if he is asleep or just pretending to be; it was one of Sherman’s many little accomplishments. But there is another art, too, that goes with it—that of being able to breathe so you fool the person doing the listening. This, possibly, may have been the other man’s accomplishment. His breathing deepened, got scratchier—but very slowly. It got into its stride, and little occasional burblings welled up in it, very artistically. Not snores by any means, just catches in the larynx. Sherman, up on his elbow, thought: “He’s off. He couldn’t breathe that way for very long if he wasn’t—be too much of a strain.”

He got up off the bunk and put on his coat, so the white of his undershirt wouldn’t show. He picked up the shirt that Fowler had ruined and balled it up tightly into fist-size, or not much bigger. He got out the trunk key and put it down on the floor right in front of the trunk, between his bent

legs. He spit muffedly into his free hand, soaked the hollow of it. Then he gave that a half-turn up against the lock and each of the clamps. The lock opened quietly enough, but the clamps had a snap to them that the saliva alone wouldn't take care of. He smothered them under the ganged-up shirt as he pressed each one back. He got it down to a tiny click. Then he took a long, hard look over at Fowler through the gloom. That suction was still working in his throat.

The trunk split apart fairly noiselessly, with just one or two minor squeaks, and he had to turn his head for a minute—for a different reason this time. The way it had opened, though, was all to the good, one side of it shielded him from Fowler's bunk.

He had to go carefully on the next step, couldn't just remove her. There were too many loose things in there, all the busted partitions and drawers would clack together and racket.

He got them out first, piece by piece. She came last, and wasn't very heavy.

Now here was where the steward came into it. He had a choice of risks: not to bother with the steward at all, to try sneaking down the passageway in the opposite direction with her. That was out entirely. All the steward would have to do was stick his head out of the little room where the call-board was and spot him. Or, to leave her out, but in here, in the dark, and tackle the steward outside. He didn't like that one either. Fowler might open his eyes from one moment to the next and let out a yell. So he had to get her out of here, and yet keep the steward from coming near her outside. The inset between the cabins, outside the door, was the answer—but the steward must *not* turn the corner and come all the way! It was all a question of accurate timing.

He was as far as the cabin door now, but that was a problem in itself. He was holding her up against him like a ventriloquist's dummy, legs still folded up flat while she hung down straight. He got the door open without any

creaking, but a sunburst of orange seemed to explode around him and his burden. It didn't reach all the way to Fowler's berth, but it could very well tickle his eyelids open if it was left on too long.

He stepped across the raised threshold with her, holding on to the door so it wouldn't swing with the ship's motion. Then without letting go of it he managed to let her down to the floor out there. He turned and went in again alone, to ring for the steward; as he did so an optical illusion nearly floored him for a second. It was that Fowler had suddenly stiffened to immobility in the midst of movement. But he was in the same position that he had been before—or seemed to be—and his lids were down and the clucking was still going on in his throat. There was no time to worry about it, either he was awake or he wasn't—and he wasn't, must have just stirred in his sleep.

The steward's bell, Sherman knew, didn't make any sound in the cabin itself, only way out at the call-board. He punched it, got back to the door before it had time to swing too far shut or open, and then eased it closed. She was right beside him on the floor out there, but he didn't look at her, listened carefully. In a minute he heard the put-put of shoeleather coming down from the other end of the passageway. Now!

He drifted negligently around the corner, started up toward the steward to head him off; the man was still two of those lateral insets away. They came together between his, Babe's and the next.

"Did you ring, sir?"

Sherman put his head on the steward's arm appealingly. "I feel rotten," he said in a low voice. "Get me some black coffee, will you? Too many brandies all afternoon and evening." He looked the part, from what he'd just gone through—if nothing else.

"Yes, sir, right away," the steward said briskly. And then instead of turning back, he took a step to get around

Sherman and continue on down the passageway, toward where the body was!

"What're you going that way for?" Sherman managed to say, gray now.

"The main pantry's closed, sir, at this hour. We have a little one for sandwiches and things in back of the smoking room, I'll heat you some up there—"

"Here I go!" was all Sherman had time to think. The whole boat went spinning around him dizzily for a minute, but his reflexes kept working for him. Without even knowing what he was doing, he got abreast of the steward —on the side where she was—and accompanied him back, partly turned toward him. The steward was a shorter man, only Sherman's outthrust shoulder kept him from seeing what lay sprawled there as the inset opened out to one side of them. He pulled the same stunt he had on Fowler when he was getting the trunk closed under his nose, kept jabbering away with his eyes glued on the steward's, holding them steady on his own face.

The steward stepped past, and the opening closed behind him again. Sherman dropped back, but still guarding it with his body. His jaws were yammering automatically: "—never could stand the coffee in Paris, like drinking mud. All right, you know where to find me—"

The steward went on and disappeared at the upper end. Sherman, in the inset, crumpled to his hands and knees for a minute, like an animal, stomach heaving in and out. This last tension had been too much for him, coming on top of everything else. "All to keep from dying twenty years too soon!" he thought miserably, fighting his wretchedness.

He got himself in shape again in a hurry, had to, and a minute later was groping up the corridor in the opposite direction, lopsidedly, borne down by her dimensions if not her weight on one side, his other arm out to steady himself against the wall.

There was no one out at the stairlanding now that the steward was out of the way, and only a single overhead light was burning. He decided to chuck the stairs and do it right from this A-deck. One deck higher or lower couldn't make any difference if he went far enough back to the stern. And there might be other stewards on night duty on the other deck levels.

He put her down for a minute on a wicker set-tee out there, unhooked the double doors to the deck, and looked out. Deserted and pitch dark. A minute later she was out there with him, and the end of his long, harrowing purgatory was in sight. Babe couldn't keep his hands from trembling.

He didn't go right to the rail with her. There was still the necklace, for one thing, and then the nearer the stern the better to make a clean-cut job of it. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face beyond the rail, but the deck wall on the other side of him showed up faintly white in the gloom, broken by black squares that were the cabin windows.

Near the end of the superstructure there was a sharp indentation, an angle where it jutted farther out, and in this were stacked sheaves of deck chairs, folded up flat and held in place by a rope. There were, however, three that had been left unfolded side by side, perhaps made use of by some late strollers and that the deck steward had missed putting away, and one of them even had a steamer rug left bunched across it.

He let her down on one of them and bent over her to finish freeing the necklace. The handkerchief had remained in place all this time, for some reason. But it was one of his own and huge, touched her shoulders. He had to discard it to be able to see what he was doing. Loosened, the breeze promptly snatched it down the deck and it vanished. His hands reached for the loose end of the necklace, where he had already filed it through close to the clasp—and then

stayed that way, poised, fingers pointing inward in a gesture that was like a symbol of avarice defeated.

The platinum strand was there, but invisible now in the dark, naked of pearls! Not two or three but the whole top row had dropped off, one by one, somehow, somewhere along the way! The motion of carrying her, of picking her up and setting her down so repeatedly, must have loosened them one at a time, jogged them off through that break in the wire he himself had caused. And since it obviously hadn't happened while she was still in the trunk, what it amounted to was: he had left a trail of pearls behind him, every step of the way he had come with her from the cabin out here—like that game kids play with chalk marks called Hare-and-hounds—but with death for its quarry. An overwhelming sense of futility and disaster assailed him.

They wouldn't stay in one place, they'd roll around, but they were there behind him just the same, pointing the way. It was only the top row that had been stripped clean, the other two had been tourniqueted in too tight for any to fall off.

He had no more than made the discovery, with his fingertips and not his eyes, than a figure loomed toward him out of the deck gloom, slowly, very slowly, and Fowler's voice drawled suavely:

"I'll take the rest of 'em now, that go with the ones I been pickin' up on the way."

Sherman automatically gave the blanket beside him a fillip that partly covered her, then stood up and went out toward him, knees already crouched for the spring that was to come. The gloom made Fowler seem taller than he was. Sherman could sense the gun he was holding leveled at him by the rigid foreshortening of his one arm. The thing was, was it still empty or had he reloaded it since?

VII

He started circling, with Fowler for an axis, trying to maneuver him closer to the rail. That brought the chair more clearly into Fowler's line of vision, but the position of his head never changed, slowly turned in line with Sherman. Suddenly it dawned on Sherman that the dick didn't know the whole story even yet; hadn't tumbled yet to what was on that chair! Must have taken it for just a bunched-up steamer rug in the dark. Sure! Otherwise he'd be hollering blue murder by this time, but all he'd spoken about was the pearls. Hadn't seen Sherman carry her out after all, then; thought he was just on the trail of a jewel smuggler.

"But in a minute more he'll see her; he's bound to!" he told himself. "Dark or not, his eyes'll be deflected over that way. And that's when—"

While his feet kept carrying him slowly sidewise across the deck, from the chair toward the rail, he muttered: "*You* will? Who says so?"

Fowler palmed his badge at him with his left hand. "This says so. Now come on, why make it tough for yourself? I've got you dead to rights and you know it! They're so hot they're smoking. Fork 'em over and don't keep me waiting out here all night, or I'll—"

Sherman came up against the rail. Had he reloaded that persuader or hadn't he? "I can only be wrong once about it," he figured grimly. He jerked his head at the chair. "The tin always wins. Help yourself!" His knees buckled a notch lower.

He saw the pupils of Fowler's eyes follow the direction his head had taken, start back again, then stop dead—completely off him. "Oh, so you *are* working with a shill after all! What's she showing her teeth, grinning so about? D'ye think I'm a kid—?"

He never finished it. Sherman's stunning blow—the one he'd promised him in the train—his whole body following it, landed in an arc up from where he'd been standing. His fist caught Fowler on the side of the neck, nearly paralyzing his nerve centers for a minute, and the impact of Sherman's body coming right after it sent him down to the deck with Sherman on top of him. The gun clicked four times into the pit of Sherman's stomach before they'd even landed, and the impact with which the back of the dick's head hit the deck told why it didn't click the two remaining times. He was stunned for a minute, lay there unresisting. Less than a minute—much less—but far too long!

Sherman got up off him, pulled him up after him, bent him like a jackknife over the rail, then caught at his legs with a vicious dip. The gun, which was still in the dick's hand, fell overboard as he opened it to claw at the empty night. His legs cleared the rail at Sherman's heave like those of a pole vaulter topping a bar, but his faculties had cleared just in time for his finish. His left hand closed despairingly around a slim, vertical deck-support as the rest of his body went over. The wrench nearly pulled it out of its socket, turned him completely around in mid-air so that he was facing Sherman's way for a brief instant. His face was a piteous blur against the night that would have wrung tears from the Evil One himself.

But a human being was sending him to his death, and they can be more remorseless than the very devils of hell. "I don't want to die!" the blurred face shrieked out. The flat of Sherman's foot, shooting out between the lower deck-rails like a battering-ram, obliterated it for a minute. The gripping hand flew off the upright support into nothingness. When Sherman's foot came back through the rails again, the face was gone. The badge was all that was left lying there on the deck.

The last thing Sherman did was pick that up and shie it out after him. "Take that with you, Cop, you'll need it for

your next pinch!”

Carrying out his original purpose, after what had just happened, was almost like an anticlimax; he was hardly aware of doing so at all, just a roundtrip to the rail and back. He leaned up against the deck wall for a minute, panting with exertion. The partly denuded necklace, freed at last from its human ballast, in the palm of his hand. “You’ve cost me plenty!” he muttered to it. He dumped it into his pocket.

Suddenly the deck lights had flashed on all around him, as if lightning had struck the ship. He cringed and turned this way and that. They were standing out there, bunched by the exit through which he himself had come a little while ago, stewards and ship’s officers, all staring ominously down toward him. He knew enough not to try to turn and slink away; he was in full sight of them, and a second group had showed up behind him, meanwhile, at the lower end of the deck, cutting him off in that direction. That last scream Fowler ripped out from the other side of the rail, probably; the wind must have carried it like an amplifier all over the ship at once.

“But they didn’t see me do it!” he kept repeating to himself vengefully, as they came down the deck toward him from both directions, treading warily, spread out fanwise to block his escape. “They didn’t see me do it! They gave it the lights out here just a minute too late!”

The chief officer had a gun out in his hand, and a look on his face to match it. They meant business. One by one the cabin windows facing the deck lighted up; the whole ship was rousing. This wasn’t just another hurdle any more; this was a dead end—the last stop, and he knew it.

Suddenly he came to a decision. The net was closing in on him and in a minute more his freedom of action would be gone forever. He didn’t waste it, but used it while he still had it to cut himself free from the first crime even while the second was tangling around him tighter every instant.

He found the rail with the backs of his elbows, leaned there negligently, waiting for them. Right as they came up, his elbows slipped off the rail again, his hands found his trouser pockets in a gesture that looked simply like cocky bravado. Then he withdrew them again, gave one a slight unnoticeable backhand-flip through the rails. The motion, screened by his body, remained unobserved; their eyes were on his face. The necklace had gone back to Manon, the job had blown up—but it couldn't be helped, he had his own skin to think of now.

The chief officer's eyes were as hard as the metal that pointed out of his fist at Sherman's middle. "What'd you do with that man Fowler?" he clipped.

Sherman grinned savagely back around his ear. "What'd *I* do with him? I left him pounding his ear in 42-A. We're not Siamese twins. Is there a regulation against coming out here to stretch my legs—?"

The night steward cut in with: "I didn't like how he acted when he ordered the cawfee a while ago, sir. That's why I reported to you. When I took it in to him they were both gone, and the insides of this man's trunk were all busted up and lying around, like they had a fierce fight—"

A woman leaning out of one of the cabin windows shrilled almost hysterically: "Officer! Officer! I heard somebody fall to the deck right outside my window here, the sound woke me up, and then somebody screamed: 'I don't want to die!' And when I jumped up to look out—" Her voice broke uncontrollably for a minute.

The officer was listening intently, but without turning his head away from Sherman or deflecting the gun.

"—he was kicking at *a face* through the rails! I saw it go down—! I—I fainted away for a minute, after that!" She vanished from the window, someone's arm around her, sobbing loudly in a state of collapse.

The net was closing around him, tighter, every minute. "We all heard the scream," the officer said grimly, "but that

tells us what it meant—”

The bulky captain showed up, one of his shirttails hanging out under his hurriedly donned uniform-jacket. He conferred briefly with the chief officer, who retreated a pace or two without taking his gun off Sherman. The latter stood there, at bay against the rail, a husky deckhand gripping him by each shoulder now.

The gun was lowered, only to be replaced by a pair of hand-cuffs. The captain stepped forward. “I arrest you for murder! Hold out your hands! Mr. Moulton, put those on him!”

The deckhands jerked his forearms out into position, his cuffs shot back. The red welt across his knuckles where he’d bruised them against Fowler’s jawbone revealed itself to every eye there.

He flinched as the cold steel locked around him. “I didn’t do it—he fell overboard!” he tried to say. “It’s her word against mine—!” But the net was too tight around him, there was no room left to struggle, even verbally.

The captain’s voice was like a roll of drums ushering in an execution—the first of the hundreds, the thousands of questions that were going to torment him like gadflies, drive him out of his mind, until the execution that was even now rushing toward him remorselessly from the far side of the ocean would seem like a relief in comparison. “What was your motive in doing away with this man, sending him to his death?”

He didn’t answer. The malevolent gods of his warped destiny did it for him, sending another of the stewards hurrying up from the deck below, the answer in both his outstretched hands, a thin flat badge, a gnarled string of pearls, half-gone.

“I found this and this, sir, on the B-deck just now! I thought I heard a scream out there a while back and I went out to look. Just as I turned to come in again this, this shield landed at my feet, came sailing in from nowhere on the

wind like a boomerang. I put on the lights thinking someone had had an accident down on that deck, and a little while afterward I caught sight of this necklace down at the very end. The wind had whipped it around one of the deck-supports like a paper streamer—”

Sherman just looked at the two objects, white and still. The night had thrown back the evidence he had tried to get rid of, right into his very teeth! There were two executions waiting for him now, the tall knife at Vincennes, the electric chair at one of the Federal penitentiaries—and though he could only die once, what consolation was it that only by one death could he cheat the other?

The captain said: “He’s as good as dead already! Take him down below and keep him under double guard until we can turn him over to the Federal authorities when we reach Quarantine.”

Sherman stumbled off in the middle of all of them, unresisting. But he did crack up completely when the captain—just as they were taking him inside—folded a yellow wireless message and showed it to the chief officer. “Funny part of it is,” he heard him say, “this came in not fifteen minutes ago, from the New York City police authorities, asking us to hold this man Fowler for them, for blackmail, for preying on people on ships and trains, impersonating a detective abroad. The badge is phony, of course. If our friend here had kept his hands off him for just a quarter of an hour more—”

Sherman didn’t hear the rest of it. There was a rush of blood to his ears that drowned it out, and the laughter of the Furies seemed to shriek around him while they prodded him with white-hot irons. All he knew was that he was going to die for a murder that could have been avoided, in order to cover up one that otherwise would quite probably never have been revealed!

ONE AND A HALF MURDERS

“A fine how-d’ye-do,” Mike Travis scowled at his blubbering sister across the kitchen table. “I come down here for a little rest and a breath of sea-air, and I run into this smelly mess! Right in my own family. You could have knocked me over with a feather! And that’s a fine way to hear it, too, from the kids on the street when I asked them the way to your house!”

“I wrote you,” gurgled Mrs. Murray. “Didn’t you get my let—?”

“No,” barked Travis, jerking his cup away. “And quit crying into my coffee, it’s weak enough as it is!”

“I thought maybe you could do something for him, working with a private detective agency like you do,” sniffled Mrs. Murray.

“Used to, y’mean! I was let out only last week, that’s why I’m here. After the depresh is over everywhere else, it suddenly hits the investigation business as an afterthought. And at my age, too!” His face grew beet-red to the roots of his snow-white hair and his cigar-stub jerked from the left corner of his mouth to the right without his lifting a finger at it. “Too old, they think! Not up-to-date enough!”

His sister was the sort who could always spare a word for somebody else’s troubles, even in the midst of her own. “You could fall back on barbering; you once took a course in that, didn’t you, before you went into the detective business?” She dabbed her apron to her face and went

back to her grief once more. “Frank’s a good lad, he wouldn’t kill anybody in cold blood like that. I know he didn’t do it.”

“Suppose you tell me just what happened,” said Mike impatiently. “I ain’t in the fortune-telling business.”

His sister took a deep breath. “Well, you know how crazy he is about dancin’. There’s no harm in that, is there? Well, one night—” and she launched into the past.

* * * *

The rich girl hurried through the crowded lobby, holding her breath for fear of being recognized and stopped. Just when she thought she had made it, as she came out of the hotel, she met Arnold face to face. Her parents weren’t with him for once.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she explained hastily. “Arnold, don’t let on you saw me go out. I’ll explain when I come back—”

He put out his hand and tried to stop her. “A girl your age shouldn’t be out alone, at this hour, with a diamond bracelet like that on your wrist. Be careful, Sylvia, this is a bad town. Let me go with you—”

She turned away. “I can take care of myself. And if you breathe a word about this, I’ll never speak to you again.”

As she lost herself in the crowd moiling slowly along the thronged Boardwalk, she had a feeling that he was coming after her, keeping her in sight. But she didn’t look back.

Young Murray was waiting for her just outside the Million Dollar Pier and he had the admission tickets in his hand. He didn’t look like he could afford even the fifty-cents apiece it cost to enter. She took his arm with a smile and they went in.

It stretches way out over the Atlantic, and most of it is the big dancing-pavilion under colored lights. But at the back there is a verandah or promenade-deck, purposely left dark at all times. And along both sides there are two more. Anyone who’s ever been there knows the set-up.

They had nothing to check, so they stepped right off and went to it. After about five minutes, she slipped the diamond bracelet off her wrist and asked him to carry it in his pocket for her. “The catch needs to be fixed, I’m afraid I’ll lose it,” she said. “Don’t let me go home without it, they’re real.”

He gave her a look when he heard that, but he did what she asked. She’d only known him for three nights—but she was very young, and he danced so well.

When they stopped for a minute between numbers, a girl with too much eyeshadow on came over to where they were standing clapping.

“You can’t ditch me like this!” she said to Murray. “Doing pretty good for yourself, aren’t you!” She turned to the girl then, and her voice rose to a yell. “Watch yourself with this guy, Miss Millionbucks! Remember I told you so. He’s death to dames!” Everyone around them heard her say it.

Somebody came after her and pulled her away, but she shouted back: “I’ll fix you, Murray, if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Brrh!” the rich girl said, and pretended to shiver. But many a truth is spoken in jest.

Half an hour later they left the floor together, he and she, to rest for awhile. They went out on the darkened end of the Pier, away from all the lights and noise. There was no one around out there just then. No one ever saw her alive again.

Yet how could anything happen to her, with hundreds of people within reach of her voice? Thoughts of death must have been very far from her mind. But a noisy jazz-band can drown out the loudest scream. The tune it was pounding out was “I’m The Boogy Man.”

She murmured, “I’m thirsty, will you get me a drink of water?”

As he got up, he leaned across the back of her deck-chair and slipped both arms around her shoulders, in a double embrace from behind. She turned to look up at him. A cloud

hid the moon for a moment, and they were both in pitch-darkness.

* * * *

The eye-shadow girl came out on the left-hand “porch” of the Pier with someone, to get a breath of air. The moon was behind a cloud and the water was black.

“Wait, I’m not through with him!” she burned. “I’ll get even—” She broke off suddenly and grew rigid. “What was that? D’ja hear that splash just then? Sounded like someone fell in.”

“Just a wave slapping up against one of the piles,” the fellow with her said.

“It came from down the end there. Let’s go look.”

She hurried away from him and turned the corner. She didn’t come back and he finally had to go after her. When he got there she was leaning over the railing scanning the water.

Just then the moon came out again. She jerked back and caught him by the sleeve. “You look, is there anything down there? I thought I saw a white arm reaching up out of the water just now!”

Silvery patches appeared here and there, dazzling to the eyes. “It’s the reflection of the moon,” he said.

“Guess you’re right. But gosh, it had me for a minute! Let’s go back and dance.”

As she turned to go, she saw something lying on a deck-chair, a tiny ball of white, and stopped to pick it up. A girl’s handkerchief dropped by somebody, a costly one too. She was a thrifty soul and she took it with her; once it was laundered it would be as good as new. Her companion, who had gone ahead, didn’t see her do it.

As she followed him in to the dance-floor, she said once more: “I’ll get even with that two-timer yet!”

* * * *

Meanwhile, someone had tapped Frank Murray on the shoulder as he bent over the water-cooler beside the illuminated fish-tanks at the rear of the dance-floor. Even before he looked up to see who it was, some of the water spilled out of the wax-paper cup he was filling; his hand didn't seem to be very steady.

His eyes lifted, and he didn't know the man.

The other's voice was dangerously low. "You came in here an hour ago with a girl in a white satin dress. What've you done with her? I'm taking her back with me, she doesn't belong in a place like this. Now, don't fool around with dynamite. I don't know if she's told you her name or not, but that's Sylvia Reading, the chain-store man's girl."

Murray wasn't holding the cup straight enough, more water slopped out of it. His wrist was jerking like a piston. His voice was steely enough when it came, though. "I know all about who she—" His teeth clamped tight and bit off the rest of it short. Finally he said, "You're wasting your time. She left half-an-hour ago."

"No, that doesn't go," the stranger said. "You were taking that drink to her, see? You're too crummy to spend a penny on yourself, you'd put your mouth right down on the tap, but for her you'd shoot a whole Lincoln-head at once. She's out there in back, I guess, waiting for you." He didn't wait for the answer.

The cup folded up in Murray's fist and the water spurted out and he went after him.

She wasn't out there. The other guy was standing there in the dark squinting all around and calling, "Come on, Syl, snap out of it. If your people ever find out about this—"

He hardly turned his head at all to meet the sudden onslaught. There was a smack, and Murray was staring dazedly up at him, stiff-armed against the floor.

"I learned to box at Princeton," the stranger informed him, fastidiously shaking out his cuff, "not in poolrooms." He swooped down on him all at once, straightened up again,

holding something in his hand. Something that sparkled. “What’s this, that fell out of your pocket? Seems to me I’ve seen it before.” He turned the bracelet slowly around. “So she went home half-an-hour ago, did she? And left this with you for a souvenir, I suppose. You robbed her while you were dancing with her, you little sewer-rat!”

Murray scrambled to his feet, face whiter than the moonlight. The palsy that had afflicted his wrist awhile ago had now spread to his whole body. His tone had changed to one of frightened pleading. “I didn’t, Jack, I swear I didn’t! Don’t start anything like that, gimme a break, will ya? She handed it to me to hold for her. I left her waiting out here only a minute ago—”

“A five-thousand-dollar, piece of jewelry she handed to you? Oh, of course! Just like that—I don’t think!”

But Murray didn’t wait to hear any more. A sense of his own predicament swept over him suddenly. That blind, unreasoning fear of the law, that claustrophobia, that the young, the poorlyeducated, are always more susceptible to than others, struck him like lightning. The sight of the diamonds in the other’s hand seemed to rob him of all reasoning power. He turned and fled in silent panic out toward the crowded dance-floor and the escape that lay beyond.

* * * *

But Arnold’s rasping shout had reached it ahead of him. “Stop that man! Hold him, somebody!”

As the fugitive flashed out under the pitiless, revealing lights, zig-zagging like a black bullet crashing through a bouquet of flowers, the music was already dying into a succession of discordant notes and the packed dancers were coming to an uncertain stop all over the huge place.

Arms reached out to grab him, always just too late. In his wake sprawling figures stumbled to regain their balance.

But his impetus began to slow, the size of the crowd was against him.

And then a small, vindictive satin slipper slithered out between his racing feet like a spoke. He plunged flat on his face, with such force that his own legs went curling up in back of him, in what was almost a forward-somersault. When the shock had cleared, his eyes followed that treacherous little slipper from the floor on up to the malignant face of the eye-shadow girl. He was lying within five yards of the outer lobby, that would have led to the Boardwalk and freedom—if he had made it. She and her partner had been the last of all the couples barring his way!

“Thanks, pal, that was something to be proud of!” he panted, chin on floor.

He was jerked to his feet and pummeled around a lot before the pier attendants could extricate him. A couple of blue-coats were already rushing in from the Boardwalk outside, with a noisy mob of celebrators at their heels.

“Hold him, now!” warned Arnold, “until I have a chance to find out—” He raced to a booth and dialed Sylvia Reading’s hotel.

Murray was moaning, “Oh my God, I didn’t do anything!” when he came back. They were all standing around him thick as bees.

“He’s a dip, he lifted a twenty-grand bracelet,” someone volunteered. Its value had quadrupled inside of five minutes. The Pier manager was blue in the face, with two windmills for arms. “You couldn’t take him nowhere else, you gotta hold jail right here in the middle? Look, millions of ‘em in here without a ticket! Shoo, go home! No more dancing! We close for the night! I sue the municipality!”

Arnold came back slow and came back white. “She hasn’t gone back there, I just had her people on the wire! And it’s only a couple of blocks’ walk from here. She’s vanished!”

“You the complainant?” a cop asked. “What charges—theft?”

“My fiancée—ask him what he did with her. I saw her come in here with him with my own eyes, now she’s gone, no trace of her! The bracelet was in his pocket—”

“Look in his other pocket, maybe you’ll find the girl,” someone wisecracked.

“Better still,” a harsh voice said, “look in the water, out at the end there.” The little lady with the eyeshadow edged her way forward with business-like determination. Twice as much eyeshadow wouldn’t have softened her eyes just then. “I saw him with her. And a little later I was outside there myself, and I heard a loud splash in the water. Ask this guy with me. Then when I go look, I see a white arm sticking up out of the water. And I picked this up.”

She held up a crumpled ball of handkerchief. Her baleful basilisk-eyes never once left Murray’s shivering face.

Arnold caught at it, his face went gray. “That’s hers,” he whispered. “Look in the corner, see the S and R embroidered there. Sylvia Reading. Smell it. Gardenia—what she always used.” They had to hold him back from Murray. “You asked what charges? Suspicion of murder. I’ll bring the accusation myself. That girl is gone!”

A sudden hush fell on the crowd. Murray’s choked whimper was all that could be heard as they dragged him away. Over and over: “I didn’t do anything, I didn’t do anything—”

* * * *

Sylvia Reading’s body was washed up on the beach down at Ventnor two days later, obviously carried there by the current. Arnold identified it at once. The satin dress hadn’t even lost its sheen yet. The very rouge that had outlined her mouth could still be discerned; “waterproof” was its trademark. The autopsy showed that she had been in the water those two full days. And there was only a little water in her lungs; *life had not been quite extinct when she was thrown in*. She had been garrotted, strangled to death, with

the silken shoulder-straps of her own dress, caught from behind in a noose, and twisted. The marks showed plainly on her throat.

Murray, whom she had last been seen alive with, was indicted for murder in the first degree and held for trial. He had stopped saying “I didn’t do anything” now. It had gotten him too many wallops. He didn’t say anything at all any more.

“Well, if he didn’t he probably did something else some other time,” commented Mike Travis unfeelingly, and stood up. He reached for his hat. “He oughta get a good swift kick anyway, going there night after night to dance like a jack-in-the-box!”

Mrs. Murray had uncovered one eye, hopefully. “Where you going?” she sobbed.

“Down to the morgue,” said Mike grudgingly.

As the door banged after him she gave a deep sigh. Strangely enough, it sounded like a sigh of relief and renewed confidence.

Sylvia Reading lay there on the slab like a statue, and her beauty was only a memory now, and all her father’s millions couldn’t bring her back again. Mike stood looking down at her.

“No,” he said over his shoulder, “I’m not a relative. I’m a private investigator retained by Murray’s family. Empire State Agency, New York.”

It didn’t deter him that that had ceased to be a fact a week ago. He’d kept the badge; that was about all he had to show for twenty-five years’ work. “Let me see her things,” he said.

The cobwebby stockings didn’t even have a run in them. There was a green grease-spot on one, probably from brushing one of the mildewed piles imbedded deep down in the water where she’d first sunk.

He handed them back. “Run along, don’t hang around me,” he said impatiently. “I’m not a body-snatcher. Oh, so

it’s an open-and-shut case, is it, and I’m just wasting my time here, am I? Well, it’s my time! Skate me in a chair, I’m not as young as you lads.”

The purplish discolorations were still clearly visible, where the treacherous ribbons had cut life short. Still, there must have been a moment’s time, time enough to make just one gesture of resistance. What would be anyone’s involuntary, spasmodic gesture at such a time? To reach for the thing that was stifling you, try to drag it away. And that failing, as of course it had—

He withdrew one of her hands from under the rubber sheet and looked at it. She probably had a manicure every day of her life, he told himself. But there was a little dirt, an almost invisible line of black, under the tapered, unbroken thumb-nail. He reached for the other hand and looked. Two of them had it on that hand.

“Hand him a deck of cards,” somebody smirked in back of him, “maybe he wants to play honeymoon bridge with her!” He paid no attention.

* * * *

Maybe sitting there at the end of the Pier with Murray that night she’d let her hands stray along the railing, had gotten a little dirt under her nails. But why just three fingers, why not all ten? He took a quill toothpick from his pocket and stripped the paper jacket from it. He held the lifeless hand up and prodded under the thumb-nail. The whole line of blackness moved at one time; as he withdrew the quill it had vanished from the nail—and he was holding a short human hair before his eyes. The other two nails each produced the same object. So it hadn’t been dirt after all—and Sylvia Reading’s last gesture, after trying to drag away the noose that was throttling her, had been to reach blindly upward and clutch at the head of her assailant in her death-throes.

He carefully put the three hairs away in the paper that had held the toothpick; then he got up and left. The morgue-attendants tapped their foreheads significantly as he slouched out. “Cracked,” was their verdict.

Murray thought so too when Mike showed up to visit him in his cell later in the day. “Well,” was Mike’s dour greeting, “you’re a credit! What’d you do it for anyway?”

Murray blasted him with a look. “ ‘Cause she stepped on my toes while we were dancing.” As he turned his head impatiently away he felt three sharp twinges at the top of his scalp, and saw his uncle putting something into a cigarette-paper.

He sprang to his feet, his face violently contorted. “McGuffy!” he squalled through the bars, rattling them. “McGuffy!” And when the keeper came hustling along, “Throw this pest outa my cell! I got some rights, haven’t I?” The turnkey had to come between them. “Kibitzer!” shouted Murray after his departing visitor.

“Ah, youth, hot-tempered youth,” murmured Mike tolerantly as he shuffled down the corridor.

He next popped up at the barber shop of the Claymore Hotel. “Naw,” he said as three barbers sprang to attention beside their chairs, “I don’t want a workout, I want a job.”

“Got references?” said the manager unwillingly, when Mike had buttonholed him. “I can’t just hire anyone that comes in off the street—” He glanced at the dog-eared memorandum Mike passed to him. Mike was testing a pair of clippers with practiced fingers.

“Oh, you worked at the Grand Central Terminal in New York. That’s more like it! And it says here you quit of your own accord.” He glanced at Mike almost in awe. “Ain’t many do that these days.”

The three assistants gathered round, craning their necks to read the unparalleled statement with their own eyes. Mike was triumphantly warming up, snipping at an imaginary customer with a pair of shears.

Suddenly someone's finger pointed at an upper corner of the paper. The manager let out a howl. "These references are dated 1913! Get out, get out before I—"

Mike caught the folded credentials as they came flying back at him. "All right, if that's the way you feel about it," he said stiffly. At the door he turned to deliver a parting thrust. "A good barber improves with age, like wine!"

They were still snickering under their breaths about it a few minutes later, when one exclaimed, "I'm missing a pair of clippers!"

"Who took my shears?" another wanted to know.

"Holy smoke!" reported the third, "my spare jacket's gone from the hook!"

* * * *

The shears, the clippers and the jacket all appeared simultaneously at the door of Room 1115, upstairs in the hotel, a little while later, and Mike, who was in the middle of all of them, knocked. It had cost him three dollars to check in just now and he was still muttering about it, but they didn't let you get past the reception-desk unquestioned unless you had a room of your own you were going to.

The door of eleven-fifteen opened and its occupant stared coldly out at him.

"Afternoon, Mr. Arnold," Mike said softly. "Little trim, hot towel, mud pack, nice cool shave—anything I can do for you? Compliments of the management."

"What's all this? I didn't send for any barber!" Arnold scowled. He got ready to close the door.

"I know you didn't, sir," said Mike ingratiatingly, "but we've installed one on each floor, we want our guests to be as comfortable as possible—"

Arnold ran a hand across his scratchy chin, motioned him in unwillingly. "All right, get it over with."

Mike deftly tucked a towel, snipped experimentally at the air with his shears. He hadn't done this in over twenty

years, but it all came back to him little by little. His fingers lost their rustiness; he began to remember, each time, just what to do next. Sometimes, of course, the knowledge came a little too late; he saw that he shouldn't have run his clippers all the way up to the top of the head in the back; it looked too much like a convict-haircut. That was too bad, but the hair would all grow back again in a few weeks.

Arnold twitched and said: "Ow! What're you doing?"

Mike peered closely at the place. "Sorry, sir, I didn't notice. You have a little half-healed scratch there just under the hairline; I must have raked it with my comb just now."

Arnold was suddenly silent, didn't answer. You could have sliced the silence with a knife; it spoke louder than words. Mike cleaned the comb carefully, and the hairs that had caught between its teeth he removed and wrapped in a cigarette-paper behind the man's back.

"Speed it up!" Arnold said impatiently. "Is it going to take you all day?"

Mike quietly removed the towel, pocketed his implements, and moved toward the door without waiting for that finishing touch to the tonsorial profession—the customer's verdict. Which was just as well.

It caught up with him, however, halfway down the corridor. The door flew open a second time, hair-raising imprecations pursued him, as well as a shoe and a thick glass ashtray which just missed him by inches. He dove discreetly down a staircase and sought his own room two floors below.

He pinned a note to the rolled-up white jacket and implements: "Return to hotel barber shop with apologies." Then he left, with half-a-dozen human hairs in a cigarette-paper, all he had to show for his three dollars. "We'll see what the little glass slides have to say," he murmured.

"And what do you want me to do with these?" demanded the A.C. Police Commissioner dryly. "Stuff a pillow with 'em, or put 'em in a locket for a keepsake?"

“Just send ‘em to Washington for me and have the Department of Justice experts find out which matches which. Be sure not to get the tags mixed. A,” he explained, “was taken from under the fingernails of the body—I have witnesses at the morgue to verify that. Group B is from the head of the accused, C from that of the chief State’s witness. The analysis ought to show which matches which.”

“Thanks for A, anyway,” the Commissioner nodded, “it’s one bet our examiner overlooked. It ought to come in handy at the trial. I’ll do it for you, though, Travis.”

“Have ‘em send you a wire,” pleaded Mike. “They can forward the full report later. I know the suspect you have now will stay put, but in case it turns out to be somebody else—you can reach me at my sister’s house, South Carolina Avenue.”

“You have my word on it,” repeated the Commissioner.

Then he added, not unkindly, “I don’t like to tell you this, old-timer, but that boy’s as good as dead already. It’s one of the strongest circumstantial cases we’ve had here in years.”

Mike left, thinking, “And I’m counting on three hairs to outweigh it!”

He plodded along the Boardwalk, head down. It was hopeless. Even if the report that came back was favorable, what chance had the kid against that young swell, with all his money and influence? The dead girl’s own people would probably back him up if it came to a showdown. He thought of Murray having him thrown out of his cell, and grinned. Spunky, fiery, even in the shadow of death. Then he thought of the other youth, nervous, fidgety, in his luxurious hotel-room. There had been something soft and flabby there just under the surface, Mike had sensed it. Too much money, maybe. Why not dig in, maybe he’d get something! Why wait for the hairs to tell the story? Maybe he could get something more, to back them up with. Why wait for the phalanx of high-priced lawyers that would close in around him, shielding him the moment he was legally jeopardized?

Arnold was ramming eighty-odd neckties into a valise when the knock came on his door. He thought it was the bellhop for his baggage, and unsuspectingly went to open it. By the time he saw that it wasn't, it was too late to close it again, they were in already.

There were three of them, and he recognized the one in the middle and knew then for a certainty what he'd already suspected all along, that his barber of awhile before had been something more than a barber. The suspicion alone had jittered him to the point of getting ready to take a run-out powder until the trial came up; the certainty of it now paralyzed him to the point of helplessness. It was characteristic of his fiber that instead of trying to bar their way he fell back flabby and limp as a rag. Sylvia Reading had known her men, she had known what she was doing when she refused to marry him. "Soft and no good." She had carried the knowledge to her grave with her. He was vanquished before the blow was even struck.

The men closed the door behind them. One stayed beside it. One went over to the telephone and moved it out of the way. Arnold's way.

"Remember me?" said Mike.

Arnold nodded, ashen.

Mike flashed some kind of a badge, took in the readied luggage. "So you were going away?" he drawled.

"Why? What do you want?" stammered the playboy.

"Funny you should be going away right at this time. Funny you should have that little scratch on your scalp, just above the hair-line. By the time you came back it would've healed, wouldn't it?"

There was a bottle on the table, and a glass. Arnold said, "Lemme have another drink, will you? Lemme talk to the Commissioner, will you?" He sounded out-of-breath.

The one by the telephone took it up with both hands, swung downward with it. The wires came flying loose out of the soundbox. Then he handed it to Arnold.

“You’re going to talk to the Commissioner,” Mike promised. “That’s why we’re here. He sent us to get you.”

Arnold gave a hiss of relief. “Nobody has to know, do they? I can explain to him—but it won’t get in the papers, will it, your taking me there like this?”

“Won’t it?” grinned Mike. “Won’t it? Every leg-man in Atlantic City’s ganged up down at the door, there’s a camera waiting behind every post to get you—”

A cry broke from him. “I can’t stand it! Photographers, my name in all the papers—it’ll ruin my life! Can’t you take me down the back way? Let me get hold of a lawyer, at least! Oh, my God, let me have a drink!”

Mike moved the bottle away. “I’ll make a bargain with you,” he said quietly. “You can have a drink, and we’ll take you out the back way. Just take a sheet of that stationery and write, ‘I killed Sylvia Reading,’ and sign your name under it.”

Arnold jumped back as though he’d been bitten. “No!” he yelled. “No! I didn’t do it! You can’t make me say I did! You’re trying to catch me, aren’t you! You can’t pin it on me —”

“Can’t we?” said Mike. “We have already. We’ve proved who killed her! Show him, Lane.”

The one by the door fished out two little paper packets, undid them.

Mike said, “Your hair’s been tested, since I was here this afternoon. You didn’t know I helped myself to some, did you? It matches the specimens we found under her fingernails. Murray’s doesn’t! She reached up in her death-struggle and clawed at your head; she not only made that little scratch I reopened today, she tore out several of your hairs by the roots. They stayed under her nails, even the water didn’t dislodge them. It’s not the word of a friendless little dance-hall lizard against yours any more, it’s the word of an expert at the Department of Justice in Washington!

Come on—and hold your chin up when you hear the camera-shutters go click-click!”

He looked all around him, blindly, as though he couldn’t see them any more. Suddenly he was talking through his hands, face hidden. “I couldn’t stand it, to see her night after night with that cheap. She had no use for me, and it rankled. She wouldn’t listen to me, wouldn’t get up and leave when I found her sitting there alone. I started to shake her by the shoulders, I only wanted to shake some sense into her—and then, before I knew it, it had happened! I tell you, she drove me to it, she wouldn’t take me seriously —Please,” he slobbered, “let me have a drink—”

“Do like I told you,” said Mike, “and we’ll even wait outside the door for you, let you finish the bottle in peace.”

Arnold’s face stopped twitching for a moment. “You’ll—wait—outside the door?” He snatched at a sheet of hotelpaper, scrawled two lines on it. His voice was just a whisper. “Here—now let me have my drink.”

Outside the door Mike folded the paper and put it away. “Soft and no good,” he murmured. He motioned his two companions toward the elevator.

“Ain’t you gonna wait?” one whispered curiously.

“What for?” said Mike. “He’s down there on the Boardwalk already, ahead of us.”

“You knew that—and you let him?”

“It’s the kindest thing anyone coulda done for him,” Mike answered. “Funny how too much money takes all the backbone outa you. I gotta go over to the Commissioner with this confession.

The second one crumpled the two little paper packets and threw them away disgustedly. “I ain’t getting bald fast enough,” he complained, “I gotta yank out the few I got left. He didn’t even look at ‘em!”

“Quit beefing; here’s your twenty apiece,” said Mike, “and stay away from that cheesy confidence-racket of yours

on the Boardwalk, or next time I will turn you both in like I threatened to!”

* * * *

The Commissioner just sat back and whistled after he’d scanned Arnold’s confession. “I don’t know just how you got this out of him, brother,” he said meaningfully, “but you don’t know how lucky it is for you you did!” He passed an opened telegram across the desk to him. “Cast your eyes on that!”

Mike’s face paled as he read. It was the D. of J. expert’s preliminary report. “Group B, from head of accused, does not check with A, from fingernails victim, neither follicles, texture, nor color. Neither does Group C, from second suspect.”

Mike just stood there swallowing. The chief clues had gone haywire. The specimens of hair had probably been off the dead girl’s own head.

“We’re dismissing the case against young Murray, all right,” said the Commissioner sombrely, “but if it wasn’t for these five scribbled words, ‘I killed Sylvia Reading, J. Arnold,’ you brought me in just now, we’d have had half a case of murder against you yourself for whatever it was you did to him made him jump out the window like he did. In fact, for all I know, we probably still have at that—but I’m not going to do anything about it.” He stared curiously at Mike. “I suppose all that matters is results—but talk about putting the cart before the horse!”

“So you got your job back,” beamed Mike’s sister happily across the kitchen-table. “They must have read all about it in the papers. Special delivery, and signed by the head of the agency himself!”

“Yeah,” scoffed Mike, “took ‘em long enough to find out how good I am. Well, I’ll take my time about answering, they can wait till I’m good and ready.” He took the reply he

had prepared from his pocket and hurriedly sealed it. “Got an air-mail stamp?” he wanted to know.

YOU PAYS YOUR NICKEL

Delaney boarded an empty northbound train at 125th Street by the simple expedient of loosening a chain across the station platform that barred his way, instead of dropping a token into a turnstile. The little metal disc attached to his cap, bearing the numerals 01629, gave him the privilege of doing that. That disc was his by reason of the fact that he was a subway guard.

He pulled a folded tabloid out from behind the panel in the car vestibule and, scorning to assume duties which were still rightfully the night shift's, he sprawled comfortably on one of the seats, legs out before him. The pale pink newssheet engrossed him while the train rattled its way to the end of the line, to start back and meet the rush hour. It was full of topics that had very little bearing on himself and his daily surroundings, such as storms at sea, airplane mishaps, the shapely limbs of a Miss Beaumont who had just flown in from Hollywood, and also a great deal about a "phantom burglar" who was being besieged by the police in the Wadsworth Building, on lower Broadway.

The man had been in there ever since the small hours of the previous night, had ransacked five offices singlehanded to the tune of $500,000, killed the watchman, and they still hadn't been able to lay their hands on him. A cordon had been thrown around the place, the paper said, and it was just a matter of time—time and a mere fifty or sixty floors to

cover—before they caught up with him. Delaney, reading it, felt vaguely cheated. Up above there was always something doing; down here, below ground, nothing ever happened—you were like in your grave already.

As they pulled in at the end of the line, he put the paper back where he'd found it, stirred his stumps, and presented himself and his passbook to the factotum who detailed the personnel off the various southbound trains.

"Last section, third train out," he was told. They were all expresses this far up; the locals didn't go beyond 137th Street. The headway, during the rush hour, was a train every two minutes.

This rite—"shenanigans," Delaney termed it—attended to, he joined his mates on the benches until his own train pulled in. It was a "ghost" train, without a soul on it so far. He stepped aboard and placed himself exactly over the coupling irons of the second and third cars from the end, one foot on each platform, like a sort of Atlas astride his own little world. The time bell rang and he bore down on the pneumatic lever. Six doors in all, three to the left of him and three to the right, slid sibilantly closed. The train pulled out. Another day had begun.

One station down and the train was no longer empty. Before it dove under at Dyckman it was jammed. At 96th it was a madhouse on wheels, and at Times Square the riveted seams of the steel cars threatened to open.

That was the high water mark, then the ebb set in. After Wall Street, Delaney himself was sitting down again, reading another tabloid that someone had left behind. This was a six a.m. edition; they hadn't caught up with the "phantom" yet. They'd got to the top of the tower by now, but he'd miraculously slipped through them somehow, and he was on his way down. But he was still in there, and the cordon down at street level had been reinforced. They were going to keep the personnel out, and they were sending in tear-gas bombs. The police order now was to give him no

quarter, shoot him on sight; for he'd chalked up his second killing, one of their own, trapped in an angle of a dead-end corridor and plugged in the back.

The strangest thing about it was that nobody knew what he looked like. The only two who had caught a glimpse of him were dead before they could tell—hence the "phantom" tag. Delaney doped this out laboriously for himself while his ears hummed as he plunged under the river for the first time that day and hit Brooklyn.

At the other end of the line, with a twenty-minute relief on his hands, he changed his six A.M. edition, which was stale already, for one that had just hit the streets, hadn't been born yet when he got on the train uptown. He took it upstairs with him for a smoke and a shot of fresh air. Miss Beaumont's legs were still there, but they'd lost ground; the Phantom had shoved them from the first page back to the third. He rated a scarehead now. He'd cheated the cordon of police, got out, loot and all. From an extension onto the roof of a church next door, as closely as they could figure it. Then down into the church through a lovely stained-glass skylight, which now lay all over the floor in pieces.

The sexton had had sense enough to hide behind one of the pews, and had got a good look at him and thereby also lived to spill it. He'd watched him slip out, valise and all, and duck down the steps into the Wall Street station, which was right outside the door—with two score bluecoated backs in full view a building-length away.

By the time the sexton got over to them, and the stampede got started, they were just a flight of steps too late. The Wall Street West Side station is a single platform between the tracks, instead of a double one like most. Break one for the Phantom. There were two trains in together, going in opposite directions, which mightn't have

happened all the rest of the day. Break two for the Phantom. By the time the cavalcade got down, they had their choice of tail-lights, which didn't tell them a thing.

The station agent headed the downtown one off by telephoning Clark Street, and it was held sealed when it got there and drag-netted, but the Phantom wasn't on it. They couldn't catch the uptown one in time, even by telephone, for the Fulton and Park Place Stations were too close; but when they finally stopped that train and gave it the works at Chambers Street, the Phantom didn't turn up there either. He'd had two ganged-up stations to slip off at, though none of the other passengers they quizzed remembered seeing anyone with a valise, and neither did the station agents in question.

The chase had shifted to Delaney's own domain now and his interest was whetted; a second-hand thrill was better than none at all. It was coming closer all the time.

Just before eight, the paper gave as the time the getaway into the subway had taken place. Delaney began to calculate absorbedly, sitting on an empty ginger-ale case by the station exit. He himself had made Wall Street at about eight sharp, leaving on a 7:20 headway as he had. Trains make poorer time during the rush hour, on account of the gangs getting off at every stop.

"That southbound one," he told himself disappointedly, "musta been the one right ahead of me. I musta got there two minutes after he lammed. Just my luck. It wouldn't be my train he picks—but somebody else's! I must have the Indian sign on me."

He pocketed the paper, disgusted, and reported downstairs for the return run. The fact that the guy was armed and had already killed two men in cold blood didn't lessen Delaney's sense of personal grievance. He felt that he had been dished out of the little excitement there was to be had. "Just one train up, and I coulda maybe had him riding with me!"

The time bell pealed and he slammed his section shut with a face that would have soured milk. The long haul back got under way. The outer stations came and went: Church, Sterling, President, Franklin.

Then Eastern Parkway showed up. Now at Eastern, the West Side lines do this in-bound: two branches fork together. A five-car section coming in from Flatbush Avenue, a half train, waits there for a five-car section coming in from New Lots; they're hooked together to make a full train, ten cars, and cover the rest of the route in one. Outward-bound it's reversed: at that point they split.

Delaney's half got in, waited, and its complementary half showed up behind it on the dot, kissed it with a slight jolt. The coupling crew jumped to its duty, compressed air hissed, and the two sections were joined. The second motorman, dispensed with, went off duty. Delaney's post automatically shifted one car back, to take in what had formerly been the control car. This brought him to what had been the rear platform until now, not used by passengers getting off or on.

It was when he had stepped back from leaning out between cars to catch the signal, and they were already under way, that he first saw the thing, standing by itself in the comer of the vestibule. A dingy, dog-eared cowhide valise, flush with the door. It didn't click, didn't mean a thing at first; it was traveling *in* toward Wall Street, *not* out away from there.

Yet he couldn't understand how it could have been left where it was. That end door hadn't been in use until now, and no one had got on carrying a bag like that since the return trip had begun. He would have seen it. When they did bring stuff like that on, they kept it right under their feet or close to one of the doors in operation, didn't lug it all the way out of sight to the back platform.

Whatever it was, it was in the way, blocking the door. He slurred it with his foot across to the other side of the

vestibule, then stood in the doorway and gave the car in general a dirty look.

"Whose suitcase is that?" he megaphoned. "Whaddya think this is, a baggage car? Clear it outa here!"

The sprinkling of passengers looked up interestedly—but blankly. They consisted of a Western Union messenger, two matrons headed for shopping, a sleepy youth who had been ladling orangeade all night, a pair of chattering Puerto Ricans, and an old man with a long beard who believed in the second coming of the Messiah and was dropping pamphlets on everybody else's lap. No takers—none, that is, for the mysterious valise.

Delaney went back again to open for Grand Army Plaza, then when that was out of the way, stood staring at the thing, thinking it over. Suspicion became a certainty, little by little. He'd found it on the side that opened for Wall Street; almost all the rest, the whole length of the line, opened on the opposite side. No one to claim it; no one riding in with it. There was only one answer—it didn't belong on this trip. It must have been brought on during the run before, overlooked at the end of the line by the crew jumping off; and now it was starting back again. It was hard to believe, a thing that size, but maybe with that metal partition swinging loose in front of it they hadn't spotted it.

He glanced up at the car number—3334. They shuffled the cars around a good deal at the end of each run, he knew; coming back he might have been assigned to what had been the train ahead of his the last time, without knowing it. And if so, maybe that thing in the corner over there had half a million in it this very minute!

He went over to it, tried the two latches; but they were locked tight. He picked it up, tested its weight—hard to say what it had in it. Even if it was what he took it for, he still

didn’t get the idea. It meant this “Phantom” had sent his loot sailing at Wall Street and hadn’t gone with it. That sounded screwy. Robbing five offices just to give the haul a free ride by itself on the subway? Unless he had someone working with him, waiting at the end of the line to pick it up. If he had, something had gone wrong, for here it was on its way back again, unclaimed.

Which meant it had run the gauntlet twice, not only at the end of the line when the cars were cleared, but before that at Clark Street when the police had halted the train and gone through it, looking for the murderer. It could have happened at that, incredible as it seemed. They were looking for someone fitting the sexton’s description, first of all, and the valise was only incidental. Not finding him, the suitcase itself could easily have escaped their attention, hidden under people’s legs in that milling, half-hysterical crowd. They’d had all the doors to watch, and ten packed cars to wade through, and not much time to do it in. There probably wasn’t elbow room to bend down and peer at the floor, even if they’d thought of doing so.

Delaney was beginning to understand what must have happened. The guy dove down the steps just a leap ahead of them. There were two trains in, one on each side of him. He must have had to do his thinking fast, no time to hesitate. He couldn’t even count on the trains pulling out in time; they might be stopped right where they were and held there in the station.

He didn’t know the sexton had glimpsed him in the church. The only giveaway, he thought, was the valise. Separate himself from that, and he was safe. So he plunged it into the downtown train, spun around, and dove into the uptown one without it.

People are always running for trains, why should that have attracted any attention? And on the downtown car vestibule they were probably crammed so close together, all with their papers up in front of their faces, that like the

police they didn’t see that he’d left something on the floor. And later, each one thought it belonged to the other fellow—until the train split up, and it became the rear platform, and there weren’t any left any more. And the Phantom, of course, had had sense enough to lam out of his own train at Fulton, without waiting for them to overhaul it at Chambers.

So far, so good, but then what? No one parts company with five hundred grand that easily, whether it means the chair or not. Delaney discarded the accomplice theory at this point; they wouldn’t have had any way of getting in touch with each other in time. The Phantom hadn’t intended powdering down the subway, he’d just done it instinctively—the only hole in the ground there was for him to hide in. But for him to send his haul barging off like that on its own, there must have been some connecting link in his mind, some trick play, by which he could catch up with it later. Delaney refused to believe he had kissed it good-bye for good, not after what he’d been through to get his hands on it.

Now just what way was there for him to connect with it again? He certainly wasn’t counting on it being turned in to the lost-and-found and then showing up later to claim it: that would be putting his head into the noose for fair. “Can you identify the contents?” “Half a million in cash and securities.” And he certainly was not fool enough to think that by taking a later train from farther up he could overtake the first one in time and get his hands on it again. He’d spend the rest of the day riding back and forth, always just one train too late!

But a guy like the Phantom wouldn’t work that way.

No, the answer was this: he’d played a hundred-to-one shot, a thousand-to-one shot, had no other choice. He was waiting some place up the line, where this train would have to pass, waiting for that suitcase to come back to him undisturbed, overlooked! And he’d rung the bell, just this

once out of a thousand times: it hadn't been taken off, it was heading back to him again! It nearly made Delaney's hair stand up to think of luck like that, of nerve to take a chance like that and have it come through!

But there was just one little remaining hitch to be smoothed away, at least in Delaney's own mind. How in the devil's name did he expect to know the right train, the right car, when it pulled up in front of him? They were all alike even to Delaney, and he spent his life on them. Had he marked the door in some way, so he'd know it again when it made the trip back? That was asking a lot, to expect a guy running for his life to have a piece of chalk or something ready in his hand for just such a purpose!

Just to convince himself, though, Delaney stepped outside at the next stop and scanned all three doors of the car. There wasn't a mark on them. But the answer came to him when he got on again—so simple that he'd overlooked it until now. How did the company officials themselves, anybody at all, tell one car from another? Why, by the number, of course—stenciled in big white numerals on the blackened lower pane of each end window. And this one was a pushover—3334. In that split second when the Phantom had wedged the suitcase aboard, he'd lamped the number beside the door—and that was all he had to go by; that was the one slim connecting link between him and his hot half million now.

He must have good eyes, all right, to count on glimpsing it in time, one car out of ten, as it whizzed in past whatever platform he was waiting on at this very minute! Still, it could be done.

They were coming into Clark Street now. Delaney bent down and picked up the valise. "Ain't it a shame," he mused dryly, "that I caught onto his little stunt, without nobody telling me nothing! Now all I do is just move it one car over—and where is he? All his sweat and brainwork for nothing."

Abruptly Delaney set it down again. “He’ll look in first,” he said to himself. “If he doesn’t see it, he won’t get on—figure his thousand-to-one shot muffed and it was taken off at the other end.” He scratched the back of his head. “I’d like to see what he looks like,” he decided. “A guy as tricky and nervy as all that! Hell, I got that much coming to me, after packin’ sardines in all day long.”

He left the valise where it was.

He wasn’t, he assured himself, endangering the money any by leaving it exposed like that. “He can get on, but he can’t get it off again while I’m on the doors. I’ll see to that. I just want to watch what he does—oughta be fun, break the monotony!”

A moment later, as they went under the river, he remembered that the fellow would be armed, had already killed two men who had tried to hinder him. He still left the valise where it was.

They blew into Wall Street, where the Phantom had last been seen, and nothing happened. No one at all got into Delaney’s cars there, though he stretched his neck both ways; they were all going to their offices at that hour, not coming away from them. He spotted a pair of cops still hanging around, one at each end of the platform, that was all.

At least it showed they hadn’t nabbed him yet. Delaney decided he must have a criminal streak in himself, the satisfaction he felt at that knowledge. Almost as if he was rooting for the guy—which of course he wasn’t.

As for flagging the bluecoats and turning the valise over to them, there were several good reasons for not doing it. In the first place, he was only surmising what it was, the regulations were that it was to be turned in at the end of the line. He was working for the company, and not the police.

Wall Street dropped back, and almost immediately Fulton showed around the curve. Delaney didn’t watch the

platform as hard this time, was giving up hope of his theory being correct. His car hit about the center of the boat-shaped concrete “island.”

There didn’t seem to be anyone waiting to get on. Down at the end someone was standing shaking one of the chewing-gum slot machines, trying to get his penny back. It looked as though he was waiting for a downtown train, made no move toward this one. Delaney cautiously turned to look up the other way; there was no one at all up there.

When he turned back again, the figure had vanished.

Park Place ticked off, then the train slowed up for Chambers. The valise stayed where it was, unmolested. After Chambers would come a five-minute straightaway without breaks, all the way to 14th. Delaney gave Chambers a good once-over, up and down, from his vantage point. There were a couple of cops hanging around there too. A fat lady, whose girth would have been the pride of any sideshow, accosted him just then from the platform.

“Doth ith go to Timeth Thquare?” she queried.

“It doth,” he assured her.

She scowled, and proceeded to wedge herself aboard.

The bell was pealing, and he closed the door. He hadn’t calculated on how much of her there was. Most of her was on already, but not quite all. The rubber-edged door nipped her stern slightly.

A moment later, as she moved on, there was a distinct sound of rending silk. A look of alarm crossed her baby face. “Eep!” she squealed, and started revolving slowly on her axis, trying to get a look behind her.

Delaney knew the type. “Now I’m in for it,” he told himself resignedly. He was.

“I’m gonna weport you for thith, young man—” she began indignantly, as he stepped down to the vestibule and tried to look unaware of her presence. “I’m gonna thue thith company!”

This probably would have continued without a letup all the way to 14th Street, but Delaney happened to look past her just then to where the valise had been. He snapped to attention with a jolt. The bag was gone!

It was traveling down the aisle, had already gotten half a car length away in the minute his back had been turned, gripped by the same slouch-hatted figure he'd seen so harmlessly tinkering with the slot machine at Fulton Street. Pretending to fuss about a penny while he waited to pounce on half a million dollars!

So that was their "Phantom," was it? Well, he didn't look like much from the back—just a wiry little fellow going some place in a hurry. But Delaney wasn't letting it go at that. He was going to get a look at his face or know the reason why.

"Hey, you!" he bawled, and his voice went booming down the car. "Drop that!"

A face flashed white over one hurrying shoulder. Even at that distance Delaney could see there wasn't any fright in it. There was only cold-blooded, grinning death. The fat lady was in his way, monumental, wedged in the inner doorway—and that probably saved Delaney's life.

Before he could get past her and leap after the man, as he was primed to, the answer to his hail came back—and not in words. There was a second flash over that shoulder—smaller, brighter this time—a whipcrack that topped the roar of the train. A white sworl powdered the glass of the vestibule door just behind Delaney. The door had slipped partly free with the motion of the train.

The fat lady promptly fainted, but fortunately sideways onto the nearest vacant seat. That cleared the aisle. But the figure in the loosely flapping topcoat had already bridged the platform into the next car. He banged the communicating door closed to hamper Delaney, and the glass shattered. Delaney came plunging at it, tore the frame out of the way, and opened the back of his hand in a thin red line.

The lights of Chambers Street had just fallen behind the last car—it was a long station and the whole thing had happened in a flash—and there had been two cops on the platform there. He leaped upward and sidewise in the second vestibule, gave the emergency cord a yank that buckled it into a long loop. If they backed up a few yards, they could get help aboard from the station.

The fugitive had increased his lead to a whole car length now. He seemed to glide between the scattering of frozen, stunned passengers, immune to touch. It was Delaney following after, capless now, with his grim face and bleeding hand, who sowed panic. Women jumped up on the seats with both feet, screaming, then herded toward the back of the train, all trying to get out of the car at once.

The express slurred to a crazy, jolting stop as the signal reached the motorman. Some of the passengers were thrown to the floor.

“Get out on the rear platform,” Delaney shouted over his shoulder. “Sing out for help—they may hear you back at the station!” Whether they understood or not, he couldn’t tell; he didn’t wait to find out.

The fugitive was a car and a half ahead now. Half a million can weigh very little, when it’s going to be all yours. The man was out of Delaney’s section by this time. A weird silence had overtaken the stalled cars the minute the motion went out of them—all but the chirping at the rear. Delaney, without slowing up, megaphoned his hands and boomed ahead: “Sullivan! Stop that man! The guy with the bag!” It carried like a trumpet call through the still cars.

A minute later he cursed himself for doing it. There was another of those whip-cracks, and the smoke from it was still lazing overhead when he got to the next guard’s platform. Sullivan was sprawled on his back, a hole over his eye had just begun to bleed. Delaneyjumped over him, swore like a mad dog as the sight registered, went plowing on. The hysterical passengers scattered like leaves in front

of him, pushed out windows with their elbows, clawed their way out the other end of the car.

The distant figure with the valise, all that he had eyes for now, had hit the first car at last, couldn't go any farther. Delaney heard himself bellowing out loud like a vindictive bull. He'd never known a guy could want to kill another guy so much, until now. He was in such a red rage that the thought of the gun was actually a come-on instead of a deterrent. A bullet right through the heart, he felt, wouldn't have been able to slow him up now.

The front car came into focus before his smoldering eyes —and the killer had vanished, wasn't in front of him any more. Just as he leaped the platform-gap, the train gave a jerk forward, then plunged into full motion again.

Damn that motorman, why did he ignore the signal like that? He was cutting them off from help at Chambers Street —with 14th Street a full five-minute run ahead! The train picked up speed as it never did under the eyes of a station timekeeper; it was in full careening flight already, rocking from side to side.

There had only been a single man in the first car. He was crouched down at seat level now, pointing terrifiedly. "He went in that little doohinky there! He's got a gun, watch y'self, man!" Then he slithered out of the way.

Delaney had known already he was in there, in the booth with the motorman. It was the only place left for him to go, unless he took a jump down forward under the whistling wheels. Delaney lunged at the metal door with his shoulder, heaved. It held fast. He must have wedged his body against it, since there was no way of locking it on the inside.

Delaney roared through the crack, "Stop the train, you fool! Cut the switch!"

It wasn't the motorman's voice that answered from the other side of the partition, cold, distinct above the tunnel-roar: "Get away from that door or I'll let him have it! You'll be on a train *without* a driver!" And then the old fellow's

voice, crazed with fear, “Delaney, for God’s sake, do what he says—he’s got a gun at the back of my neck!”

A green all-clear signal winked by beside the track outside. They’d have a few more of those, Delaney knew, but in a minute or two they’d be getting red ones as they overtook the train ahead. And they were bound to if they didn’t stop. The headway was longer now than during the rush hour, but the rate they were going would use it up in no time.

He tried to warn the maniac in there of what would happen, continuing to heave at the door while he panted, “You can’t getaway with it! You’ll pile us up on the train ahead!”

The panel gave slightly and the killer’s voice sounded from the inside, “Show me how it works! Come on, show me how it works—and I’ll do the handling!”

The train slowed momentarily, as the contact broke, then picked up speed again as it was resumed.

There was an insane laugh that froze Delaney. “That’s all I need to know!” The panel fell all the way back in a flash, and as Delaney crouched to rush the opening, the old motorman toppled out into his arms, blood threading down by his ear. The booth banged shut again behind him and the train seemed to roar forward.

Delaney eased the overalled figure to the floor, dragged it back out of the way. “Pop! What’d he do, shoot you?”

But it wasn’t a bullet wound, it was a vicious blow with the butt of the gun that had knocked him out. Meaning, probably, that the skunk was running low on cartridges, wanted to hang on to the few he had left.

Delaney didn’t know much about guns, but he remembered that the fellow was carrying a revolver, and that six slugs was all one packed. He’d shot two off in the

Wadsworth Building and two just now in the train. Unless he had a second gun or a pocketful of refills, he had only two left. But a hell of a lot of good knowing that did, with the lights of Canal Street cometing by and then another double green track-light right after that. Red was due any moment.

Delaney leaned across the prostrate motorman and stuck his head out the open upper half of one of the windows. And there it was, still way up the track, but already visible—two midget dots of warning, one above the other, at right-angles to the tunnel wall. And beyond that, almost invisible in the gloom, a cluster of even tinier ruby pinpoints, where their predecessor was slowing up as it neared 14th Street. Two, maybe three, local stops away yet, but they'd be on top of it before it could pull out again!

He let the impregnable booth go hang, turned and fled down the deserted aisle toward the back, as all the passengers had done before him. But he wasn't thinking of his own skin. The second car was empty too, but at the end of that the bolder and more curious among them were huddled, peering up ahead with blanched, tense faces. They started to scatter again as he bore down on them.

"Metal!" he shrieked. "One of you—gimme something made of metal—anything, to throw a short circuit!"

They didn't understand him, or were too frightened. Another local stop gleamed by, and beyond it the two red stop-signals were already the size of dimes.

The fat lady who had involuntarily saved his life once was hunched there, shaking and sniffling. He clawed at her throat and she gave a screech of terror, tried to waddle away. The long silk scarf she wore tucked about her whipped off in his hand, yards and yards of it. He ran back toward the first car, trailing it after him. The red light came abreast, shot past them.

He rolled the thing up into a big loose ball, ducked past the control booth with it, and dropped flat on his stomach

over the lip of the open front platform. His head hung down over the edge. Up ahead, the taillights of the next train were square now and expanding every second. Either the guy deliberately intended to commit suicide rather than be caught, or he didn't know how to stop any more.

But right while Delaney lay there with the big fluffy bunch of silk poised in his hand to pitch at the shoe that gripped the third rail, and stall them, the Phantom gave him the answer. He broke out of the booth just in back of Delaney, valise still in one hand, something else now in the other. The control-key that shut off contact. He'd brought it out with him!

He pitched it at one of the windows. There was a slight crash, and it vanished. They couldn't stop now, there was no way—not from the control room, anyhow.

He streaked toward the back, gun out again to replace the key he'd thrown away. He was going to let it happen, callously sending dozens of people to death or painful injury, simply to better his chance of escaping in the resulting chaos! That was the idea, another of those thousand-to-one shots of his! To beat the crash to the end of the train, toss his suitcase off the rear platform, drop off after it himself, and if he survived the fall, make good his escape up through the nearest emergency exit.

And survive he probably would at that; it was just the kind of freak luck he'd been running in for twelve hours straight now. What would a few lacerations or bruises mean to him, living on borrowed time as he was?

The gods of blind chance would probably see him through; they seemed to be all for his kind of reckless fool.

Delaney dropped his head downward again, concentrated on the shoe gliding along the third rail, below and off to the side of him. One thing at a time—there were human lives on this train, and on that other one up front there, and they counted for more than even half a million dollars.

Three times Delaney swung his arm out ahead of him with the rumpled mass of silk, that excellent conductor, foaming out of his hand, and three times swung it under and downward—without letting go. If the rush of air deflected it, carried it harmlessly past the shoe straight down the middle of the trackbed—

But there wasn't any more time left, not even enough to hesitate. The taillights ahead were only a train length away by now. He could look up the aisle of the end car already; it was like a small lighted tunnel telescoped within a bigger black one. Let the gods of luck give somebody else a break for a change!

He opened his hand, let go, with just a fillip to the right to carry the silk off-center. It streamed out and downward, opening as it went. It hit the third rail just inches ahead of the shoe, whipped from sight, and seemed to be sucked in under the rail guard.

Then there was a warning spatter of sparks. The whole tunnel turned blue as though a giant flashlight picture had just been taken down there under the car truck. And then a report like heavy artillery that put the Phantom's puny pistol cracks to shame.

The blue glare went out again as suddenly as it had flared up, but the cars were already jarring to a sickening halt. Delaney had been given his break. He had short-circuited the train.

He nearly went sailing off through the open platform door with the suddenness of the lurch. He caught the single chain with one upflung arm and dangled there, half in and half out. He managed to squirm back in again, scrambled to his feet, and plunged down a car aisle that had turned dark now and was filled with a thin layer of acrid smoke drifting lazily rearward. The train lights had gone with the power, but a single automatic emergency bulb gleamed dully just above the vestibule of each car. He thanked God for them, for the passengers' sake if not his own.

They'd all been thrown down by the halt, and they'd reached a pitch of terror by now, some of them anyway, that was almost animal. But he wasn't concerned with them just now. He raced down the clear lane between their prone, jabbering forms that someone else had opened just ahead of him, with the wave of that deadly little gun.

He was in mid car, out of reach of the levers, when all the doors silently swung back around him. He knew who'd done it! The fellow was getting out the side instead of going all the way to the back. He must have remembered that there'd be a guard down at the end-section who might tangle with him. And now the train had stalled, it was no longer suicide to jump off at the side, in fact, easier and quicker than the other way.

Delaney spurted for the nearest controls, to try to reverse them again before the fellow had time to slip through, but by the time he'd done it, he knew it was too late. Leaning out at nearly a forty-five degree angle between cars, trying to pierce the tunnel gloom down that way, only proved the assumption to be correct. It was just the next car down that he'd made his getaway from, and the feeble radius of light from the bulb down at that vestibule momentarily outlined something moving away from it that instantly lost itself in the murk. But Delaney had seen that it was a figure holding onto a square shape and hopping awkwardly athwart the local tracks to the two-foot emergency runway niched into the side of the tunnel. And that led far down to where blue and white lights, one above the other, and a puff of gray daylight, marked an exit.

Well, he wasn't there yet! And he'd shot, maybe killed Sullivan, banged the old man on the conk, and tied up the whole line into a knot! Delaney reversed the controls a second time, and jumped down to the tracks himself.

The tunnel was black, but it looked red to him just then. Two long jumps cleared the local rails for him, and he caught the single hand-guard that hemmed the causeway,

hoisted himself up onto the little narrow footpath. It was at about train level. Instantly the blue and white lights up ahead vanished. Something was between him and them.

Delaney sprinted along the straight, two-foot cement ribbon of foot-hold, pushing himself in toward the wall constantly with one hand on the rail that paralleled it. It was hard to make time along a place that narrow and tricky, but it was even harder if you had a valise to pack, he told himself. You'd have to scuttle along crabwise in that case, so it wouldn't trip you. He himself tripped once, went down face forward, and all but fell down to the tracks three feet below. He picked himself up and bolted on, knees and palms stinging.

The exit lights ahead slowly rose in perspective as they drew nearer, cleared the top of the silhouette that had obscured them, and hit him in the eye like two moons. For the first time, then, he saw how close he and his quarry were. There was only about ten yards between them. The thumping and slapping of the suitcase as it was borne along were now clearly audible. The cars of his own motionless train were far in back of him by now; he was traversing the pitch-black empty stretch between it and the one behind, a local, also stalled and semi-lighted. Just ahead of that, though, were the exit lights and the gush of daylight that marked safety for the killer.

But Delaney already knew he'd beat him to it. That grip was hampering the fellow something fierce. The ten yards were down to about seven now, and the man's hoarse strangled breathing seemed to fill the tunnel.

Delaney made himself audible at last, though the other must have known all along someone was after him. "Come on, give up, I've got you now!"

A second later he'd paid for his overconfidence. One foot somehow got in front of the other, and he went down a second time. He managed to stay on the runway, but was flat as a mat.

Just as the floor came up and smacked him, the figure ahead whirled. There was a bang, a flash, and a thin whistle past where Delaney's head should have been.

One bullet left, and five yards between them. They were both motionless for a minute, half strangling for air. Delaney crouched, leaped at the man from scratch in a sort of long rising tackle that brought him up to shoulder level by the time they connected. The gun exploded again, but straight at the ceiling like a sprint signal this time, but with one of Delaney's hands at the wrist that wielded it, the other at the fellow's neck, pulling it together into a flesh necktie. The gun clicked harmlessly twice more in the air, then dropped to the runway with a clash, and bounced down to the tracks below.

Delaney took away his open hand from the fellow's throat, only to bring it back again hardened into a meteorite of a fist that drove between the other's eyes as though it had come all the way from another planet.

If any consciousness survived the impact, there was no sign of it. The wrist Delaney had been gripping jerked from his grasp, the other's body went down flat over the valise that had been standing just behind him. The head missed the edge of the runway, dropped from sight, and pulled all the rest of him down to the tracks after it with a sort of acrobat's half turn and back flip, under the hand rail. The valise stayed on the ledge; but the Phantom stayed down below in an indistinguishable heap.

Delaney, about to jump down after him, was suddenly conscious of light flaring all around him, like an abrupt aurora borealis there in the tunnel. That local, not far down, was all at once blazing with light again, bleaching the tunnel walls. So was his own train, far up the other way. They'd ironed out the short-circuit and the power had come on again.

A puff of black, acrid smoke seemed to spurt from under the mound of clothes that lay on the tracks just beneath

him, as though they were on fire. He turned his head away and leaned sickly up against the tunnel wall.

Later, trudging away from there, hauling the recovered valise slowly after him, the professional came to the surface in Delaney again. “Two shorts in a row,” he mused despondently. “They’ll can me sure when they find out it was me caused the first one.”

“And did they?” asked his blindfolded train-mate Sullivan from the hospital bed that evening.

“I didn’t let on it was me done it,” answered Delaney, “but somebody must have tipped them off. They seemed to know it, anyway. They didn’t dock me, though. Instead, all the higher-ups come around shaking hands with me. They said something about promoting me.”

“Well, what’re you kicking about?” the other asked. “You sound like—”

“It was bad enough before, riding the platforms,” complained Delaney. “Now it’ll be twice as slow, stuck behind some signal-board keeping tabs on the lights all day long! That’s what a guy gets. He don’t know when he’s well off!”

THE NIGHT I DIED

The point about me is: that I should stay on the right side of the fence all those years, and then when I did go over, go over heart and soul like I did—all in the space of one night. In one hour, you might say.

Most guys build up to a thing like that gradually. Not me; why, I had never so much as lifted a check, dropped a slug into a telephone-slot before that. I was the kind of a droop who, if I was short-changed, I'd shut up about it, but if I got too much change back I'd stand there and call their attention to it.

And as for raising my hand against a fellow-mortal—you had the wrong party, not Ben Cook. Yet there must have been a wide streak of it in me all along, just waiting to come out. Maybe all the worse for being held down all those years without a valve, like steam in a boiler.

Here I'd been grubbing away for ten or twelve years in Kay City, at thirty per, trying on suits (on other guys) in the men's clothing section of a department store. Saying "sir" to every mug that came in and smoothing their lapels and patting them on the back. I go home one night that kind of a guy, honest, unambitious, wishy-washy, without even a parking-ticket on my conscience, and five minutes later I've got a murder on my hands.

I think it was probably Thelma more than anyone else who brought this latent streak in me to the surface; it might have stayed hidden if she hadn't been the kind of woman

she was. You'll see, as you read on, that she had plenty of reason later to regret doing so. Like conjuring up the devil and then not being able to get rid of him.

Thelma was my common-law wife. My first wife, Florence, had given me up as hopeless five years before and gone to England. We parted friends. I remember her saying she liked me well enough, I had possibilities, but it would take too long to work them out; she wanted her husband readymade. She notified me later she'd got a divorce and was marrying some big distillery guy over there.

I could have married Thelma after that, but somehow we never got around to it, just stayed common-law wife and husband, which is as good as anything. You know how opposites attract, and I guess that's how I happened to hook up with Thelma; she was just my opposite in every way. Ambitious, hard as nails, no compunctions about getting what she wanted. Her favorite saying was always, "If you can get away with it, it's worth doing!"

For instance, when I told her I needed a new suit and couldn't afford one, she'd say: "Well, you work in a men's clothing department! Swipe one out of the stock—they'll never know the difference." I used to think she was joking.

After she egged me on to tackle our manager for a raise, and I got turned down pretty, she said: "I can see where you'll still be hauling in thirty-a-week twenty years from now, when they have to wheel you to work in a chair! What about me? Where do I come in if a hit-and-run driver spreads you all over the street tomorrow? Why don't you take out some insurance at least?"

So I did. First I was going to take out just a five-thousand-dollar policy, which was pretty steep for me at that, but Thelma spoke up. "Why not make it worth our while? Don't worry about the premiums, Cookie. I've got a little

something put away from before I knew you. I'll start you off. I'll pay the first premium for you myself—after that, we'll see." So I went for ten thousand worth, and made Thelma the beneficiary, of course, as I didn't have any folks or anyone else to look after.

That had been two years before; she had been paying the premiums for me like a lamb ever since. All this made me realize that under her hard surface she was really very bighearted, and this one night that I started home a little earlier than usual I was warbling like a canary and full of pleasant thoughts about "my little woman," as I liked to call her, and wondering what we were going to have for dinner.

Six was my usual quitting-time at the store, but we had just got through taking inventory the night before, and I had been staying overtime without pay all week, so the manager let me off an hour sooner. I thought it would be nice to surprise Thelma, because I knew she didn't expect me for another two or three hours yet, thinking we would still be taking inventory like other nights. So I didn't phone ahead I was coming.

Sherrill, who had the necktie counter across the aisle, tried to wangle me into a glass of suds. If I'd given in, it would have used up my hour's leeway. I would have got home at my regular time—and it also would have been my last glass of suds on this earth. I didn't know that; the reason I refused was I decided to spend my change instead on a box of candy for her. Sweets to the sweet!

Our bungalow was the last one out on Copeland Drive. The asphalt stopped a block below. The woods began on the other side of us, just young trees like toothpicks. I had to get off at the drug store two blocks down anyway, because the buses turned around and started back there. So I

bought a pound of caramels tied with a blue ribbon, and I headed up to the house.

I quit whistling when I turned up the walk, so she wouldn't know I was back yet and I could sneak up behind her maybe and put my hands over her eyes. I was just full of sunshine, I was! Then when I already had my key out, I changed my mind and tiptoed around the house to the back. She'd probably be in the kitchen anyway at this hour, so I'd walk in there and surprise her.

She was. I heard her talking in a low voice as I pulled the screen door noiselessly back. The wooden door behind that was open, and there was a passageway with the kitchen opening off to one side of it.

I heard a man's voice answer hers as I eased the screen closed behind me without letting it bang. That disappointed me for a minute because I knew she must have some deliveryman or collector in there with her, and I wasn't going to put my hands over her eyes in front of some grocery clerk or gas inspector and make a sap out of myself.

But I hated to give the harmless little plan up, so I decided to wait out there for a minute until he left, and motion him on his way out not to give me away. Then go ahead in and surprise her. A case of arrested development, I was!

She was saying, but very quietly, "No, I'm not going to give you the whole thing now. You've got seventy-five, you get the rest afterwards—"

I whistled silently and got worried. "Whew! She must have let our grocery bills ride for over a year, to amount to that much!" Then I decided she must be talking in cents, not dollars.

"If I give you the whole two hundred fifty before time, how do I know you won't haul your freight out of town—and not do it? What comeback would I have? We're not using I.O.U.'s in this, buddy, don't forget!"

She sounded a lot tougher than I'd ever heard her before, although she'd never exactly been a shrinking violet. But it was his next remark that nearly dropped me where I was. "All right, have it your way. Splash me out another cuppa java—" And a chair hitched forward. Why, that was no delivery-man; he was sitting down in there and she was feeding him!

"Better inhale it fast," she said crisply, "he'll be showing up in another half-hour."

My first thought, of course, was what anyone else's would have been—that it was a two-time act. But when I craned my neck cautiously around the door just far enough to get the back of his head in line with my eyes, I saw that was out, too. Whatever he was and whatever he was doing there in my house, he was no back-door John!

He had a three days' growth of beard on his jawline and his hair ended in little feathers all over his neck, and if you'd have whistled at his clothes they'd have probably walked off him of their own accord and headed your way.

He looked like a stumblebum or derelict she'd hauled in out of the woods.

The next words out of her mouth, lightning fizzled around me and seemed to split my brain three ways. "Better do it right here in the house. I can't get him to go out there in the woods—he's scared of his own shadow, and you might miss him in the dark. Keep your eye on this kitchen-shade from outside. It'll be up until eight thirty.

"When you see it go down to the bottom, that means I'm leaving the house for the movies. I'll fix this back door so you can get in when I leave, too. Now, I've shown you where the phone is—right through that long hall out there. Wait'll you hear it ring before you do anything; that'll be me phoning him from the picture-house, pretending I've forgotten something, and that'll place him for you. You'll know just where to find him, won't run into him unexpectedly on your way in.

“His back’ll be toward you and I’ll be distracting his attention over the wire. Make sure he’s not still ticking when you light out, so don’t spare the trigger; no one’ll hear it way out here at that hour!

“I’ll hear the shot over the wire and I’ll hang up, but I’m sitting the rest of the show out. I wanna lose a handkerchief or something at the end and turn the theater inside out, to place myself. That gives you two hours to fade too, so I don’t start the screaming act till I get back at eleven and find him —”

He said, “Where does the other hundred-seventy-five come in? Y’ don’t expect me to show up here afterwards and colleck, do ya?”

I heard her laugh, kind of. “It’s gonna be in the one place where you can’t get at it without doing what you’re supposed to! That way I’m going to be sure you don’t welsh on me! It’s going to be right in his own inside coat-pocket, without his knowing it! I’m going to slip it in when I kiss him good-bye, and I know him, he’ll never find it. Just reach in when you’re finished with him, and you’ll find it there waiting for you!”

“Lady,” he whispered. “I gotta hand it to you!”

“Get going,” she commanded.

I think it was that last part of it that made me see red and go off my nut, that business about slipping the blood-money right into my own pocket while I was still alive, for him to collect after I was dead. Because what I did right then certainly wasn’t in character. Ben Cook, the Ben Cook of up until that minute, would have turned and sneaked out of that house unless his knees had given way first and run for his life and never showed up near there again. But I wasn’t Ben Cook any more—something seemed to blow up inside me. I heard the package of candy hit the floor next to me with a smack, and then I was lurching in on them, bellowing like a goaded bull. Just rumbling sounds, more than words. “You murderess! Your—own—husband!” No, it certainly

wasn’t me; it was a man that neither of us had known existed until now. Evil rampant, a kind of living nemesis sprung from their own fetid plotting, like a jack-in-the-box.

There was a red-and-white checked tablecloth on the kitchen table. There was a cup and saucer on it, and a gun. I didn’t see any of those things. The whole room for that matter was red, like an undeveloped photographic print.

The gun came clear, stood out, only after his arm had clamped down on it like an indicator pointing it out. My own did the same thing instinctively, but a second too late; my hand came down on his wrist instead of the gun. The crash of a pair of toppled chairs in the background was inconsequential, as was her belated shriek of baffled fury: “Give it to him now, you! Give it to him quick—or we’re sunk!” Whatever else there was in that hell-howl, there wasn’t fear. Any other woman would have fainted dead away; you don’t know Thelma.

The cry, though, was like cause and effect; he didn’t need to be told. The gun was already being lifted bodily between us, by the two pressures counteracting each other—mine pushing it away from me, his pushing it toward me. Neither of us trying to push it up, but up it went in an arc, first way over our heads, then down again to body-level once more. Outside of our flailing left arms, which had each fastened on the other’s, I don’t recall that our legs or the rest of our bodies moved much at all.

She could have turned the scales by attacking me herself with something, from behind. It was the one thing she didn’t do—why, I don’t know. Subconsciously unwilling to the last, maybe, to raise a hand to me in person.

After about thirty seconds, not more—but it seemed like an age—it finally went off. Just past my own face, over my shoulder, and out somewhere into the passageway behind us. Then it started turning slowly between us, desperately slowly, by quarter-inches, and the second time it went off it had already traveled a quarter of the compass around. It hit

the side-wall, that time, broadside to the two of us. It went on past that point, turning laboriously in its double grip, and the third time it went off right into his mouth.

He took it down with him—it was his hand that had been next to it, not mine—and I just stood there with both arms out—and empty.

I suppose I would have given it to her next if it had stayed in my own hand. She expected me to; she didn't ask for mercy. "All right, I'm next!" she breathed. "Get it over as quick as you can!" And threw up both forearms horizontally in front of her eyes.

I was too tired for a minute to reach down and get it. That was what saved her. I don't remember the next few minutes after that. I was sitting slumped in one of the chairs. I must have uprighted it again, and she was saying: "The ten grand is yours now, Cookie, if you'll use your head."

The way it sounded she must have been talking for several minutes, talking herself out of what was rightfully coming to her. What she'd been saying until then hadn't registered with me, but that did.

"Get out," I said dully. "Don't hang around me. I may change my mind yet." But the time for that was over, and she probably knew it as well as I did. The room had come back to its regular colors by now. Only the tablecloth was red any more; that and a little trickle that had come out of his open mouth onto the linoleum.

She pointed at him. "That's you, down there. Don't you get it? Readymade." She came a little closer, leaning across the table toward me on the heels of her hands. "Why pass a break like this up, Cookie? Made-to-order. Ten grand. Play ball with me, Cookie." Her voice was a purr, honey-low.

"Get ou—" I started to mutter, but my voice was lower now too. She was under my skin and working deeper down every minute. I was wide open to anything anyway, after what had happened.

She held up her hand quickly, tuning out my half-hearted protest. “All right, you caught me red-handed. You don’t hear me denying it, do you? You don’t see me trying to bellyache out of it, do you? It muffed, and the best man won. That’s giving it to you straight from the shoulder. But the policy I slapped on you still holds good, the ten gees is yours for the taking—” She pointed down again. “And there’s your corpse.”

I turned my head and looked at him, kept staring thoughtfully without a word. She kept turning them out fast as her tongue could manage.

“It’s up to you. You can go out to the phone and turn me in, send me up for ten years—and spend the rest of your life straightening the pants on guys at thirty per week. Have it that way if you want to. Or you can come into ten thousand dollars just by being a little smart. The guy is dead anyway, Cookie. You couldn’t bring him back now even if you wanted to. What’s the difference under what name he goes six-feet-under? He even gets a better break, at that; gets a buggy-ride and a lot of flowers instead of taking a dive head-first into Potter’s Field!”

I hadn’t taken my eyes off him, but I already wanted to hear more. “It’s wacky; you’re talking through your lid,” I said hopefully. “How you gonna get away with it? What about all the people in this town that know me? What about the guy that sold me the insurance? What about the bench down at the store where I work? I no more look like him than—”

“If it’s his face got you stopped, we can take care of that easy. And outside of a phiz, what’s so different between one guy and the next? Stretch out a minute, lie down next to him—I wanna see something.”

I wasn’t hypocritical enough to hesitate any more. She already knew I was with her anyway—she could tell. I got down flat on the floor alongside him, shoulder to shoulder. He wasn’t laid out straight by any means, but she attended

to that with a few deft hitches. She stood back and measured us with her eyes. “You’re about an inch taller, but the hell with that.” I got up again.

She went over and pulled down the shade to the bottom, came back with cigarette-smoke boiling out of her nose. “It’s a suicide, of course, otherwise the police’ll stick their noses into it too heavy. A farewell note from you to me ought to hold them. Run up and bring down one of your other suits, and a complete set of everything—down to shorts and socks.”

“But what’re we going to do about his map?”

“A bucketful of boiling lye will take care of that. We got some down the basement, haven’t we? Come on, help me get him down there.”

“Where does it figure, though? You want ’em to believe he had guts enough to stick his face in that?”

“You went down there and bumped yourself through the front teeth with the gun, see? You keeled over backwards and dumped this bucket on top of your face in falling. A couple of hours under that and he’ll be down to rock bottom above the shoulders; they won’t have much to go by. His hair’s pretty much the color of yours, and you haven’t been to a dentist in years, so they can’t check you in that way.”

“It’s still full of holes,” I said.

“Sure it is,” Thelma agreed, “but what reason’ll they have to go looking for ’em, with me there screaming the eardums off ’em that you were my husband? And waving your good-bye note in their faces! There won’t be anyone missing from this town. He was a vagrant on his way through. This was the first house he hit for a hand-out when he came out of the woods. He told me so himself, and he never got past here. The police’ll be the least of our worries, when it comes to it, and as for the insurance investigator, once I get past the first hurdle I know just what to do so there’s no chance for it to backfire: send him to the crematorium in a couple of days instead of planting him in the cemetery. Fat

lot of good an order for an exhumation'll do them after that!"

I said about the same thing he'd said, this dead guy, only a little while ago. "You're good—damn your soul! I think we can pull it at that!"

"Think? I know we can!" She snapped her cigarette butt at the side of his face—and hit it! "Always remember—if you can get away with anything, it's worth doing. Now let's go—we haven't got much time."

I picked him up by the shoulders and she took him by the feet, and we carried him out of the kitchen and down the cellar stairs and laid him down temporarily on the floor there, any old way. The gun had gone right with him the whole way, at the end of his dangling arm.

The laundry was down there, and the oil-burner, and lines for hanging up clothes, and so on. There was a gas-heater for boiling up wash. She lit that, then she filled a pail half-full of water and put it on to heat. Then she dumped lye into it for all she was worth until there wasn't any more left around. "As long as it takes the skin off his face," she remarked. "Go up and get the clothes now, like I told you, and doctor up a suicide-note. Better take something and get those slugs out of the kitchen-wall; it went off twice, didn't it, before it rang the bell? Rub ashes in the nicks, so they won't look new. Let me know when you're ready."

But I wasn't Ben Cook the slough any more. "And leave you alone down here with that gun? It's still got three in it. You're so full of bright ideas, how do I know you won't go back to your original parlay after all?"

She threw up her hands impatiently. "Forget it, will you! It's got to stay in his mitt like it is; you can't take it up with you. We're both in this together, aren't we? We either trust each other the whole way, or we may as well call it quits right now!"

She was blazing with an unholy sort of enthusiasm. I could tell by looking at her I had nothing to worry about as

far as she was concerned any more. It was contagious, too; that was the worst part of it—greenback-fever. I turned around and beat it upstairs to the top floor. There were spots in front of my eyes, ten-spots.

I got him out a complete set of everything. For an artistic finishing-touch I even threw in a spare truss like I wore. That had figured in my examination for the insurance. I took a razor with me and a pair of clippers that I'd been in the habit of using to save myself the price of a haircut. I chased down to the desk in the living-room, got out paper, and wrote:

Thelma my darling:

I've thought it over and I guess you're right. I'll never amount to anything. I haven't had the courage to tell you yet, but Grierson turned me down last month when I asked him for a raise. I'm just a millstone around your neck, just deadweight; you'll be better off without me. When you come home tonight and read this and go looking for me, you'll know what I'm driving at. Don't go near the basement, honey; that's where I'll be.

Goodby and God bless you.

Ben

Which I thought was pretty good. She did too, when I went down and showed it to her. She flashed me a look. "I think I've been underestimating you all these years."

Clouds of steam were coming from the pail of lye. "Beat it up and attend to the bullet-holes, and the blood on the kitchen-floor," I said, "while I go to work on him—"

I could hear her footsteps pattering busily back and forth over my head while I was busy down there.

I gave him a quick once-over with the razor and a cake of yellow laundry soap, clipped his neck a little, so we wouldn't have to count too much on the lye.

I piled his own worm-eaten duds into a bundle and tied it up, then outfitted him from head to foot.

It took plenty of maneuvering to slip his arm through the sleeves of the shirt and jacket without dislodging the gun from his hand.

I tied his tie and shoelaces for him as if I were his valet, and filled his pockets with all the junk I had in my own, down to the crumpled pack of butts I was toting. I strapped my wristwatch on him, and then I straightened up and gave him the once-over. He looked a lot more like me now than he had before I'd begun.

She came trooping down again, with her hat on for the movies. "Slick," she breathed. "Everything's all set upstairs. Here's the two wild bullets. What're you doing with his stuff, putting it in the furnace?"

"Nothing doing." I said. "That's muffed too often. All they need's a button or a strand of hair left over in there and we go boom! I'm taking it with me when I go and I am getting rid of it someplace else."

"That's the ticket!" she agreed. She handed me a pair of smoked glasses and an old golf cap. "Here, I dug these up for you, for when you light out. Anyone that knows you will know you anyway—but in case anyone passes you while you're on the lam, they'll do.

"Steer clear of downtown whatever you do. Better powder about ten minutes after I do; take the back door, cut through the woods; stay away from the highway until you get over to Ferndale—somebody might spot you from a passing car. You can hop a bus there at midnight—to wherever you decide to hole in, and better make it the other side of the State-line. Now we gotta finish up fast. I phoned the drug store to send over some aspirin, told 'em you felt kinda low—"

"What's the idea?"

"Don't you get it? I'm leavin' just as the errand-boy gets here; he even sees you kiss me good-bye at the front door. Hold him up a minute hunting for change, so that he has me walking in front of him down the street toward the show. I don't want to get the chair for something I didn't do, Cookie! Now, what name are you going to use and where'll I reach you when the pay-off comes through?"

I laughed harshly. “You’re pretty anxious to see that I get my cut.”

“I’m glad you used that word,” she said drily. “It’s my favorite little word. Nuts! You can’t come back here; you know that! I’ve gotta get it to you. What’re you worrying about? We’ve got each other stopped, haven’t we? If I try to hog the dough, all you do is show up, it goes back where it came from, and we both land in clink. On the other hand, you can’t get it without little Thelma—”

“We split it seventy-five, twenty-five, and little Thelma’s on the short end for being such a smart girl,” I growled.

Something gave one corner of her mouth a little hike up. “Done,” she said. “Now hurry up, give him his facial. Measure the distance off.”

We stood him upright on his feet, then let him down backwards in a straight line toward the heater on which the pail of lye was sizzling. The back of his head cleared it by two, three inches.

“Move him in a little closer.” she said. “His conk’s supposed to tip it over as he goes down.”

“All right, stand back,” I said, “and watch your feet.”

I took it off the stove, turned it upside down, and doused it on him, arched as far away from the splash as I could get. It dropped down on his head like a mold; only a little spattered on his body below the shoulders. Just as the pail dropped over his head like a visor, the front doorbell rang.

The last thing she said as she went hustling up was, “Watch out where you step—don’t leave any tracks!”

I caught up with her halfway down the front hall. “Whoa! Pass over that hundred-seventy-five you were going to stuff into my pocket. I can’t live on air the next few weeks!”

She took it grudgingly out of her handbag. “It comes off your share, don’t forget,” she let me know.

“All right, and here’s one for your memory-book,” I whispered. “I’m Ned Baker at the Marquette Hotel over in

Middleburg. Don’t put it on paper, but see that you hang onto it. It’s easy enough—Cook, Baker, see?”

The bell rang a second time.

“About three weeks, the minute I put the check through,” she promised. “All set? Here goes! Loosen your tie—you’re staying in and you’re in a hari-kari mood. Play up!”

I stayed where I was. She went to the door squalling, “G’by, hon! Sure you won’t change your mind and come with me?” She opened the door and an eighteen-year-old kid named Larry whom we both knew by sight said, “Package from the drug store, Mrs. Cook. Thirty-five cents.”

Again she shook the house to the rafters. “Here’s your aspirin, dear!”

I shuffled up acting like a sick calf. I separated one of the tens she’d just given me from the rest and offered it to him. He said he didn’t have that much change. “Wait a minute, I think I’ve got it inside,” I said. Meanwhile, she was sticking her snoot up at me. “G’by, dear. You won’t be lonely now, will you?”

He was facing my way, so I tried to look tragic. “Enjoy your show,” I murmured bravely, pecking at her with my mouth. I walked down the steps with her and part of the way toward the sidewalk, with my arm around her waist. She turned back to wave a couple times, and I waved back at her. The kid was taking it all in from the doorway.

“They got a revival of Garbo tonight,” he remarked when I came back. “Don’t you like Garbo, Mr. Cook?”

I sighed. “I got too much on my mind tonight, Larry,” I told him. I let her get to the first crossing, then I brought out the thirty-five cents and gave him a dime for himself. He thanked me and started off after her.

I locked the door (she had her own key) and then I bolted back to the cellar-stairs and took a last look down from the head of them. Threads of steam were still coming out from under the rim of the lye-pail, upturned there over his face.

I picked up his bundle of clothes, which I'd left at the top of the stairs, and wrapped them in good strong brown paper. The two bullets were in there with them, and the scrapings from his jaw and neck on scraps of paper. The brownish rag, too, with which she'd scoured the little blood off the linoleum.

The latter didn't have a mark left on it to the naked eye—and there was no reason for them to give it a benzidine test. The bullet-holes were okay too; she'd spread them to look like knotholes in the wood and dirtied them with ashes. She'd even washed and put away the used coffee-cup, and the note was in place on the desk.

I left my own hat up on the rack, and put on the cap, pulled it well down over my eyes.

I left the lights just the way they were in all the rooms, then I went up to the rear room on the second floor, which was dark, and stood watching for a long time. There weren't any houses in back of us, just a big open field with the woods off to the right.

In the daytime, crossing the field to get to them, I might have been spotted from one of the houses farther down, but not at this hour. It was a clear night, but there wasn't any moon.

I went downstairs, opened the screen-door, pulled the wooden one closed behind me, let the screen one flap back in place, and jumped away in a hurry from the square of light that still came through the oblong pane in the wooden one. We would have locked that on the inside if we had both left the house together, but staying home alone the way I was supposed to tonight, it could very well stay unlocked without arousing suspicion.

I cut diagonally away from the house, to get out of sight of the roadway that fronted it and bisected the woods all the way to Ferndale. It took a turn, however, halfway between the two points, so going through the woods was really a short-cut.

Within five minutes after I had left the kitchen-door, and less than a quarter of an hour since Thelma had left the house all told, the first skinny saplings closed around me and hid me from sight.

By a quarter to twelve the trees were starting to thin out again, this time in front of me, and the lights of Ferndale were glimmering through them. I was half-shot and my feet were burning, but it was worth it; I hadn't seen a living soul—and what was more important, not a living soul had seen me. I'd kept from getting lost and going around in a circle, which could have happened to me quite easily in those woods, by always managing to keep the highway to Ferndale parallel with me on my right. Even when I was out of sight of it, an occasional car whizzing by gave it away to me. Otherwise, I might very well have done a Babe-in-the-Woods act and come out again where I started from. I'd opened the parcel and retied it again on my way. Took out the two slugs and the bloody rag and buried them in three separate places.

The clothes themselves were too bulky to bury with my bare fingernails, and I wasn't just going to leave them under a stone or anything. Nor could I risk putting a match to them and burning them—the light might have given me away to someone. The safest thing was to keep them with me and get rid of them long afterwards at my leisure.

Ferndale wasn't much more than a crossroads, but the interstate buses stopped there. I stopped for a minute and brushed myself off as well as I could before I showed out in the open. I looked respectable enough, but that was almost a drawback in itself.

A well-dressed guy dropping down out of nowhere at midnight to board a bus, without a through ticket, wasn't really the most unnoticeable thing in the world. But I had no choice in the matter. Nor very much time to make up my mind. The last one through was sometime between twelve and one. I decided, however, not to buy a Middleburg ticket

from here but ride right through past it to the end of the line, and then double back to Middleburg from that end in a couple of days. That would make the trail a little harder to pick up—just in case.

As for the sun-glasses, which I'd been carrying in my pocket, I decided against them altogether. That was the one detail, it seemed to me, about which Thelma hadn't shown very good judgment. No one in Ferndale knew me in the first place, and they'd only attract attention instead of lessening it. People don't wear those things in the middle of the night, no matter how weak their eyes are supposed to be.

I straightened my shoulders and strolled casually out of the trees into the open, past an outlying cottage or two, dead to the world at this hour, and onto the single stretch of paved sidewalk that Ferndale boasted. A quick-lunch place was open and blazing with light, and the bus depot was down at the far end. There was a small but up-to-date little waiting-room there, washrooms, a magazine-stand, etc. No one around but the colored porter and an elderly man who looked like he was waiting to meet somebody getting off the incoming bus.

I went up to the ticket-window as casually as I could and rapped on the counter a couple of times. Finally the porter called out, "Johnson! Somebody at the wicket!" and the ticket-seller came out of the back someplace.

I said, "Gimme a through ticket to Jefferson." That was the neighboring state capital, terminus of this line.

He said, "I don't know if I can get you a seat at this hour; usually pretty full up. You shoulda put in a reservation a-head—There's a six-o'clock bus, though."

"Lissen," I said, looking him in the eye, "I gotta get home. Whaddya think I'm going to do, sit around here all night waiting for the morning bus?"

He called over my shoulder to the elderly gent, who was reading a paper, "You meeting somebody on the next bus,

mister?”

The old fellow said, “Yep, my nevvew’s coming down on it —”

“That’s that, then,” he said to me indifferently. “’Leven eighty.”

“When’s it get in?” I asked, pocketing my change.

“Ten minutes,” he said, and went back inside again.

I was down at the quick-lunch filling up on hot dogs when the bus slithered in. I picked up my package and went up toward it. A young fellow of high-school age was getting off and being greeted by the elderly gent. I showed my ticket and got on.

Its lights were off and most of the passengers were sprawled out asleep. The ticket-seller had been right: there was only a single vacant seat in the whole conveyance, the one that the kid had just got out of! It was a bum one on the aisle, too.

My seat-mate, by the window, had his hat down over his nose and was breathing through his mouth. I didn’t pay any attention to him, reached up and shoved my bundle onto the rack overhead, sat back and relaxed. The driver got on again, the door closed, and we started off with a lurch.

My lightweight bundle hadn’t been shoved in far enough in the dark: the motion of the bus promptly dislodged it and it toppled down across the thighs of the man next to me. He came to with a nervous start and grunted from under his hat-brim.

“Excuse me,” I said, “didn’t mean to wake you—”

He shoved his hat back and looked at me. “Why, hullo, Cook!” he said. “Where you going at this hour of the night?” And held his hand spaded at me.

A couple of years went by, with my face pointed straight ahead and ice-water circulating in my veins. There wasn’t

very much choice of what to do about it. Even if the bus had still been standing still with its door open, which it wasn't any more, it wouldn't have done any good to jump off it. He'd already seen me.

And to try to pass the buck and tell him to his face he had the wrong party, well what chance had I of getting away with that, with our shoulders touching, even though it was dark inside the bus? I couldn't stop it from getting light in a few hours, and there wasn't any other seat on the bus. All I'd succeed in doing would be snubbing him, offending him, and making him start thinking there must be something phony afoot; in other words, indelibly impressing the incident upon his memory.

Whereas if I took it in my stride, lightly, maybe I could keep it from sinking in too deeply; maybe I could do something about the timing to blur it a little, make him think later on that it was the night before and not tonight that he'd ridden with me on a bus. It had to be the night before; it couldn't be the same night that I was supposed to be bumping myself off down in the cellar back at Copeland Drive!

"Well, for the luvva Pete, Sherrill!" I said with shaky cordiality. "Where you going yourself at this hour of the night?" I shook his mitt, but there was less pressure now on his side than mine.

"Y'acted like y'didn't know me for a minute," he complained, but rapidly thawed out again. "What'd you get on way the hell out at Ferndale for?" he said.

But that one had to be squelched at all costs, no matter how unconvincing it sounded. After all, he'd definitely been asleep when they pulled into Ferndale, he couldn't have seen who got on there.

"I didn't. What's the matter with *you*?" I said in surprise. "I changed seats, come back here from up front, that's all." There was a little girl holding one of the front seats in her own right, but she was asleep with her head on her

mother’s lap; it looked like the seat was vacant from where we were. “He’ll forget about it by the time she straightens up in the morning—let’s hope,” I thought.

He seemed to forget it then and there. “Funny I missed seeing you when I got on,” was all he said. “I was the last one in; they even held it for me a minute—” He offered me a cigarette, took one himself, seemed to have no more use for sleep. “Where you heading for, anyway?” he asked.

“Jefferson, I said.”

“That’s funny,” he said, “I am too!”

If he could have heard the things I was saying inside myself about him at the moment, he would have let out a yell and probably dived through the window, glass and all. “How come?” I said, between unheard swear-words.

I knew it would be my turn right after his, and I was so busy shaping up my own explanation, I only half-heard his. Something about the manager phoning him at the last minute after he’d already gone home that afternoon, to pinch-hit for our store’s buyer, who’d been laid up with the flu, and look after some consignments of neckties that were waiting down there and badly needed in stock. “What’s taking you down there?” he asked, as I knew he would.

I told him I had to see a specialist, that I’d been below par for some time and none of the docs back home had seemed able to do a thing for me.

“When you going back?” he wanted to know.

“’Morrow afternoon,” I said. “Be home in time for supper —” I had to be “back” by then; I couldn’t hope to fog him on the time element by more than twenty-four hours. That I’d even be able to do that much was highly doubtful, but I might just get away with it.

“That’s just about when I’ll be going back, too,” he said chummily. “Be back at work Friday morning.”

I answered with careful emphasis: “Whaddya mean, Friday? The day after tomorrow’ll be Thursday. Tonight’s Tuesday.”

“No,” he said innocently, “you’ve got your dates mixed. Tonight’s Wednesday.”

This went on for about five minutes between us, without heat of course. I finally pulled my horns in when he offered: “Wait, I’ll ask the driver, he ought to be able to straighten us out—”

“Never mind, guess you’re right,” I capitulated. I wasn’t keen on attracting the driver’s attention to myself in any shape, form, or manner. But I’d done what I wanted to: I’d succeeded in conditioning Sherill’s mind. Later he wouldn’t be sure whether it *was* Wednesday or not, when he thought back to tonight.

Right on top of that came a honey. “Whaddya say we split expenses while we’re there?” he offered. “Share the same hotel room.”

“What do I need a hotel room for?” I said shortly. “I told you I’m going back on the afternoon bus!”

“Hell,” he said, “if you’re as rundown as you say you are, funny you should be willing to go without sleep a whole night! We don’t get into Jefferson till seven. You got a before-breakfast appointment with your doctor?”

The skepticism in his voice had to be nipped before it got steam up, I could see; the only way seemed to be by falling in with his suggestion. I could let him start back alone, pretend my appointment had been postponed until afternoon and I had to take a later bus. Technically, even one of those could get me home in time for my own suicide.

We had our breakfasts together at the bus depot and then we checked in at a hotel down the street called the Jefferson. I let him sign first, and stalled shaking a clot out of the pen until he’d already started toward the elevator. Then I wrote “Ned Baker” under his name, “Frisco.” That was far enough away—a big enough place to assure anonymity. I’d met him en route; that was all. I wasn’t going to do it to him right here in this hotel, anyway, and there was no earthly reason for him to take another look at that

register in checking out, nor for the clerk to mention me by name in his presence; we'd paid in advance on account of our scarcity of baggage.

He asked for a ten-thirty call and hung a "Do not disturb" on the door when we got up to the room. Then we turned in, one to a bed. "I'm dead," was the last thing he yawned.

"You betcha sweet life you are, brother!" I thought grimly. He dropped off into a deep, dreamless sleep—his last one. I knew I was safe enough while I had him right with me, and until he got ready to start back; I wasn't going to do it in this hotel room anyway. So I just lay there on my back staring up at the ceiling, waiting, waiting. The wings of the death-angel were spread over us in that room; there was the silence of the grave.

The phone-peal, when it came, shattered it like a bomb. I felt good, because the time was drawing shorter now. This new self of mine seemed to be agreeing with me. "Toss you for the shower," I offered.

"Go ahead," he stretched, "I like to take my time."

It was a little thing like that changed my plans, brought it on him even quicker. Just before I turned on the water I heard him open and close the door. He called in, "Gee, pretty liberal! They hand you a morning paper compliments of the management in this place!"

When I came out he was sitting there on the bed with it spread out alongside him. He wasn't looking at it, he was looking at me; he was holding his head as though he'd been waiting for me to show up in the bathroom doorway. There were three white things there on that bed, but it was his face that was whiter even than the pillows or the paper.

"What're you looking at me like that for?" I said gruffly, and then my own got white too.

He began shrinking away from me along the edge of the bed. He said: "They found your body in the cellar of your house—last night at eleven—you committed suicide. It's here, on the first page of this Jefferson paper—"

I dropped the towel and picked the paper up, but I didn't look at it; I was watching him over the top of it. He was shaking all over. He said, "Who—was that? Who'd you do it to?"

"This is a mistake," I said furrily. "They've got me mixed up with somebody else. Somebody by the same name, maybe—"

His back was arched against the headboard of the bed by now, as if he couldn't get far enough away from me. He said, "But that's your address there—25 Copeland Drive—I know your address! It even tells about your working for the store—it gives your wife's name, Thelma—it tells how she found your body, with your face all eaten away with lye—" I could see beads of sweat standing out in a straight line across his forehead. "Who was that, Cook? It must have been—somebody! My God, did *you*—?"

I said, "Well, look at me! You see me here with you, dontcha? You can see it's not me, cantcha?" But that wasn't what he was driving at, and I knew it as well as he did. He knew I was alive, all right; what he wanted to know was who was dead.

I don't know what the outcome would have been, if he hadn't given himself away by starting to dress in that frightened, jerky way—snatching at his clothes as if he was afraid of me, trying to stay as far out of my way as he could while he struggled getting his things on. I suppose it would have happened anyway, before I would have let him go back to our own town, knowing what he now did. But not right then, not right there.

I told myself, coldly, as I watched him fumbling, panting, sweating to get into his things in the least possible time, "He's going straight out of here and give me away! It's written all over him. He won't even wait till he gets back tonight—phone them long distance right from here, or else tip the cops off right here in Jefferson. Well—he's not going to get out that door!"

The phone was between the two beds. He was bent over on the outside of his, which was nearer the door, struggling with his laces. What was holding him up was that in his frenzied haste he'd snarled them up into a knot. The door didn't worry me as much as the phone. I moved around, naked, into the aisle between the two beds, cutting him off from it.

"Why all the rush?" I asked.

"I gotta hustle and get after those ties," he said in a muffled voice. He couldn't bring himself to look around at me, rigidly kept his head turned the other way.

I moved up closer behind him. My shadow sort of fell across him, cutting off the light from the window. "And what're you going to do about what you just read in the paper?"

"Why, nothing," he faltered. "I—I guess like you said, it's just some kind of mistake—" His voice cracked into a placating little laugh; you wouldn't have known what it was by the sound of it, though. And the last thing he ever said was to repeat, "Nothing—nothing at all, really."

"You're blamed tooting you're not," I rasped. I don't know if he even heard me. I suddenly pulled him down flat on his back, by the shoulders, from behind. I had a last flash of his face, appalled, eyes rolling, staring up at mine. Then the two pillows were over it, soft, yielding, and I was pressing them down with my whole weight.

Most of the struggle, of course, was in his legs, which had been hanging down free over the side of the bed. They jolted upward to an incredible height at first, far higher than his head, then sank all the way back to the floor again, and after that kept teetering upward and downward like a seesaw between bed-level and the floor.

It was the very fact that they were loose like that that prevented his throwing me off him. He was off-balance, the bed ended just under his hips, and he couldn't get a grip on the floor with his heels. As for his arms, they were

foreshortened by the pressure of the big pillows like a bandage. He only had the use of them below the elbows, couldn't double them back on themselves far enough to get at my face, claw as he might. I kept my face and neck arched back just beyond their reach, holding the pillows down by my abdomen in the center and by the pressure of my shoulders and splayed arms on each end.

The bedsprings groaned warningly once or twice of approaching doom. Outside of that there wasn't a sound in the room but my own breathing.

The leg-motion was the best possible barometer. It quickened to an almost frenzied lashing as suffocation set in, then slowed to a series of spasmodic jerks that would slacken inevitably to a point of complete motionlessness. Just before it had been reached, I suddenly reared back and flung the pillows off, one each way. His face was contorted to the bursting-point, his eyes glazed and sightless, but the fingers of his upturned hands were still opening and closing convulsively, grabbing at nothing; he was unmistakably still alive, but whether he could come back again or would succumb anyway in a minute or two more was the question. It was important to me to beat his heart to the final count.

I dragged him off the bed, around the second bed, and got him over to the window. I hoisted him up, turned him toward it, and balanced him lightly with one arm against my side, as if I was trying to revive him. I looked, and I looked good. The room was on the fourteenth floor, and we'd taken one of the cheaper ones; it gave onto an air-shaft, not the street. There were, probably, windows all the way down, under this one—but the point was, there weren't any *opposite;* that side was blank. No one could look in here.

I think he would have pulled through; he was beginning to revive as air got into his lungs. The congested blood started leaving his face little by little, his eyes closed instead of staying wide open, but you could hear him breathing again, hoarsely. So I edged him a little closer,

threw up the lower sash all the way to the top—and just stepped back from him. I didn't touch him, just took my support away, retreated farther into the room. He wavered there, upright by the open window. Vertigo had evidently set in as his lungs began to function and his heartbeat came back to normal. It was a toss-up whether he'd go back, forward, or sideways; the only sure thing was he wasn't staying on his own feet just then, and was going into a faint.

Maybe there was some kind of a draught pulling at him from the long, deep shaft out there; I don't know. He went forward—as though a current of air were sucking him through the window. It was a good high window. His head just missed the sash bisecting it. He folded up at the waist across the ledge, half in, half out, like a lazy guy leaning too far out in slow motion—and gravity did the rest. Death beat his glimmering faculties to the punch—he was gone before he could fling up his arms, grab at anything. His legs whipped after him like the tail of a kite—and the window-square was empty.

The impact seemed to come up long afterwards, from far away, muffled, distant, and even the new me didn't like the sound of it very well. I didn't make the mistake of going closer and looking down after him. Almost immediately there was the sound of another window being thrown up somewhere down the line, a pause, and then a woman's screech came tearing up the shaft.

I saw that one of his unlaced shoes had come off while I was hauling him across the room. I edged it back under his own bed, smoothed that from a condition of having been struggled upon back to a condition of just having been slept in, particularly the pillows. I erased a blurred line across the carpet-nap that his one dragging shoe had made, with the flat of my own shoe.

Then I picked up the towel I'd already wet once, went back into the bathroom, turned on the shower full-blast, and got back under it again. Its roar deadened everything,

but a sudden draft on my wet shoulder tipped me off when they'd used the passkey on the room-door. "Hey, Sherrill!" I boomed out just as they came in, "can I borrow some of your shaving-cream?" I stuck my head farther out and hollered, "What's the matter with ya, didya go back to sleep in there? That's the third time I've asked ya the same question—"

Then I saw them all standing looking in at me. "What's up?" I yelled, and reached out and shut off the water.

The sudden silence was stunning.

The hotel detective said, "Your roommate just fell out of the window in there."

"Oh, my God!" I gasped, and had to hang onto the rubber curtain to keep from tipping over, myself, for a minute. Some soap got in my eyes and made them fill with water. Through it I could see them all looking at me, from the bellhop up, as though they knew how bad I felt, and felt sorry for me.

Three weeks to the day, after that morning in the hotel at Jefferson, Thelma's message was waiting for me in my mailbox at the Marquette in Middleburg. I had been holed-up there for two weeks past, from the moment I'd felt it prudent to leave Jefferson. Not that I'd been under arrest or even suspicion at any time, but the detectives there had, naturally, questioned me about how well I'd known Sherrill, whether he'd said anything to indicate he intended suicide. I seemed to satisfy them on all points.

They kept me waiting another twenty-four hours—and on pins and needles. Then they sent word that I was free to leave whenever I wanted to. I didn't waste time hanging around once I heard that! It struck me that I hadn't been called on to make a deposition at any coroner's inquest, but I wasn't inclined to argue with them on that point. Nor did I

bother trying to find out what disposition had been made of Sherrill's remains. I simply left—while the leaving was good!

Beautifully as I'd got away with that, though, I had plenty of other things to get jittery about while I was waiting to hear from her the next couple weeks in Middleburg. I kept wondering whether she was going to double-cross me or not, and the suspense got worse day by day and hour by hour. If she did, I had no come-back.

She'd soaped me up by saying all I had to do if she tried to hold out was show up home and give her away. True enough as far as it went, but there was one thing I'd overlooked at the time: what was to keep her there on tap once she got her paws on the insurance check? All she had to do was blow out in some other direction and—good-bye ten grand!

That was what really had me down, the knowledge that she had been holding a trump-hand all through this little game of ours—with me trying to bluff her. And from what I knew of her, she didn't bluff easy. I'd even set a deadline in my own mind: forty-eight hours more, and if I didn't hear from her, I'd head back home myself, no matter what the risk, and land on her with both feet before she took a powder out on me.

Nothing had muffed at her end—I knew that for a fact; so she couldn't alibi that she wasn't in line for the money. I'd been buying our hometown papers daily ever since I'd been in Middleburg, watching to see if the thing would curdle or start to smell bad, and it hadn't.

It would have been in headlines in a minute if it had, but all I had were the few consecutive items bearing on it that I'd clipped out and stuck away in my wallet. I'd been taking them out nightly and going over them, to reassure myself, and it was as good as television. First, the news announcement that had sent Sherrill to his death (although he'd seen it in a Jefferson, not a hometown paper).

Then an inconspicuous obituary the next day, mentioning a date for the cremation. Then a twenty-four-hour postponement of the cremation, with no reason given (this had given me a bad night, all right!). Then finally, two days later, the bare announcement that the cremation had taken place the day before. That was all, but that was plenty. The thing was signed, sealed, and delivered—we'd got away with it!

Even outside of all that, anyone in my position, naturally, would have been jittery. Just having to sit tight day by day waiting for the pay-off was reason enough. The one hundred and seventy-five dollars I'd chiseled out of her was starting to run down; I wanted to get my hands on the real dough and get out of this part of the country altogether. Middleburg, after all, wasn't so very far away from the hometown. Somebody who has known me might drop over from there and spot me when I least expected it; the young mustache I was nursing along was no guarantee at all against recognition.

I stayed in my room most of the time, let them think what I'd told Sherrill, that I was in precarious health. I began to look the part, too, so it wasn't hard to sell the idea. I haunted my letter-box downstairs, and just went as far as the corner-stand once a day, to get the hometown paper, the Kay City *Star*. I always soft-pedaled it by buying a Jefferson one and a Middleburg one along with it, and then discarding them in the nearest trash-can.

And up in my room I always tore the name and place of publication off the tops of every page of each copy, carefully burning the strips in an ashtray, so the chambermaid or anyone else finding it wouldn't know just where it was published.

I had a bad minute or two one evening when the news vendor couldn't find me a copy of the hometown rag. "They usually send me two," he apologized, "but they were one short today, and there's another gent been buying 'em right

along, like you do yourself, and he musta got here ahead of you, I guess, and took the only one I had—”

I got very quiet, then finally I said off-handedly, “He a regular customer of yours? How long’s he been doing that?”

“Oh, two, three weeks now—’bout as long as you have. He lives right in the same hotel you do, I think; I see him come in and go out of there a lot. Nice guy, minds his own business—”

I said, even more off-handedly than before, “D’je happen to mention to him that I been taking the Kay City *Star* from you too?”

“Nah!” he said emphatically, “I never said ‘Boo’ to him.”

I had to be satisfied with that, and in a day or two my apprehension had dulled again, not having anything further to feed on. The Marquette was no skyscraper honeycomb; I’d seen all the faces in it by this time, and there was definitely no one there that knew me or that I knew, or that I’d ever seen before. Nor did the register, when I went over it without much trouble, show any Kay City entries.

The whole thing was just a harmless coincidence, that was all; probably the guy took the *Star* purely for business reasons. There was a pudgy realtor who had the room across the hall from mine; I’d met him once or twice on the elevator, and it was probably he, keeping tab on real estate opportunities in various townships. That reassured me completely; he fitted the newsman’s description exactly, and never even so much as looked at me the few times we happened on each other.

One night I eavesdropped while I was unlocking my own door and overheard him having a long argument with somebody over the phone. “That’s an ideal site,” he was saying. “Tell ’em they can’t have it at that price. Why, it would be a gold-mine if we leased it for a filling-station—”

On the twenty-first morning after Sherrill’s death, I stepped up to the hotel desk—and for the first time there

was white showing in my letter-box! My overwrought nerves began crackling like high-tension wires. It had a Kay City postmark. In my excitement I dropped it and this real-estate guy, who had come up to the desk for his own mail just then, picked it up and handed it back to me without a word.

I went over in a corner of the lobby and tore it open. There was no signature—probably she hadn't wanted to hand me a blackjack that could be used against her—but it was from her all right. I recognized the writing, although she'd tried to distort it a little, or else her excitement had done that for her.

Jackie has come through pretty. If you want to see him, you know what to do about it. It's up to you to do the traveling, not me. I'm not at the old place any more, so it'll be okay. 10 State Street is where you'll find me.

The way I burned it's a wonder smoke didn't curl out of my ears. So it was up to me to do the traveling, was it? She knew what a chance I'd be taking by showing up home, even if she had changed addresses!

I came to a sudden decision. "All right, for being so smart, she's going to pony over the whole ten grand now! I'm going down there and clean her out! And if she opens her trap, she's going to suddenly quit being alive!"

I folded the thing up, put it in my pocket, and went out. I hit the seedy part of Jefferson, across the railroad tracks, and picked up a .32 and some cartridges at a hock-shop without too many questions asked, particularly the one about where was my license. I came back and I booked a seat on the three o'clock bus, which would get me to Kay City just after dark. I bought a cheap pair of reading glasses

and a flat tin of shoe polish. I went back to my room, knocked the lenses out of their tortoise-shell rims and heavied up my mustache with a little of the blacking.

At half-past two in the afternoon I went downstairs and paid my bill and turned in my key. The clerk didn't say a word, but I saw him stick a bright-red pasteboard strip like a bookmark in my letter-box. "What's that for?" I asked idly.

"That's to show it's available."

"You've got one in the one right next to it too." I squinted.

"Yeah, 919, across the hall from you, checked out about half an hour ago too."

The only thing that kept me from getting flurried was that his check-out had come ahead of mine, and not after; otherwise, I'd have suspected there was something phony about it. But this way, how could he have possibly known I intended leaving myself, when the first warning I'd given was this very minute?

"Just the same," I said to myself, "he's been taking the Kay City *Star* every day. I'm gonna take a good look in that bus, and if he's in it, I don't get on. I'm not taking any chances, not gonna lay myself open the way I did running into Sherrill!"

I timed myself to get to the depot just five minutes ahead of starting-time. The bus was standing there waiting to go. I walked all down one side of it, gandering in every window, and then doubled back on the other side, doing the same thing, before I got on. There wasn't a sign of him.

I found my seat and sat down on the edge of it, ready to hop off if he showed at the last moment. He didn't.

I looked them all over after a while, and there wasn't anything about any of them to call for a second look. Nor did I get even a first one from anybody. It was dark by the time we hit Ferndale, and about nine thirty when we got into Kay City at the downtown terminus. I slipped on the lensless pair of rims just before the doors opened, and didn't waste any time lingering about the brightly lighted

depot. Outside in the street-dusk I'd pass muster, as long as I didn't stop to stare into any glaring shop windows.

State Street was a quiet residential thoroughfare lined with prosperous residences; it was nearer in to the heart of the city than where we had lived, though. I reconnoitered number 10 from the opposite side of the street, going past it first and then doubling back. It was just a substantial brick house, two-storied, without anything about it to make me leery. Only one window, on the ground floor, showed a light. I thought, "What the hell is she doing in a place like that?" I decided she must have rented a furnished room with the family that owned it.

I crossed over farther down, and then once more started back toward it. There wasn't a soul on the street, at the moment. Instead of going right up to the door, I edged around to the window where the light was and took a look in.

Thelma was in the room there, and she seemed to be alone. She was right in a line with the window, sitting by herself in a big chair, holding a cigarette and staring intently over into a corner which I couldn't see from where I was. I could tell she was under a strain—the hand holding the cigarette shook visibly each time she lifted it. I waited a while, then I tapped lightly on the pane.

She looked square over at me, didn't show a bit of surprise. She jerked her head in the direction of the front door, but didn't get up or anything. I went around to it and tried it cautiously. She'd left it on the latch, for me to walk in without ringing. I closed it softly behind me, tapped the .32 in my pocket, and moved a few paces down the hall, listening. The house was dead; the people were out, whoever they were.

I put my hand on the side-door that led to the room where she was and pushed it open. She was still sitting there, shakily holding that cigarette. "Hello, Cookie," she said in a funny voice.

“Hello, yourself,” I growled, and I looked all around the room. It was empty, of course. There was another, leading out somewhere toward the back, its door standing wide open, but I couldn’t see a thing through it.

“Did you get my note?” she said. Then she said: “You’ve come back to kill me, of course. I’ve had a feeling it would end up that way all along. Is that it, in your pocket there?” And her eyes rolled around spasmodically, not at all matching the quiet dryness of her voice.

I said, “What’s the matter with you, you paralyzed or something? Whaddya keep sitting there like that for? Gimme the dough, all of it!”

She said, “What was our arrangement, again?”

“Twenty-five, seventy-five, with you on the short end. But that’s out, now; I’m taking the whole works—and here’s the convincer—” I took the gun out slowly.

The cigarette fell, but she still didn’t move.

“Up!” a voice said in my ear, and I could feel snub-nosed steel boring into my spine through my clothes. Then half of Kay City seemed to come into the room all at one time, through the door behind me and also through that other one opposite. One guy even stood up from behind the big easy chair she’d been in all along, a gun on me across her shoulder.

I let the .32 drop and showed my palms. I knew the Kay City chief of police by a picture of him I’d once seen. “Well,” he purred, “nice of you to drop in at my house like this! Wrists out, please!”

I said to her, “You dirty, double-crossing—”

“I didn’t cross you, Cookie,” she said wearily. “They tumbled the very next day—”

“Shut up!” I raged at her.

“That’s all right, Cook,” the chief of police said soothingly.

“The guy was never cremated at all—we saw to that. We inserted that phony announcement in the paper ourselves. She’s been in custody ever since—it’s just that we were

waiting for the insurance check to come through, to use in evidence. You thought you were good, didn't you? Want me to tell you what you had for breakfast Tuesday? Or what tune you whistled when you were getting ready for bed a week ago Sunday night? No trouble at all!"

They had to hold me up between them. "I didn't kill him," I gasped, "it was self-defense—"

The fat realtor from the Marquette came around in front of me. "Maybe it was self-defense when you pushed Sherrill out of the window in Jefferson?"

"I was taking a shower; I didn't have anything to do with —"

"Sherrill didn't die," he said. "A couple of clothes-lines at the bottom of that shaft were kinder to him than you were. He's been in a hospital down there with his back in a plaster-cast for the past three weeks. Crippled for life, maybe, thanks to you—but able to talk. He told us all about it, that's how it blew up at this end."

Something seemed to blow up in me too, the way it had that night. I was Ben Cook again, who'd never done anything wrong in his life. It was as if the streak of badness had worked itself out, somehow.

I shuddered and covered my face with my manacled hands. "I'm—I'm sorry. Well, you've got me, and maybe it's all for the best—I'm ready to take what's coming to me—"

"Don't worry, you're going to," said the chief of police. "Take him over to headquarters and book him. Take her back to the cooler."

As we were leaving, one of the detectives said: "All for ten grand! If you'da just hung on a little while longer, you'da gotten it without lifting your finger—like that!" He took out a cablegram from his pocket.

It was addressed to me, at the old address. It had come in only a couple days before. It was from London, from some attorney I'd never heard of. It informed me my first wife,

Florence, had died two months before and left me a legacy of more than three thousand pounds.

Ten thousand dollars!

I didn't show any emotion at all. Just turned to them and asked them if they'd do me a favor.

"Give you a swift kick, I suppose," one of the detectives sneered.

"It's mine to do with as I want, isn't it, this dough? Turn it over to Sherrill, will you, for me? Maybe it'll help to get him fixed up so he can walk again."

They all looked at me in surprise, as though this was out of character, coming from me. It really wasn't, though. None of us are one hundred percent bad and none of us are one hundred percent good—we're all just kind of mixed, I guess. Maybe that's why the Judge, the Higher One, feels sorry for us. A whole row of black marks and then a single white mark at the very end. Which cancels which? I'll find out for sure pretty soon now . . .

DEATH IN THE AIR

Inspector Stephen Lively, off-duty and homeward-bound, stopped at the newsstand underneath the stairs leading up to the Elevated station and selected one of the following day's newspapers and one of the following month's magazines for purposes of relaxation. His nightly trip was not only lengthy, it was in two parts—from headquarters to South Ferry by "El" and from there to Staten Island by ferry—hence the two separate items of reading-matter; one for each leg of the way.

Given a combination of two such names as his and, human nature being what it is, what else can you expect in the way of a nickname but—Step Lively? It had started at the age of seven or thereabouts when he stood up in school and pronounced his first name the wrong way; he finally quit struggling against it when it followed him onto the squad and he realized that he was stuck with it for the rest of his days, like it or not.

It wouldn't have been so bad, only it was altogether inappropriate. Step Lively had never made a quick motion in his life. To watch him was to think of an eight-times-slowed-down film or a deep-sea diver wading through seaweed on the ocean floor; he gave the impression of having been born lazy and getting more so all the time. And the nickname probably made this trait more glaring.

He was not, strangely enough, obese along with it—just the opposite, tall and spare, concave at the waist where

others bulge. He carried his head habitually bent forward a little, as though it were too much trouble to hold it up straight. He not only walked slowly, he even talked slowly. What mattered chiefly was that he thought fast; as far as results went, his record on the force seemed to prove that the race isn't always to the swift. He'd been known to bring in some of the nimblest, most light-footed gentry on record.

Like a steam-roller pursuing a motorcycle; it can't keep up with it, but it can keep remorselessly after it, wear it down, slowly overtake it, and finally flatten it out. So Step's superiors didn't let it worry them too much that he was the despair of traffic-cops crossing a busy street, or that he sent people waiting on line behind him out of their minds. It takes more than that to spoil a good detective.

Step entered the lighted stairway-shed and sighed at the sight of the climb that awaited him, as it did every night. An escalator, like some of the other stations had, would have been so much easier on a man.

The subway, which would have gotten him to the ferry considerably quicker, he eschewed for two very good reasons. One was that he'd have to walk a whole additional block eastward to get to it. And secondly, even though you descended to it instead of climbing at this end, you had to climb up out of it at the other end anyway; he preferred to get the hard work over with at the start, and have a nice restful climb down waiting for him when he got off.

He slowly poised one large, paddle-like foot on the bottom step and eight minutes later he was upstairs on the platform, the ordeal of the ascent safely behind him until tomorrow night. As he stepped out from behind the turnstile, a Sixth Avenue train was standing by with its gates in the act of closing. Step could have made it; a man who had come up behind him darted across and did. Step preferred not to. It would have meant hurrying. There'd be another one along in a minute. The old adage about cars and women was good common horse-sense.

This was 59th, and the trains alternated. The next would be a Ninth Avenue. They separated at 53rd, but both wound up together again at South Ferry, so it didn't matter which he took. More seats on the Ninth anyway. And so, because he refused to bestir himself—this story.

A three-car Ninth flashed in in due course. Step got up off the bench—it wouldn't have been like him to stand waiting—and leisurely strolled across to it. He yawned and tapped his mouth as he perambulated sluggishly down the aisle. The crabby, walrus-mustached conductor, who had had to hold the gate for him, felt a sudden unaccountable urge to stick a pin in him and see if he really could move fast or not, but wisely restrained the impulse, maybe because he had no pin.

The first car had a single occupant, sitting on one of the lengthwise seats, visible only up to the waist. The rest of him was buried behind an outspread newspaper, expanded to its full length. Step sprawled out directly opposite him with a grunt of satisfaction, opened his own paper, and got busy relaxing. All the windows were open on both sides of the car, and it was a pleasant, airy way to ride home on a warm night. Two pairs of legs and two tents of newsprint on opposite sides of the aisle were all that remained visible. The conductor, maybe because Step irritated him vaguely, retired to the second car, between stations, instead of this one.

The train coasted down Ninth Avenue sixty feet in the air, with the buildings that topped it by a story or two set back at a respectable distance from its roadbed. But then at Twelfth Street, it veered off into Greenwich Street and a change in spacing took place. The old mangy tenements closed in on it on both sides, narrowing into a bottleneck and all but scraping the sides of the cars as they threaded through them. There was, at the most, a distance of three yards between the outer rail of the super-structure and

their fourth-floor window-ledges, and where fire-escapes protruded only half that much.

What saved them from incessant burglarizing in this way was simply that there was nothing to burglarize. They were not worth going after. Four out of five were tenantless, windows either boarded up or broken-glass cavities yawning at the night. Occasionally a dimly-lighted one floated by, so close it gave those on the train a startling impression of being right in the same room with those whose privacy they were cutting across in this way. A man in his underwear reading a paper by a lamp, a woman bent over a washtub in a steaming kitchen. Their heads never turned at the streaming, comet-like lights or the roar of the wheels going by. They were so used to it they never gave it a thought. It was just part of their surroundings. Nor did those on the train show any interest either, as a rule. The few there were at this hour had their papers up and their backs to the passing scene. There isn't anything pretty about the lower West Side of New York. The river a block over is blotted out by docks, and the connecting side-streets are roofed with producesheds.

In the front car, the two solitary occupants continued immersed in their reading-matter. Christopher and Houston had gone by, and they pulled into Desbrosses Street. As they cleared it again a moment later, the train slackened briefly, slowed down without coming to a full halt, then almost immediately picked up speed once more. Perhaps some slight hitch on the part of a track-signal or a momentary break in the "shoe" gripping the third rail. Step took his eyes off his paper and glanced around over his shoulder, not because of that, but to find out how near his destination he was.

There was an open window staring him in the face, flush with the car-window that framed him, and so close it was almost like a continuation of it, a connecting-tunnel into the tenement's front room. There was no light in the first room,

but light shone feebly in from the room beyond through an open doorway. At the same time the train-lights swept in and washed across the walls like a sort of lantern-slide, from left to right.

In the double glare, fore and aft, two forms could be glimpsed, moving unsteadily about together. A man and woman dancing drunkenly in the dark, with exaggerated motions of their arms and heads. Lurching, reeling, pressed tightly together. “Wonder what the big idea of that is?” Step thought tolerantly. “Too warm for lights, I guess—” The noise of the cars drowned out whatever music was being supplied them for their strange activities.

Just as the two superimposed windows slipped apart out of perspective, the wheels of the train cracked loudly as though passing over a defect in the rails. At the same time, one of the shadow-dancers struck a match and it went right out again, just a stab of orange, and some water-borne insect or other winged into the car past Step’s face. He slapped vaguely at it, went back to his newspaper. The train picked up speed and headed down the track for Franklin Street.

The party across the aisle had fallen asleep, Step noticed when next he glanced over across the top of his paper. He grinned broadly at the sight he presented. There was a man after his own heart. Too much trouble even to fold up his paper and put it away. The breeze coming in on Step’s side of the car had slapped it back against his face and shoulders; his hands were no longer holding it up, had dropped limply to his lap. His legs had sprawled apart, were wobbling loosely in and out like rubber with the motion of the car.

Step wondered how he could breathe with the layers of paper flattened that way across his nose and mouth, you could actually see the indentation his nose made through it. And that insect that had blown in—it looked like a large black beetle—was perched there on the paper just above it.

Step thought of the innumerable comedy-gags he'd seen where someone tried to swat a fly on a sleeper's face, and of course the sleeper got the full impact of it. If he only knew the guy, he'd be tempted to try that now himself. Still, it was an awful lot of effort to reach across a car-aisle just to swat a horse-fly.

As they began drawing up for Franklin, the air-current of their own momentum rushed ahead, outdistanced them. It tugged loose the outside paper of the sleeper's outspread newspaper, no longer clamped down by his fingers, and sent it whirling up the aisle. Step blinked and went goggle-eyed. The black bug was still there, on the page underneath, as though it had bored its way through! A second sheet loosened, went skimming off. The damn thing was still there, as though it were leaping invisibly from one page to the other!

Step got to his feet, and though the motion was slow enough, there was a certain tenseness about him. He wasn't grinning any more. Just as he did so, the train came to a halt. The jolt threw the sleeper over on the side of his face, and all the rest of the newspaper went fluttering off, separating as it went. The black bug had leaped the last gap, was in the exact middle of the sleeper's forehead now, this time red-rimmed and with a thread of red leading down from it alongside his nose, like a weird eyeglass-string, to lose itself in the corner of his mouth. Step had seen too many of them not to know a bullet-hole when he saw one. The sleeper was dead. He didn't have to put his hand in under his coat, nor touch the splayed hand, caught under his body and dangling down over the aisle like a chickenclaw, to make sure of that. Death had leaped out at him from the very print he was reading. Such-and-such, then—period! A big black one, right into the brain. He'd never known what had hit him, had died instantly, sitting up. It wasn't the breeze that had slapped the paper up

against him; it was the bullet. It wasn't an insect that had winged past Step's shoulder that time; it was the bullet.

Step reached up leisurely and tugged twice at the emergency-cord overhead. The gates had closed on Franklin, and the train had already made a false start ahead, checked immediately with a lurch; The handlebar-mustached conductor came running in from the platform, the motorman looked out from his booth at the upper end of the car.

"What's the idea? What's going on in here?" The conductor's words spattered like buckshot around the heedless Step.

"Hold the train," he drawled almost casually. "Here's a man been shot dead." Then as the blue-coated one began panting down the back of his neck and elbowing him aside, he remonstrated mildly, "Now don't crowd like that. There's nothing you can do. What y'getting so excited about? Just lemme try to find out who he is first—"

The motorman said from the other side of him, "Get him off. We can't stand here all night. We're on a schedule; we'll tie up the whole line into a knot behind us."

"Stand aside! Who do you think you are anyway?" the fiery conductor demanded.

Step said wearily, "Oh, do I have to go through that again?" and absentmindedly palmed his badge to him, backhand, while he continued bending over the prostrate form. From then on there was nothing but a respectful silence all around while he went on going through the corpse's pockets with maddening deliberation.

His mind, however, was anything but sluggish, was crackling like a high-tension wire. The sound of the shot? There didn't necessarily have to be any in this case, but that crack of the car-wheels over a split in the rails had probably been it. And the match that one of those two tipsy dancers had struck in the darkened tenement-room back there hadn't been a match at all, hadn't glowed steadily enough

nor lasted long enough, couldn't have been anything but the flash of the shot, the results of which he was now beholding.

Drinking, carousing, then entertaining themselves by taking pot-shots out the window at passing trains, were they? Well, a nice little manslaughter rap would take the high spirits out of them, for some time to come, whoever they were.

"Dudley Wall," he said, reading from an envelope. "Lives on Staten Island like me. Shame, poor fella. All right, take him by the feet and help me get him outside to the waiting-room." And as the conductor moved backwards before him down the aisle, with the body between them, he rebuked: "Don't walk so fast. He ain't going to get away from us!" They moved at a snail's pace thereafter, to suit Step, out through the gate and across the platform with their burden. Stretched him out on one of the benches inside by the change-booth, and then Step strolled inside with the agent and sent in his report over the latter's phone.

"That guy," whispered the conductor darkly to the motorman on their way back to their posts, "has sleeping sickness, you can't tell me different!"

"Maybe it's ringworm," hazarded the motorman. They pulled out, and the two or three other trains that had ganged up behind them flashed by one after the other without stopping, to make up for lost time.

"I gotta get back to Desbrosses Street," Step remarked, coming out again. "You keep an eye on him till they get here." He felt sure he'd know the tenement window again when he saw it, whether they were still there or not.

"Well, you'll have to go down to the street, cross over, and then climb to the uptown side," the agent explained, wondering what he was waiting for.

Step looked horrified. "And then when I get there climb down again? And climb up four flights of stairs inside that building? Oh, golly, I'm just tuckered out. I couldn't make it.

I'll walk back along the track, only way I can see. That's bad enough."

He sighed deeply, took a tuck in his belt, and made his way to the far end of the platform. He descended the short ladder to the track-level and struck out from there, trudging doggedly along with one hand trailing along beside him on the guard-rail.

"Watch the trains!" the agent shouted after him warningly. Step didn't answer out loud, that was too much trouble, but to himself he muttered: "This is one time I'm glad I'm good and thin!"

One of them caught him halfway between the two stations, and the sight of it looming up on him was fairly terrifying to one unused to track-walking. He began to wobble unsteadily on the cat-walk, which seemed only inches wide, and realizing that he would either topple dizzily in front of it or fall down to the street if he kept looking at it head-on, he wisely turned his back to it, grabbed the guard-rail with both hands, and stared intently out at the roof-tops, ignoring it till it had hurtled by. Its velocity nearly seemed to pull the coat off his back.

He stared after it disapprovingly. "Such a town. Everything always in a hurry to get somewhere else!" Then he resumed his laborious progress alongside the tracks, feeling sorry for his feet and hoping the sniper in the tenement had no firearms license, so he could also tack a stiff Sullivan-Law charge on him.

The two lighted halves of the Desbrosses Street platform loomed toward him, lighted under the apron like the footlights of a stage. It ought to be about here. They'd already pulled out, he remembered, when he'd turned around to look. Dark-red brick it had been, but then the whole row was that. No fireescape, either. Wait a minute, there'd been a sign up on the cornice of the building next-door, but on which side of it, he couldn't recall. Nor what it had said, until suddenly it was staring him in the face once

more, with that vague familiarity that only twice-seen things can have. Then he knew that was it. PICKLED AND SALTED FISH in tarnished metal capitals with rain-streaks under them, each letter separately clamped to the brickwork, in the style of the nineteenth-century advertiser. He stopped in front of the building next to it, on the Desbrosses side. This had almost certainly been it. There was the same wide-open window through which he'd seen them dancing. But no light was coming in from the other room now. It was dark and deserted, just a gap in the façade.

It looked near enough to touch, but actually was far more inaccessible from where he now was, than it had seemed from the train-window. The gap was just wide enough to fall to your death in without half-trying, and the ledge was just over his head, now that he was down at track-level.

Step Lively had the courage of his convictions. He was going to get in this way, without going all the way down to the street and climbing up inside that dump, if he died in the attempt. He looked around him vaguely but determinedly. They had been repairing the track-bed near here somewhere, and there was a neat, handy little stack of short planks piled up, almost directly across the way from him—but with two third-rails in-between.

He didn't hesitate for a minute. What was a third rail compared to climbing four flights of stairs and getting all out of breath? Besides, they had guards on top of them, like covered troughs. There wasn't anything coming on this side, so he started across on one of the ties, and arched respectfully over the deadly metal when he came to it. So much for the downtown track. An uptown train was pulling out of Franklin, but it wouldn't get here for awhile yet. Plenty of time to get back and across.

He reached the opposite catwalk safely, picked up the top plank, and tucked it broadside under his arm. The on-coming train was still at a respectable distance, although its lights were getting brighter by the moment. He started

back over, the plank swaying up and down in his grasp like a see-saw. It wasn't the actual weight of it that hampered him, it was that its length threw him off-balance. He was like a tightrope-walker with too long a pole. He didn't have it right in the middle, and it kept tipping him forward. The train was big as a barn by now, he hadn't calculated on how quickly it would cover the short distance between the two stations. You could already look right down the lighted aisle of the first car, through the open vestibule-door. But this was no time for surveying. He lifted one foot clear of the contact-rail, set it down on the other side, then tried to bring the second one over after it. It wouldn't come. He must have given it just the wrong kind of a little half-turn. It was stuck between the two ties.

He didn't do anything at all for just a split second, which is sometimes the wisest possible course—and came easiest to him, anyway. However, there weren't many of them left, split or otherwise. The roar of the train was rising to a crescendo. The first thing almost anyone else would have done in his fix would have been to yank and tug at the recalcitrant foot—and wedge it in irretrievably. Step Lively was a slow mover but a quick thinker. He used his split-second to turn his head and stare down one hip at the treacherous hoof. The heel had dipped down into the space between the two ties and jammed. It ought to come out again easy enough, if he did the right thing. And there wasn't time to do the wrong thing. So he started turning back again on it, as if he were going to step right in front of the train. That reversed whatever twist had originally trapped it; it came up free, smooth as pie, and he stepped backwards with it out of death's path, face turned toward the train as it rushed abreast of him, brakes that wouldn't have been in time to save him screeching. He had presence of mind enough to point the plank skyward, like a soldier presenting arms, so the train wouldn't sideswipe it and throw him. The cars seemed to take the skin off his nose.

The damn thing stopped a car-length away, but whether on his account or the station's he didn't know and didn't bother finding out. He got back the rest of the way to the other side of the tracks on knees that made him ashamed of them, they jogged so.

"Now just for that," he growled unreasonably at the blank window, "I'm gonna slap you up plenty for attempting to escape while under arrest, or something!"

The plank, when he paid it out, bridged the gap neatly, but at rather a steep incline, the window-ledge being higher than the guard-rail of the "El" structure. The distance, however, was so short that this didn't worry him. He took the precaution of taking out his gun, to forestall any attempt to shake him off his perch before he could grab the window-sash, but so far there had been no sign of life from within the room. They were probably sleeping it off.

He got up on the bottom rail, put his knee on the plank, and a minute later was groveling across it in mid-air, above the short but very deep chasm. It slipped diagonally downward toward the "El" a little under his weight, but not enough to come off the ledge. The next minute he had his free hand hooked securely around the wooden window-frame and was over and in.

He took a deep breath of relief, but still wouldn't have been willing to admit that this was a lot of trouble to go to just to get out of climbing a flock of stairs. He was that way. Without looking down just now, he'd been dimly aware of people milling about on the street below him, shouting up. They'd taken him for crazy, he supposed.

A downtown train careened past just behind his back right then, and lighted up the interior of the room for him nicely, better than a pocket-flash. It also did something else —as though all these trains tonight bore him a personal grudge. It struck the lower edge of the plank he had just used, which extended too far in past the rail, with a crack and sent it hurtling down to the street below. As long as he

hadn’t been on it at the time, being cut off like this didn’t worry him particularly—he’d intended walking down anyway. He only hoped those on the sidewalk would see it coming in time to dodge. They ought to, looking up the way they had been.

But before he could give it another thought, the flickering train-lights washing across the walls showed him that he wasn’t alone in the room after all.

One-half of his quarry was lying there face-down across the bed. It was the lady-souse, and judging by the way her arms hung down on one side and her feet on the other she was more soused than ladylike. Step took his eye off her and followed the phantom yellow-square the last car-window made as it traveled around three of the walls after its mates and then flickered out in the opposite direction from the train. It had shown him a switch by the door. So the place was wired for electricity, decrepit as it was. There was a moment of complete darkness, and then he had the room-light on.

He turned back to her. “Hey, you!” he growled. “Where’s that guy that was in here with you a couple minutes ago? Get up offa there and answer me before I—!”

But she wasn’t answering anybody any more. The bullet-hole under her left eye answered for her, when he tilted her face. It said: *Finished!* The cheek was all pitted with powder-burns. There was a playing-card symbol, the crimson ace of diamonds, on the white counterpane where the wound had rested. His eye traveled around the room. No radio, nothing to make music. They hadn’t been dancing. That had been her death-struggle in his arms. The first shot had missed her, had killed the man named Wall in the first car of the “El” instead; the second one must have come a split-second after Step’s car-window passed beyond range. The same bullet hadn’t killed both; hers was still in her head. There was no wound of egress.

Step didn’t bother playing detective, snooping around, even examining the remaining rooms of the tawdry little flat. His technique would have astounded a layman, horrified a rookie, probably only have made his superior sigh resignedly and shrug. “Well, that’s Step for you.” What he did about getting after the culprit, in a murder that had been committed so recently it was still smoking, was to pull over a warped rockingchair, sit down, and begin rolling a cigarette. His attitude implied that it had tired him plenty to walk the tracks all the way back here, and everything could wait until he’d rested up a little. An occasional flickering of the eyelids, however, betokened that all was not as quiet on the inside of his head as on the outside.

The woman’s hands seemed to fascinate him. The tips of her fingers were touching the floor, as though she were trying to balance herself upside-down. He took them up in his own and looked more closely. The nails were polished and well cared for. He turned them palm-up. The skin was not coarse and reddened, by dishwashing and housework. “You didn’t belong here on Greenwich Street,” he remarked. “Wonder who you were hiding from?”

A long spike of ash had formed on the end of his cigarette, and crummy as the place was, he looked around for something to park it in. No ashtrays in sight; evidently the dead lady hadn’t been a smoker. He flicked the ash off into space, and as he did so, his eyes traveled down the seam between two of the unpainted floor-boards. Wedged into it was a butt. He got it out with the aid of a pin from his lapel. The mouth-end was still damp. Her lips, he had noticed, had been reddened fairly recently. But there wasn’t a fleck of color on this. Not hers, therefore.

He dropped the cigarette he had been smoking and crushed it out, then passed the other one back and forth under his nose a couple of times. An acrid odor immediately took the place of the aroma of his familiar Virginia tobacco. He went a step further, put a lighted match to the end of it

and tried to draw on it without actually touching it to his lips, still holding it on the pin. He had to suck mightily to start it glowing. Instantly there were results. His lungs smarted. And yet it wasn't the smoke of the burning paper he was getting, as in the case of an ordinary cigarette. That was escaping at both ends. It was the vapor of the weed that filled it.

Marihuana—crazy-weed. And unwittingly he'd gone about just the right way of smoking it, not letting it come into contact with his lips. A vacuous, boisterous laugh wrenched from him abruptly, over the slain woman's head. Nothing to laugh at, and here he was roaring. He dropped the damned thing precipitately, trod on it as though it were a snake, opened his mouth and fanned pure air into it. The booming laugh subsided to a chortle, ebbed away. He mopped his forehead, got up, and went unsteadily toward the outer door of the flat.

The din down below in the street seemed to have increased a hundredfold, meanwhile; he couldn't be sure whether it actually had or it was just the after-effects of the drugged cigarette making it seem so. Sirens screeching, bells clanging, voices yelling—as though there were a whole crowd milling around out there.

He opened the flat door, and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. No lights out in the hall. Then he saw a peculiar hazy blur just a few feet away, up overhead, and realized that there *were* lights—but the building was on fire. It wasn't darkness he'd stepped out into, but a solid wall of smoke.

He could possibly have gotten out, still made the street from where he was, by a quick dash down the stairs then and there. Step Lively plus several whiffs of a drugged cigarette, however, was no combination calculated to equal a quick dash in any direction, up or down. He turned around coughing and shuffled back into the flat he had just emerged from, closing the door on the inferno outside.

To do him justice, it wasn't simply inertia or laziness this time that kept him up there where he was. Hundreds of men in hundreds of fires have hung back to drag somebody living out with them. But very few have lingered to haul out somebody already dead. That, however, was precisely what Step had gone back for. The lady was his corpus delicti and he wasn't leaving her there to be cremated.

That a fire should start up here and now, in the very building where a murder had been committed, was too much of a coincidence. It was almost certainly a case of incendiarism on the murderer's part, perpetrated in hopes of obliterating all traces of his crime. "And if he was smoking that devilish butt I picked up," he said to himself, "he wouldn't stop to worry about whether anybody else was living in the building or not!"

He retrieved it a second time, what there was left of it, and dropped it in his pocket, pin and all. Then he wrapped the counterpane with the ace-of-diamonds symbol on it around the woman, turning her into a bundle of laundry, and moved toward the door with her. The current failed just as he was fumbling at it with one hand, under her, and the room went black.

A dull red glow shone up the stairwell, though, when he got it open. It would have been all right to see by, but there wasn't anything to breathe out there any more, just blistering heat and strangling smoke. Spearheads of yellow started to shoot up through it from below, like an army with bayonets marching up the stairs. He got back inside again, hacking and with water pouring out of his eyes, but hanging onto her like grim death, as though she were some dear one instead of just a murdered stranger he had happened to find.

The room was all obliterated with haze now, like the hallway had been the first time, but he groped his way through it to the window. He didn't lose his head; didn't even get frightened. That was all right for women or slobs

in suspenders, trapped on the top floor of a blazing tenement. “I didn’t come in through the door, anyway,” he growled. He was good and sore, though, about all this hectic activity he was having to go through. “I should ‘a’ been home long ago, and had my shoes off—” he was thinking as he leaned out across the sill and tried to signal to the mob that he could hear, but no longer see, down on the street.

He was hidden from them, and they from him, by the smoke billowing out from the windows below him. It formed a regular blanket between—but not the kind that it paid to jump into. Still, the apparatus must be ganged up down there by this time. You’d think they’d do something about helping a fellow get down, whether they could see him or not. Somebody must have almost certainly spotted him climbing in.

Even if he still had the plank, he couldn’t have made it across on that any more. He not only had *her* now, but his lungs and eyes were going all wacky with this damn black stuff; he’d have toppled off it in a minute. The crack he’d just made to himself about having his shoes off at home registered. He parked her across the sill, bunched one leg, and started unlacing. It took him about forty-five seconds to undo the knot and slip the oxford off—which for him was excellent time. He poised it and flung it down through the smoke. If it would only bean somebody now, they’d stop and think maybe that shoes don’t come flying down out of a fire unless there’s somebody up there in it alive.

It did. A section of ladder shot up out of the swirling murk just as it left his hand. The helmeted figure scampering up monkeylike met the shoe halfway, with the bridge of his nose, and nearly went off into space. He flailed wildly with one propellerlike arm, caught the ladder once more in the nick of time, and resumed his ascent—a brief nosebleed to add to his troubles. Such language Step had rarely heard

before. “Oops,” he murmured regretfully. “Shows it never pays to be too hasty. What I’ve always said.”

The fireman wiped his mouth, growled: “C’mon, step out and over, the roof’s gonna go any minute.” He was on a level with Step’s eyes now, outside the window. The room was about ready to burst with heat; you could hear the floor-boards cracking as they expanded.

Step reared the mummy-like figure, thrust it across the sill into the smoke-eater’s arms. “Take this stiff and be careful of her,” he coughed. “She’s valuable. I’ll be right down on top of you.”

The fireman, hooked onto the ladder by his legs, slung the burden over his shoulder, clamped it fast with one arm, and started down. Step started to climb over the sill backwards. The smoke was worse out here than in the room, he couldn’t see the ladder any more. A silvery lining to the smoke, like a halo all around him, showed they were training a searchlight up from below, but it couldn’t get through the dense, boiling masses. He found a rung with his one stockinged foot, made passes at the air until he’d finally connected with one of the invisible shafts—and the rest was just a switch over. Try it sometime yourself.

Then he stayed where he was until he’d shrugged his coat half-off his shoulders and hooded it completely over his head. Then he went down slowly, blind, deaf, seared, and breathing into worsted a little at a time. He went down ten stories, twenty, fifty—and still the ground wouldn’t come up and meet him. He decided the place must have been the Empire State in disguise. One time he passed through a spattering of cool, grateful spray blown off one of the hose-lines and almost felt like sticking around in it, it felt so good. Just about the time he decided that the ladder must be slowly moving upward under him, like a belt-line or treadmill, and that was why he wasn’t getting anywhere, hands grabbed him at the ankles and shoulders and he was hoisted to terra firma a yard below.

“Bud,” said the Fire Chief patiently, “as long as you were in shape to climb down on your own, couldn’t you have made it a *little* faster? I’m a very nervous man.”

Step disengaged his head from his coat, kissed himself on the knuckles, bent down and rapped them against the Greenwich Street sidewalk. Then he straightened up and remonstrated: “I never was rushed so in my life as I been for the past half-hour!” He glanced upward at the haze-blurred building, whose outline was beginning to emerge here and there from the haze of smoke.

“The fire,” the Chief enlightened him, turning away, “was brought under control during the half-hour you were passing the third floor. We finally put it out during the, er, forty-five minutes it took you getting from there down. The assistant marshal’s in there now conducting an investigation—” Which may have leaned more toward sarcasm than accuracy, but was a good example of the impression Step made upon people the very first time they encountered him.

“Tell him for me,” Step said, “it was arson—nothing else but. He mayn’t be able to find any evidence, but that doesn’t alter the fact any.”

“A firebug, you think?”

“Something just a step worse. A murderer. A pyromaniac is irresponsible, afflicted, can’t help himself. This dog knew just what he was doing, killed his conscience for both acts ahead of time with marihuana.” He pointed to the muffled figure on the stretcher. “That woman was shot dead a good quarter of an hour before the fire was discovered. I was a witness to it. I’m Lively, of the—th Precinct, uptown.”

The fire chief muttered something that sounded like: “You may be attached to that precinct, but you’re not lively.” But he was diplomatic enough to keep it blurred. “But if you were a witness,” he said aloud, “how is it the guy—?”

“Powdered? I wasn’t in the room with them, I glimpsed it from an ‘El’ train that stalled for a minute opposite the

window! You go in there and tell your marshal not to bother looking for gasoline cans or oil-soaked rags. He didn't have time for a set-up like that, must have just put a match to a newspaper running down the stairs. Where's the caretaker or janitor, or didn't the dump have one?"

"Over behind the ropes there, in the crowd across the street. Take him over and point out the guy to him, Marty."

Step trailed the fireman whom he had clouted with his shoe—which incidentally had vanished—limping on his one unshod foot, and ducked under the rope beside a grizzled, perspiring little man. Palmed his badge at him to add to his terror, and asked, while his eyes roved the crowd that hemmed them in: "Who was the woman top-floor front?"

"Insoorance?" whined the terrified one.

"No, police department. Well, come on—"

"Smiff. Miss Smiff."

Step groaned. But he'd figured she'd been hiding out anyway, so it didn't really matter much. "How long she been living up there in your house?"

"Ten day."

"Who visited her, see anybody?"

"Nome-body. She done even go out; my wife bring food."

Good and scared, reflected Step. Scared stiff, but it hadn't saved her. "Did you hear anything tonight just before the fire? Were you in the building? Hear couple shots? Hear any screams?"

"No hear no-thing, train make too much noise. Only hear fella laff coming downstairs, like somebody tell-im good joke. Laff, laff, laff, all the way out to street—"

The marihuana, of course. Just two drags had affected his own risibilities. The effects of a whole reefer ought to last hours, at that rate. Step shoved away from the futile janitor, flagged one of the patrolmen holding the crowd in check behind the ropebarrier, introduced himself. The excitement was tapering off, now that everyone was out of the house and the fire had been subdued, it was only a matter of

minutes before they'd start melting away. Overhead the "El" trains, which had been held back at Desbrosses Street while the smoke had been at its thickest, were again being allowed through, although surface traffic was still being detoured.

"Who's on this job with you?" Step asked the cop in a low voice.

"One other guy, down at the other end."

"Think the two of you can keep 'em in like they are, another couple minutes?"

The cop looked insulted. "That's what we been doing. You don't see anybody edging out into the middle of the street, do ya?"

"No, you don't understand what I mean. Can you put up another rope at each side, hem them in where they are, keep them from strolling off just a little while longer till I get a chance to take a careful look through them all?"

"I'm not authorized to keep people from going about their business, as long as they don't hamper the fire apparatus—"

"I'll take the responsibility. There's someone I'm out to get, and I've got a very good hunch he's right here looking on. Firebugs are known to do that, murderers too when they think they're safe from discovery. When you've got a combination of both, the urge to stay and gloat ought to be twice as strong!

"Bawl me out," he added abruptly, "so it don't look too phony, my standing talking to you like this."

The cop swung his club at him, barked: "Get back there! Whaddya think that rope's for? Get back there before I—"

Step cringed away from him, began to elbow his way deeper into the tightly-packed crowd jamming the narrow sidewalk. He did this as slow as he did everything else, didn't seem like anyone who had a definite place to go, just a rubber-necker working his way toward a better vantage-point. From time to time he glanced over at the gutted

building, or what could be seen of it under the shadowy “El” structure that bisected the street vertically. Torches blinked deep within the front hallway of it, as firemen passed in and out, still veiled by the haze that clung to it.

There wasn’t, however, enough smoke left in the air, certainly not this close to the ground, to send anyone into paroxysms of strangled coughing. Such as that individual just ahead was experiencing, handkerchief pressed to mouth. Step himself had inhaled as much smoke as anyone, and his lungs were back on the job again as good as ever. He kept facing the burned building from this point on, edging over sidewise to the afflicted one. The spasms would stop and he’d lower the handkerchief; then another one would come on and he’d raise it again and nearly spill himself into it. Step was unobtrusively at his elbow by now.

When a person is suffering from a coughing-fit, two ways of assisting them will occur to almost anybody. Offer them a drink of water or slap them helpfully on the back. Step didn’t have any water to offer, so he chose the second means of alleviation. Slapped the tormented one between the shoulder-blades: but just once, not several times, and not nearly forcefully enough to do any good. “You’re under arrest,” he said desultorily, “come on.”

The concealing handkerchief dropped—this time all the way to the ground. “What for? What’re you talking about?”

“For two murders and an arson,” drawled the wearied Step. “I’m talking about you. And don’t be afraid to laugh right out. No need to muffle it with your handkerchief and try to change it into a cough any more. That was what gave you away to me. When you’ve been smoking marihuana, you’ve just gotta laugh or else—But watching fires isn’t the right place to do your laughing. And if it had been real coughing, you wouldn’t have stayed around where the smoke irritated you that much. Now show me where you dropped the gun before you came back here to watch, and

then we'll get in a taxi. I wouldn't ask my feet to carry me another step tonight."

His prisoner bayed uncontrollably with mirth, then panted: "I never was in that building in my life—" Writhed convulsively.

"I saw you," said Step, pushing him slowly before him through the crowd, "through the window from an 'El' train as I was going by." He knew the soporific effect the drug was likely to have, its blunting of the judgment. "She came to us and told us she was afraid of this happening to her, asked for protection, and we been giving it to her. Did you think you could get away with it?"

"Then what'd she rat on Plucky at his trial for? She knew what to expect. He sent out word—"

"Oh, that vice trial. And she was one of the witnesses? I see." Step slammed the door of the cab on the two of them. "Thanks for telling me; now I know who she was, who you are, and why it was done. There is something to be said for marihuana after all. Not much, but maybe just a little."

When he stepped out of the cab with his handcuffed quarry at the foot of the Franklin Street station four blocks away, he directed the driver: "Now sound your horn till they come down off of up there." And when they did, his mates found Inspector Stephen Lively seated upon the bottom step of the stationstairs, his prisoner at his side.

"Fellas," he said apologetically, "this is the guy. And if I gotta go up there again to the top, I wonder could you two make a saddle with your hands and hoist me between you. I'm just plumb tuckered out!"

THE CORPSE NEXT DOOR

Harlan’s wife turned away quickly, trying to hide the canopener in her hand. “What’s the idea?” he asked. She hadn’t expected him to look across the top of his morning paper just then. The can of evaporated milk she had been holding in her other hand slipped from her grasp in her excitement, hit the floor with a dull whack, and rolled over. She stooped quickly, snatched it up, but he had seen it.

“Looks like somebody swiped the milk from our door again last night,” she said with a nervous little laugh. Harlan had a vicious temper. She hadn’t wanted to tell him, but there had not been time to run out to the store and get another bottle.

“That’s the fifth time in two weeks!” He rolled the paper into a tube and smacked it viciously against the table-leg. She could see him starting to work himself up, getting whiter by the minute even under his shaving talcum. “It’s somebody right in the house!” he roared. “No outsider could get in past that locked street-door after twelve!” He bared his teeth in a deceptive grin. “I’d like to get my hands on the fellow!”

“I’ve notified the milkman and I’ve complained to the superintendent, but there doesn’t seem to be any way of stopping it,” Mrs. Harlan sighed. She punched a hole in the top of the can, tilted it over his cup.

He pushed it aside disgustedly and stood up. “Oh, yes, there is,” he gritted, “and I’m going to stop it!” A suburban

commuters' train whistled thinly in the distance. "Just lemme get hold of whoever—!" he muttered a second time with suppressed savagery as he grabbed his hat, bolted for the door. Mrs. Harlan shook her head with worried foreboding as it slammed behind him.

He came back at six bringing something in a paper-bag, which he stood on the kitchen-shelf. Mrs. Harlan looked in it and saw a quart of milk.

"We don't need that. I ordered a bottle this afternoon from the grocer," she told him.

"That's not for our use," he answered grimly. "It's a decoy."

At eleven, in bathrobe and slippers, she saw him carry it out to the front door and set it down. He looked up and down the hail, squatted down beside it, tied something invisible around its neck below the cardboard cap. Then he strewed something across the sill and closed the door.

"What on earth—?" said Mrs. Harlan apprehensively.

He held up his index-finger. A coil of strong black sewing-thread was plaited around it. It stood out clearly against the skin of his finger, but trailed off invisibly into space and under the door to connect with the bottle. "Get it?" he gloated vindictively. "You've got to look twice to see this stuff once, especially in a shadowy doorway. But it cuts the skin if it's pulled tight. See? One tug should be enough to wake me up, and if I can only get out there in time—"

He left the rest of it unfinished. He didn't have to finish it, his wife knew just what he meant. She was beginning to wish he hadn't found out about the thefted milk. There'd only be a brawl outside their door in the middle of the night, with the neighbors looking on—

He paid out the thread across their living-room floor into the bedroom beyond, got into bed, and left the hand it was attached to outside the covers. Putting out the lights after him, she was tempted to clip the thread then and there, as the safest way out, even picked up a pair of scissors and

tried to locate it in the dark. She knew if she did, he'd be sure to notice it in the morning and raise cain.

"Don't walk around in there so much," he called warningly. "You'll snarl it up."

Her courage failed her. She put the scissors down and went to bed. The menacing thread, like a powder-train leading to a high explosive, remained intact.

* * * *

In the morning it was still there, and there were two bottles of milk at the door instead of one, the usual delivery and the decoy. Mrs. Harlan sighed with relief. It would have been very short-sighted of the guilty person to repeat the stunt two nights in succession; it had been happening at the rate of every third night so far. Maybe by the time it happened again, Harlan would cool down.

But Harlan was slow at cooling down. The very fact that the stunt wasn't repeated immediately only made him boil all the more. He wanted his satisfaction out of it. He caught himself thinking about it on the train riding to and from the city. Even at the office, when he should have been attending to his work. It started to fester and rankle. He was in a fair way to becoming hipped on the subject, when at last the thread paid off one night about four.

He was asleep when the warning tug came. Mrs. Harlan slept soundly in the adjoining bed. He knew right away what had awakened him, jumped soundlessly out of bed with a bound, and tore through the darkened flat toward the front door.

He reached it with a pattering rush of bare feet and tore it open. It was sweet. It was perfect. He couldn't have asked for it any better! Harlan caught him red-handed, in the very act. The bottle of milk cradled in his arm, he froze there petrified and stared guiltily at the opening door. He'd evidently missed feeling the tug of the thread altogether—which wasn't surprising, because at his end the bottle had

received it and not himself. And to make it even better than perfect, pluperfect, he was someone that by the looks of him Harlan could handle without much trouble. Not that he would have hung back even if he'd found himself outclassed. He was white-hot with thirty-six hours' pent-up combustion, and physical cowardice wasn't one of his failings, whatever else was.

He just stood there for a split second, motionless, to rub it in. "Nice work, buddy!" he hissed.

The hijacker cringed, bent lopsidedly to put the bottle on the floor without taking his terrified eyes off Harlan. He was a reedy sort of fellow in trousers and undershirt, a misleading tangle of hair showing on his chest.

"Gee, I've been so broke," he faltered apologetically. "Doctor-bills, an'—an' I'm outa work. I needed this stuff awfully bad, I ain't well—"

"You're in the pink of condish compared to what you're gonna be in just about a minute more!" rumbled Harlan. The fellow could have gotten down on his knees, paid for the milk ten times over, but it wouldn't have cut any ice with Harlan. He was going to get his satisfaction out of this the way he wanted it. That was the kind Harlan was.

He waited until the culprit straightened up again, then breathed a name at him fiercely and swung his arm like a shotputter.

Harlan's fist smashed the lighter man square in the mouth. He went over like a paper cut-out and lay just as flat as one. The empty hallway throbbed with his fall. He lay there and miraculously still showed life. Rolling his head dazedly from side to side, he reached up vaguely to find out where his mouth had gone. Those slight movements were like waving a red flag at a bull. Harlan snorted and flung himself down on the man. Knee to chest, he grabbed the fellow by the hair of the head, pulled it upward and crashed his skull down against the flagged floor.

When the dancing embers of his rage began to thin out so that he was able to see straight once more, the man wasn't rolling his head dazedly any more. He wasn't moving in the slightest. A thread of blood was trickling out of each ear-hollow, as though something had shattered inside.

Harlan stiff-armed himself against the floor and got up slowly like something leaving its kill. "All right, you brought it on yourself!" he growled. There was an undertone of fear in his voice. He prodded the silent form reluctantly. "Take the lousy milk," he said. "Only next time ask for it first!" He got up on his haunches, squatting there ape-like. "Hey! Hey, you!" He shook him again. "Matter with you? Going to lie there all night? I said you could take the—"

The hand trying to rouse the man stopped suddenly over his heart. It came away slowly, very slowly. The color drained out of Harlan's face. He sucked in a deep breath that quivered his lips. It stayed cold all the way down like menthol.

"Gone!" The hoarsely-muttered word jerked him to his feet. He started backing, backing a step at a time, toward the door he'd come out of. He could not take his eyes off the huddled, shrunken form lying there close beside the wall.

"Gee, I better get in!" was the first inchoate thought that came to him. He found the opening with his back, even retreated a step or two through it, before he realized the folly of what he was doing. Couldn't leave him lying there like that right outside his own door. They'd know right away who had—and they weren't going to if he could help it.

He glanced behind him into the darkened flat. His wife's peaceful, rhythmic breathing was clearly audible in the intense stillness. She'd slept through the whole thing. He stepped into the hall again, looked up and down. If she hadn't heard, with the door standing wide open, then surely nobody else had with theirs closed.

But one door was not closed! The next one down the line was open a crack, just about an inch, showing a thin line of

white inner-frame. Harlan went cold all over for a minute, then sighed with relief. Why that was where the milk-thief came from. Sure, obviously. He'd been heading back in that direction when Harlan came out and caught him. It was the last door down that way. The hall, it was true, took a right-angle turn when it got past there, and there were still other flats around the other side, out of sight. That must be the place. Who else would leave their door off the latch like that at four in the morning, except this guy who had come out to prowl in the hallway?

This was one time when Mrs. Harlan would have come in handy. She would have known for sure whether the guy lived in there or not, or just where he did belong. He himself wasn't interested in their neighbors, didn't know one from the other, much less which flats they hung out in. But it was a cinch he wasn't going to wake her and drag her out here to look at a dead man, just to find out where to park him. One screech from her would put him behind the eight-ball before he knew it.

Then while he was hesitating, sudden, urgent danger made up his mind for him. A faint whirring sound started somewhere in the bowels of the building. Along with it the faceted glass knob beside the automatic elevator panel burned brightly red. Somebody was coming up!

He jumped for the prostrate form, got an under-arm grip on it, and started hauling it hastily toward that unlatched door. Legs splayed out behind it, the heels of the shoes ticked over the cracks between the flagstones like train-wheels on a track.

The elevator beat him to it, slow-moving though it was. He had the guy at the door, still in full view, when the triangular porthole in the elevator door-panel bloomed yellow with its arrival. He whirled, crouching defiantly over the body, like something at bay. He would be caught with the goods, just as he himself had caught this guy, if the

party got out at this floor. But they didn't. The porthole darkened again as the car went on up.

He let out a long, whistling breath like a deflating tire, pushed the door carefully open. It gave a single rebellious click as the latch cleared the socket altogether. He listened, heart pounding. Might be sixteen kids in there for all he knew, a guy that stole milk like that.

"I'll drop him just inside," Harlan thought grimly. "Let them figure it out in the morning!"

He tugged the fellow across the sill with an unavoidable wooden thump of the heels, let him down, tensed, listened again, silhouetted there against the orange light from the hall—if anyone was inside looking out. But there was an absence of breathing-sounds from within. It seemed too good to be true. He felt his way forward, peering into the dark, ready to jump back and bolt for it at the first alarm.

Once he got past the closed-in foyer, the late moon cast enough light through the windows to show him that there was no one living in the place but the guy himself. It was a one-room flat and the bed, which was one of those that come down out of a closet, showed white and vacant.

"Swell!" said Harlan. "No one's gonna miss you right away!"

He hauled him in, put him on the bed, turned to soft-shoe out again when he got a better idea. Why not make it really tough to find him while he was about it? This way, the first person that stuck his head in was bound to spot the man. He tugged the sheet clear of the body lying on it and pulled it over him like a shroud. He tucked it in on both sides, so that it held him in a mild sort of grip.

He gripped the foot of the bed. It was hard to lift, but once he got it started the mechanism itself came to his aid. It began swinging upward of its own accord. He held onto it to keep it from banging. It went into the closet neatly enough but wouldn't stay put. The impediment between it and the wall pushed it down each time. But the door would

probably hold it. He heard a rustle as something shifted, slipped further down in back of the bed. He didn't have to be told what that was.

He pushed the bed with one arm and caught the door with the other. Each time he took the supporting arm away, the bed tipped out and blocked the door. Finally at the sixth try he got it to stand still and swiftly slapped the door in place over it. That held it like glue and he had nothing further to worry about. It would have been even better if there'd been a key to lock it, take out, and throw away. There wasn't. This was good enough, this would hold—twenty-four hours, forty-eight, a week even, until the guy's rent came due and they searched the place. And by that time he could pull a quick change of address, back a van up to the door, and get out of the building. Wouldn't look so hot, of course, but who wanted to stay where there was a permanent corpse next door? They'd never be able to pin it on him anyway, never in a million years. Not a living soul, not a single human eye, had seen it happen. He was sure of that.

Harlan gave the closet door a swipe with the loose end of his pajama jacket, just for luck, up where his hand had pushed against it. He hadn't touched either knob.

He reconnoitered, stepped out, closed the flat up after him. The tumbler fell in the lock. It couldn't be opened from the outside now except by the super's passkey. Back where it had happened, he picked up the lethal bottle of milk and took it into his own flat. He went back a second time, got down close on hands and knees and gave the floor a careful inspection. There were just two spots of blood, the size of two-bit pieces, that must have dripped from the guy's ears before he picked him up. He looked down at his pajama coat. There were more than two spots on that, but that didn't worry him any.

He went into his bathroom, stripped off the jacket, soaked a handful of it under the hot water and slipped into the hail

with it. The spots came up off the satiny flagstones at a touch without leaving a trace. He hurried down the corridor, opened a door, and stepped into a hot, steamy little whitewashed alcove provided with an incinerator chute. He balled the coat up, pulled down the flap of the chute, shoved the bundle in like a letter in a mail box and then sent the trousers down after it too, just to make sure. That way he wouldn't be stuck with any odd pair of trousers without their matching jacket. Who could swear there had ever been such a pair of pajamas now? A strong cindery odor came up the chute. The fire was going in the basement right now. He wouldn't even have to worry about the articles staying intact down there until morning. Talk about your quick service!

He slipped back to his own door the way he was without a stitch on him. He realized it would have been a bum joke if somebody had seen him like that, after the care he'd taken about all those little details. But they hadn't. So what?

He shut the door of his apartment, and put on another pair of pajamas. Slipping quietly into the bed next to the peacefully slumbering Missis, he lit a cigarette. Then the let-down came. Not that he got jittery, but he saw that he wasn't going to sleep any more that night. Rather than lie there tossing and turning, he dressed and went out of the house to take a walk.

He would have liked a drink, but it was nearly five, way past closing-time for all the bars, so he had to be satisfied with a cup of coffee at the counter lunch. He tried to put it to his mouth a couple times, finally had to call the waiter back.

"Bring me a black one," he said. "Leave the milk out!" That way it went down easy enough.

The sun was already up when he got back, and he felt like he'd been pulled through a wringer. He found Mrs. Harlan in the kitchen, getting things started for his breakfast.

“Skip that,” he told her irritably. “I don’t want any—and shove that damn bottle out of sight, will you?”

He took time off during his lunch-hour to look at a flat in the city and paid a deposit for it. When he got home that night he told Mrs. Harlan abruptly, “Better get packed up, we’re getting out of here the first thing in the morning.”

“Wha-at?” she squawked. “Why we can’t do that. We’ve got a lease! What’s come over you?”

“Lease or no lease,” he barked. “I can’t stand it here any more. We’re getting out after tonight, I tell you!”

They were in the living-room and his eyes flicked toward the wall that partitioned them off from the flat next door. He didn’t want to do that, but he couldn’t help himself. She didn’t notice, but obediently started to pack. He called up a moving-van company.

In the middle of the night he woke up from a bad dream and ran smack into something even worse. He got up and went into the living-room. He didn’t exactly know why. The moon was even brighter than the night before and washed that dividing wall with almost a luminous calsomine. Right in the middle of the wall there was a hideous black, blurred outline, like an X-ray showing through from the other side. Right about where that bed would be. Stiff and skinny the hazy figure was with legs and arms and even a sort of head on it. He pitched the back of his arm to his mouth just in time to douse the yell struggling to come out, went wet all over as though he were under a showerbath. He managed to turn finally and saw the peculiar shape of one of Mrs. Harlan’s modernistic lamps standing in the path of the moon, throwing its shadow upon the wall. He pulled down the shade and tottered back inside. He took his coffee black again next morning, looked terrible.

She rang him at the office just before closing-time. “You at the new place?” he asked eagerly.

“No,” she said, “they wouldn’t let me take the stuff out. I had a terrible time with the renting-agent. Ed, we’ll just

have to make the best of it. He warned me that if we go, they're going to garnishee your salary and get a judgment against you for the whole two-years' rent. Ed, we can't afford to keep two places going at once and your firm will fire you the minute they find out. They won't stand for anything like that. You told me so yourself. He told me any justified complaint we have will be attended to, but we can't just walk out on our lease. You'd better think twice about it. I don't know what's wrong with the flat anyway."

He did, but he could not tell her. He saw that they had him by the short hairs. If he went, it meant loss of his job, destitution; even if he got another, they'd attach the wages of that too. Attracting this much attention wasn't the best thing in the world, either. When he got home, the agent came up to find out what was the trouble, what his reasons were, he didn't know what to answer, couldn't think of a legitimate kick he had coming. He was afraid now even to bring up about the chiseling of the milk. It would have sounded picayune at that.

"I don't have to give you my reasons!" he said surlily. "I'm sick o' the place, and that's that!"

Which he saw right away was a tactical error, not only because it might sow suspicion later, but because it antagonized the agent now. "You can go just as soon as you've settled for the balance of your lease. I'm not trying to hold you!" he fumed. "If you try moving your things out without that, I'll call the police!"

Harlan slammed the door after him like a six-gun salute. He had a hunch the agent wouldn't be strictly within his legal rights in going quite that far, but he was in no position to force a showdown and find out for sure. No cops, thanks.

He realized that his own blundering had raised such a stink that it really didn't matter now any more whether he stayed or went. They'd make it their business to trace his forwarding address, and they'd have that on tap when disclosure came. So the whole object of moving out would

be defeated. The lesser of two evils now was to stay, lie very low, hope the whole incident would be half-forgotten by the time the real excitement broke. It may have been lesser, but it was still plenty evil. He didn't see how he was going to stand it. Yet he had to.

He went out and came back with a bottle of rye, told his wife he felt a cold coming on. That was so he wouldn't run into any more hallucinations during the night like that phantom X-ray on the wall. When he went to bed the bottle was empty. He was still stony sober, but at least it put him through the night somehow.

On his way across the hall toward the elevator that morning, his head turned automatically to look up at that other door. He couldn't seem to control it. When he came back that evening the same thing happened. It was locked, just as it had been for the past two nights and two days now. He thought, "I've got to quit that. Somebody's liable to catch me at it and put two and two together."

In those two days and two nights he changed almost beyond recognition. He lost all his color; was losing weight almost by the hour; shelves under his eyes you could have stacked books on; appetite shot to smithereens. A backfire on the street made him leave his shoes without unlacing them, and his office-work was starting to go haywire. Hooch was putting him to sleep each night, but he had to keep stepping it up. He was getting afraid one of these times he'd spill the whole thing to his wife while he was tanked without knowing it. She was beginning to notice there was something the matter and mentioned his seeing a doctor about himself once or twice. He snapped at her and shut her up.

The third night, which was the thirty-first of the month, they were sitting there in the living-room. She was sewing. He stared glassy-eyed through the paper, pretending to read, whiskytumbler at his elbow, sweat all over his ashen forehead, when she started sniffling.

“Got a cold?” he asked tonelessly.

“No,” she said, “there’s a peculiar musty odor in here, don’t you get it? Sickly-sweet. I’ve been noticing it off and on all day, it’s stronger in this room than in—”

“Shut up!” he rasped. The tumbler shook in his hand as he downed its contents, refilled it. He got up, opened the windows as far as they would go. He came back, killed the second shot, lit a cigarette unsteadily, deliberately blew the first thickly fragrant puff all around her head. “No, I don’t notice anything,” he said in an artificially steady voice. His face was almost green in the lamplight.

“I don’t see how you can miss it,” she said innocently. “It’s getting worse every minute. I wonder if there’s something wrong with the drains in this building?”

He didn’t hear the rest of it. He was thinking: “It’ll pay off, one way or the other, pretty soon—thank goodness for that! Tomorrow’s the first, they’ll be showing up for his rent, that’ll be the finale.”

He almost didn’t care now which way it worked out—anything so long as it was over with, anything but this ghastly suspense. He couldn’t hold out much longer. Let them suspect him even, if they wanted to; the complete lack of proof still held good. Any lawyer worth his fee could get him out of it with one hand tied behind his back.

But then when he snapped out of it and caught sight of her over at the inter-house phone, realized what she was about, he backed water in a hurry. All the bravado went out of him. “What’re you doing?” he croaked.

“I’m going to ask the superintendent what that is, have him come up here and—”

“Get away from there!” he bellowed. She hung up as though she’d been bitten, turned to stare.

A second later he realized what a swell out that would have been to have the first report of the nuisance come from them themselves; he wished he had let her go ahead. It should have come from them. They were closest to the

death-flat. If it came from somebody else further away—and they seemed not to have noticed it—that would be one more chip stacked up against him.

"All right, notify him if you want to," he countermanded.

"No, no, not if you don't want me to." She was frightened now. He had her all rattled. She moved away from the phone.

To bridge the awkward silence he said the one thing he didn't want to, the one thing of all he'd intended not to say. As though possessed of perverse demons, it came out before he could stop it: "Maybe it's from next-door." Then his eyes hopelessly rolled around in their sockets.

"How could it be?" she contradicted mildly. "That flat's been vacant for the past month or more—"

A clock they had in there in the room with them ticked on hollowly, resoundingly, eight, nine, ten times. Clack, clack, clack, as though it were hooked up to a loudspeaker. What a racket it was making! Couldn't hear yourself think.

"No one living in there, you say?" he said in a hoarse whisper after what seemed an hour ticked by.

"No, I thought you knew that. I forgot, you don't take much interest in the neighbors—"

* * * *

Then who was he? Where had he come from? Not from the street, because he had been in his undershirt. "I dragged the guy back into the wrong apartment!" thought Harlan. He was lucky it was vacant! It gave him the shivers, even now, to think what might have happened if there had been somebody else in there that night! The more he puzzled over it, the cloudier the mystery got. That particular door had been ajar, the bed down out of the closet, and the guy had been pussyfooting back toward there. Then where did he belong, if not in there? He was obviously a lone wolf, or he would have been missed by now. Those living with him would have sent out an alarm the very next morning after it

had happened. Harlan had been keeping close tab on the police calls on his radio and there hadn't been anything of the kind. And even if he had lived alone in one of the other flats, the unlatched door left waiting for his return would have attracted attention from the hail by now.

What was the difference where he came from anyway; it was where he was now that mattered! All he could get out of it was this: there would be no pay-off tomorrow after all. The agony would be prolonged now indefinitely—until prospective tenants were shown the place and sudden discovery resulted. He groaned aloud, took his next swig direct from the bottle without any tumbler for a go-between.

In the morning he could tell breakdown was already setting in. Between the nightly sousing, the unending mental strain, the lack of food, he was a doddering wreck when he got out of bed and staggered into his clothes. Mrs. Harlan said, "I don't think you'd better go to the office today. If you could see yourself—!" But he had to, anything was better than staying around here!

He opened the living-room door (he'd closed it on the two of them the night before) and the fetid air from inside seemed to hit him in the face, it was so strong. He reeled there in that corrupt, acrid draft, not because it was so difficult to breathe but because it was so difficult for *him* to breathe, knowing what he did about it. He stood there gagging, hand to throat; his wife had to come up behind him and support him with one arm for a minute, until he pulled himself together. He couldn't, of course, eat anything. He grabbed his hat and made for the elevator in a blind hurry that was almost panic. His head jerked toward that other door as he crossed the hall; it hadn't missed doing that once for three days and nights.

This time there was a difference. He swung back again in time to meet the superintendent's stare. The latter had just that moment come out of the elevator with a wad of rent

receipts in his hand. You couldn't say that Harlan paled at the involuntary betrayal he had just committed because he hadn't been the color of living protoplasm in thirty-six hours now.

The super had caught the gesture, put his own implication on it. "That bothering you folks too?" he said. "I've had complaints from everyone else on this floor about it so far. I'm going in there right now and invest—"

The hallway went spinning around Harlan like a cyclorama. The superintendent reached out, steadied him by the elbow. "See that, it's got you dizzy already! Must be some kind of sewer-gas." He fumbled for a passkey. "That why you folks wanted to move earlier in the week?"

Harlan still had enough presence of mind left, just enough, to nod. "Why didn't you say so?" the super went on. Harlan didn't have enough left to answer that one. What difference did it make. In about a minute more it would be all over but the shouting. He groped desperately to get himself a minute more time.

"I guess you want the rent," he said with screwy matter-of-factness. "I got it right here with me. Better let me give it to you now. I'm going in to town—"

He paid him the fifty bucks, counted them three times, purposely let one drop, purposely fumbled picking it up. But the passkey still stayed ready in the super's hand. He leaned against the wall, scribbled a receipt, and handed it to Harlan. "Thanks, Mr. Harlan." He turned, started down the hall toward that door. That damnable doorway to hell!

Harlan was thinking: "I'm not going to leave him now. I'm going to stick with him when he goes in there. He's going to make the discovery, but it's never gonna get past him! I can't let it. He saw me look at that door just now. He'll read it all over my face. I haven't got the juice left to bluff it out. I'm going to kill him in there—with my bare hands." He let the rent receipt fall out of his hand, went slowly after the man like somebody walking in his sleep.

The passkey clicked, the super pushed the door open, light came out into the dimmer hallway from it, and he passed from sight. Harlan slunk through the doorframe after him and pushed the door back the other way, partly closing it after the two of them. It was only then that Harlan made an incomprehensible discovery. The air was actually clearer in here than in his own place—clearer even than out in the hail! Stale and dust-laden from being shut up for days, it was true, but odorless, the way air should be!

"Can't be in here, after all," the super was saying, a few paces ahead.

Harlan took up a position to one side of the bedcloset, murmuring to himself: "He lives—until he opens that!"

The super had gone into the bath. Harlan heard him raise and slap down the wooden bowl cover in there, fiddle with the washbasin stopper. "Nope, nothing in here!" he called out. He came out again, went into the postage-stamp kitchen, sniffed around in there, examining the sink, the gas-stove. "It seemed to come from in here," he said, showing up again, "I can't make head or tail out of it!"

Neither could Harlan. The only thing he could think of was: the bedding and the mattress, which were on this side of what was causing it, must have acted as a barricade, stuffing up the closet-door, and must have kept that odor from coming out into this room, sending it through the thin porous wall in the other direction instead, into his own place and from there out into the hall.

The super's eye roved speculatively on past him and came to rest on the closet door. "Maybe it's something behind that bed," he said.

Harlan didn't bat an eyelash, jerky as he had been before out in the hall. "You just killed yourself then, Mister," was his unheard remark. "This is it. Now!" He gripped the floor-boards with the soles of his feet through the shoe-leather, tensed, crouched imperceptibly for the spring.

The super stepped over, so did Harlan, diagonally, toward him. The super reached down for the knob, touched it, got ready to twist his wrist—

The house-phone in the entry-way buzzed like an angry hornet. Harlan went up off his heels, coming down again on them spasmodically. “Paging me, I guess. I told them I was coming in here,” said the super, turning to go out there and answer it. “Okay, Molly,” he said, “I’ll be right down.” He held the front door ready to show Harlan he wanted to leave and lock up again. “Somebody wants to see an apartment,” he explained. The door clicked shut, the odors of decay swirled around them once more on the outside of it, and they rode down together in the car.

Something was dying in Harlan by inches—his reason maybe. “I can never go through that again,” he moaned. The sweat did not start coming through his paralyzed pores until after he was seated in the train, riding in. Everything looked misshapen and out of focus.

He came back at twilight. In addition to the dusky amber hall lights, there was a fan of bright yellow spilling out of the deathdoor. Open again, and voices in there. Lined up along the wall outside the door were a radio cabinet, a bridge lamp, a pair of chairs compacted together seat to seat. An expressman in a dirty blue blouse came out, picked them up effortlessly with one arm, and slung them inside after him.

Harlan sort of collapsed against his own door. He scratched blindly for admittance, forgetting he had a key, too shellshocked to use it even if he had taken it out.

Mrs. Harlan let him in, too simmering with the news she had to tell to notice his appearance or actions. “We’ve got new neighbors,” she said almost before she had the door closed. “Nice young couple, they just started to move in before you got here—”

He was groping desperately for the bottle on the shelf, knocked down a glass and broke it. Then they hadn’t found

out yet; they hadn't taken down the bed yet! It kept going through his battered brain like a demoniac rhythm. He nearly gagged on the amount of whisky he was swallowing from the neck of the bottle all at one time. When room had been cleared for his voice, he panted: "What about that odor? You mean they took that place the way it—?"

"I guess they were in a hurry, couldn't be choosy. He sent his wife up to squirt deodorant around in the hall before they got here. What does he care, once he gets them signed up? Dirty trick, if you ask me."

He had one more question to ask. "Of course you sized up every stick of stuff they have. Did they—did they bring their own bed with them?"

"No, I guess they're going to use the one in there—"

Any minute now! His brain was fifty per cent blind unreasoning panic, unable to get the thing in the right perspective any more. That discovery itself wasn't necessarily fatal, but his own possible implication in it no longer seemed to register with him. He was confusing one with the other, unable to differentiate between them any more. Discovery had to be prevented, discovery had to be forestalled! Why? Because his own corrosive guilty conscience knew the full explanation of the mystery. He was forgetting that they didn't—unless he gave it to them himself.

Still sucking at the bottle, he edged back to the front door, turned sidewise to it, put his ear up against it.

"T'anks very much, buddy," he heard the moving man say gruffly, and the elevator-slide closed.

He opened the door, peered out. The last of the furniture had gone inside, the hall was clear now. The fumes of the disinfectant the super's wife had used were combating that other odor, but it was still struggling through—to his acute senses, at least. They had left their door open. Their voices were clearly audible as he edged further out. Two living

people unsuspectingly getting settled in a room with an unseen corpse!

"Move that over a little further," he heard the woman say. "The bed has to come down there at nights. Oh, that reminds me! He couldn't get it open when he wanted to show it to me today. The door must be jammed. He promised to come back, but I guess he forgot—"

"Let's see what I can do with it," the husband's voice answered.

Harlan, like something drawn irresistibly toward its own destruction, was slinking nearer and nearer, edgewise along the corridor-wall. A tom-tom he carried with him was his heart.

A sound of bare hands pounding wood came through the bright-yellow gap in the wall ahead. Then a couple of heavier impacts, kicks with the point of a shoe.

"It's not locked, is it?"

"No, when I turn the knob I can see the catch slip back under the lock. Something's holding it jammed in there. The bed must be out of true or somebody closed it too hard the last time."

"What're we going to sleep on?" the woman wailed.

"If I can hit it hard enough, maybe the vibration'll snap it back. Run down a minute and borrow a hammer from the super, like a good girl."

Harlan turned and vanished back where he had come from. Through the crack of the door he saw the woman come out into the hall, stand waiting for the car, go down in it. He said to his wife, "Where's that hammer we used to have?" He found it in a drawer and went out with it.

He was no longer quite sane when he knocked politely alongside that open door down the hall. He knew what he was doing, but the motivation was all shot. The man, standing there in the middle of the lighted room staring helplessly at the fast closetdoor, turned his head. He was just an ordinary man, coat off, tie off, suspenders showing;

Harlan had never set eyes on him before, their paths were just now crossing for the first time. But discovery had to be prevented, discovery had to be prevented!

Harlan, smiling sleepily, said, “Excuse me. I couldn’t help overhearing you ask your wife for a hammer. I’m your next-door neighbor. Having trouble with that bed-closet, I see. Here, I brought you mine.”

The other man reached out, took it shaft-first the way Harlan was holding it. “Thanks, that’s real swell of you,” he grinned appreciatively. “Let’s see what luck I have with it this time.”

Harlan got in real close. The tips of his fingers kept feeling the goods of his suit. The other man started tapping lightly all up and down the joint of the door. “Tricky things, these beds,” he commented.

“Yeah, tricky,” agreed Harlan with that same sleepy, watchful smile. He came in a little closer. Something suddenly gave a muffled “Zing!” behind the door, like a misplaced spring or joint jumping back in place.

“That does it!” said the man cheerfully. “Now let’s see how she goes. Better stand back a little,” he warned. “It’ll catch you coming out.” He turned the knob with one hand and the door started opening. He passed the hammer back to Harlan, to free the other. Harlan moved around to the same side he was on until he was right at his neighbor’s elbow. The door swung flat against the wall. The bed started to come down. The man’s two arms went out and up to ease it, so it wouldn’t fail too swiftly.

Just as the top-side of it got down to eye-level the hammer rose in Harlan’s fist, described a swift arc, fell, crashed into the base of the other man’s skull. He went down so instantaneously that the blow seemed not to have been interrupted, to have continued all the way to the floor in one swing. Again the red motes of anger, call them self-preservation this time—

A dull boom came through them first—the bed hitting the floor. They swirled thicker than ever; then screams and angry, frightened voices pierced them. They began to dissipate. He found himself kneeling there alongside the bed, gory hammer poised in his hand, facing them across it. There must have been other blows.

A woman lay slumped there by the door, moaning “My husband, my husband!” They were picking her up to carry her out. Another woman further in the background was staring in, all eyes. Wait, he knew her—his wife. Someone out in the hall was saying, “Hurry up, hurry up! This way! In here!” and two figures in dark-blue flashed in, moving so swiftly that before he knew it they were behind him holding his arms. They took the hammer away. Nothing but voices, a welter of voices, heard through cotton-batting.

“This man is dead!”

“He didn’t even know him. They just moved in. Went crazy, I guess.”

He was being shaken back and forth from behind, like a terrier. “What’d you do it for? What’d you do it for?”

Harlan pointed at the bed. “So he wouldn’t find out—”

“Find out what?” He was being shaken some more. “Find out what? Explain what you mean!”

Didn’t they understand, with it staring them right in the face? His eyes came to rest on it. The bed was empty.

“God, I think I understand!” There was such sheer horror in the voice that even Harlan turned to see where it had come from. It was the superintendent. “There was a down-and-outer, a friend of mine. He didn’t have a roof over his head—I know I had no right to, but I let him hang out in here nights the past couple weeks, while the apartment was vacant. Just common, ordinary charity. Then people started complaining about losing their milk, and I saw I’d get in trouble, so I told him to get out. He disappeared three days ago, I figured he’d taken me at my word, and then this morning I found out he was in the hospital with a slight

head-concussion. I even dropped in for a few minutes to see how he was getting along. He wouldn't tell me how it happened, but I think I get it now. *He* must have done it to him, thought he'd killed him, hidden him there in that folding-bed. My friend got such a fright that he lammed out the minute he came to—"

Harlan was mumbling idiotically, "Then I didn't kill anyone?"

"You went to town on this one, all right," one of the men in blue said. He turned to the second one, scornfully. "To cover up a justified assault-and-battery, he pulls a murder!"

When another man, in mufti, took him out in the hall at the end of two or three short steel links, he recoiled from the putrid odor still clinging out there. "I thought they said he wasn't dead—"

Somewhere behind him he heard the super explaining to one of them: "Aw, that's just some sloppy people on the floor below cooking corned-beef and cabbage alla time, we gave 'em a dispossess for creating a nuisance in the building! He musta thought it was—"

SPEAK TO ME OF DEATH

The Prophet said, “Death by the jaws of a lion,” and not even Tim Shane could defy the will of the stars.

CHAPTER I

A slick-looking roadster stopped in front of Headquarters at about nine that night, and its lone occupant sat there in it for a moment before cutting the ignition, as if trying to make up her mind what to do. The car had money written all over it, money without flash. The number was so low it was almost zero. The girl in it took a cigarette out of the box fitted to the door, pulled a patented lighter out of the dash, inhaled deeply as if to brace herself. Then she got out and went up the steps between the two dark-green lights.

She was tall and slim and young. She wore a little leopard-skin jacket that didn't come below her elbows. The price of it probably ran into three figures. Her face was pale, paler than powder could have made it. At the top of the steps she took a second and final drag. Then she dropped the cigarette, stepped on it, and went in. She asked to see the lieutenant in charge.

His name was McManus and he brought a chair forward with his own hands for her in the back room. She was that kind of a girl.

She said, "My name is Ann Bridges," then she looked down at the floor. You could see her wrists were trembling, where she held them folded over one knee. Diamond-splinters flashed around her wrist-watch from the slight vibration.

"Any relative of John T. Bridges?" McManus said.

Ann Bridges looked up again. "I'm his niece," she said. "In fact, his only relative." She took it in her stride, said it almost off-handedly. To McManus it was a stunning piece of information; it was like finding yourself in the same room with the heir-apparent to a throne.

He never thought of doubting her. There was something 14-karat about her that couldn't have been faked.

She said, “It isn’t the pleasantest thing in the world to come to the police like this—” she broke off abruptly. Then she went ahead: “I don’t even know what there is you people can do about it. But something’s got to be done—”

McManus’ voice was kind. “You tell me what it is.”

“That’s the worst part of it. It doesn’t sound like anything when you tell it. Anything at all. But it is something!” Her voice rose almost to the point of hysteria. “I can’t just stand by and watch him—sink into the grave before my eyes! I had to tell somebody—had to get it off my chest! I’ve waited too long as it is!” Her eyes misted. “I’ve driven down here four nights in a row—and the first three times I lost my nerve and drove on around the block without stopping. I said to myself, ‘Ann, they’ll think you’re crazy.’ ”

McManus went over to her and rested a fatherly hand on her shoulder. “We don’t laugh at people,” he said gently. “We run across anything and everything, in our line—but we don’t laugh at people who are in trouble.” It wasn’t because she was Ann Bridges; it was because she was so young and lovely and there was such distress written on her face.

“Something has hold of us,” she said. “Something that started in by being nothing at all, by being just a joke over the luncheon-table; something that’s grown and grown, until now it’s like an octopus throttling us. I can’t name it to you, because I don’t know what to call it, don’t know what it is. It threatens him, not me, but I love him, and so the threat is to the two of us.”

She gave a little sob in her throat.

“Call it a prophecy, call it fate—call it what you will. I fought against it hard enough, God knows. But the evidence of my own eyes, my own ears, my own senses, is too much for me. And the time’s too short now. I’m afraid to take a chance. I haven’t got the nerve to bluff it out. You don’t gamble with a human life. Today’s the 13th, isn’t it? It’s too close to the 14th; there isn’t time-margin enough left now

to be skeptical. Day by day, I've watched him cross off the date on his desk-calendar, drawing nearer to death. There are only two leaves left now, and I want help! Because on the 14th—at the exact stroke of midnight, just as the 15th is beginning—"

She covered her face with both arms and shook silently.

"Yes?" urged McManus. "Yes?"

"He's become convinced—oh, and almost I have too—that at exactly midnight on the 14th he's to die. Not just an ordinary death, but a death rushing down to him from the stars he was born under—rushing down even before he existed. A death inexorable, inescapable. A death horrid and violent, inconceivable here in this part of the world where we live."

She took a deep, shuddering breath, whispered the rest of it. "Death at the jaws of a lion."

McManus didn't answer for an awfully long time. When he spoke, it wasn't to her at all. He opened the door, called to someone, said "I'm not to be disturbed—until further orders, hear?"

When he came back to her she said limply. "Thanks—for not laughing, for not smelling my breath, for not hinting that I should see a doctor. Oh, thanks, anyway!"

He took a package of cigarettes out of the desk-drawer, passed them to her. "I like you modern kids," he said paternally. "Smoke up. Pull yourself together. Tell it in your own way. Begin at the beginning—and tell it right straight through—"

CHAPTER II

It all started (Ann Bridges said) about an airplane ride. My Uncle John was going to ’Frisco on business, and he’d bought his ticket. He showed it to me at lunch, and I saw that the take-off was dated Friday the 13th. Half kiddingly, I suggested he put off leaving until the day after. There’d been a bad crack-up a week before, but lord! we were both joking, not serious about it!

My maid must have overheard us. She came to me later and said, “Beg your pardon, miss, but if that were I, I’d never let him do a thing like that.”

I said, “Be your age.”

She said, “I know of someone who could warn you, if there is to be any trouble. A man who’s gifted with second sight. Why don’t you let me take you to him?”

I gave her a cold look and I said, “Just what do I look like to you? Are you seriously suggesting that I go to some flea-bitten fortuneteller with a dirty cloth wrapped around his head and—”

“He’s not a fortune-teller,” she defended. “He’d resent being called that. He doesn’t make a profession of it, and he doesn’t take money for it.”

“I bet he doesn’t refuse it, either,” I said cynically.

“He’s a good man,” she said stoutly, “not a sharper of any kind. He happens to be born with this gift, he can’t help that. He doesn’t trade on it in any way; in fact, he doesn’t like to use it. My family and I have known him for years—”

I smiled to myself, as anyone would have. “He’s certainly sold himself to you, Elaine.”

“We won’t talk any more about it, miss,” she said stiffly. “Only, you remember that time I was in trouble—” She’d

gotten mixed up with some man, and I'd straightened it out for her; it wouldn't, be fair for me to give you the details. "You were the only one knew about that, Miss Bridges, I didn't say a word at home, I didn't dare. He took me aside one night and told me the whole thing. He told me how it was going to end up, too. He said the man was going to meet death, and I'd be rid of him once and for all. I fainted dead away on the floor. You remember how we heard two months later he'd been run over on the street?"

I did, but my skepticism wouldn't dent much. "You didn't say a word to me at the time, how was that?"

"He made me promise not to. I've broken my word to him today. He doesn't want it to become known. He hates his gift himself, says it caused him nothing but misery—

All of which sounded reasonable enough, but I was definitely not impressed. I've had very good commonsense all my life, and you have to watch your step—when you're the heir to twenty millions.

My uncle took off from Newark early the next morning, and when I got back to the house the maid blurted out: "There's nothing to worry about, Miss Bridges. I—I asked him about this trip, and he said it was safe to make it."

"Oh you did, did you?" I said severely. "And who told you to?"

"I didn't tell him who it was or anything about it. Just asked him about this morning's plane," she defended. But Mr. Bridges needn't have gone at all, could have saved himself the trouble. He told me that whoever this party is that's going out there, he or she is doomed to disappointment; nothing wall come of it, he'll just have wasted his time."

My uncle's in the import and export business, he'd gone to see about an important consignment of silk from Japan, but the maid couldn't have known that, much less this seer of hers. I'm afraid I snickered rudely.

Nothing daunted, she rushed on: “But don’t let Mr. John come back by air, Miss Bridges, whatever you do! Wire him to take the train instead. The eastbound-plane is going to run into trouble—he saw it clearly. Not a crack-up but it’s going to be grounded somewhere in the Rockies and half of them are going to die of exposure before they’re located. He saw snow piled all around it and people with frozen hands and feet having to have them amputated later—”

I blew up. I said, “One more word out of you, and I’ll give you your week’s notice!”

She didn’t open her mouth from then on, just went around looking sorry for me.

Uncle John had told me he was starting back the following Saturday. Take-off was at seven Pacific Coast Time, ten back here. I’ll admit I got a little worried Friday night, wondered whether or not I oughtn’t to send that wire after all. I was afraid he’d laugh at me. More than that even, I hated to give in to her after the way I’d talked. I went to bed without sending the wire. It was too late when I woke up in the morning, he would have started already.

He should have gotten in about noon Sunday. I drove to the airport to meet him, and he wasn’t on the plane. That gave me a nasty turn. I asked at the airport-office, and they told me he had booked a seat from Chicago east, along with several other people, on this one, and none of them had shown up to make the connection; the ’Frisco plane had been overdue when they left Chicago.

I went home plenty worried. It was in the papers and on the radio already, reported missing somewhere over the Rockies with fourteen people in it!

The maid saw how I was taking it, so finally she came out with: “I suppose I’m discharged, but I knew better than you—I took the liberty of sending Mr. John a wire over your name last night, begging him to come by train instead—”

Discharged? I could have kissed her! But then anxiety raised its head again. “He’s stubborn, he’d never listen to a

message like that—”

“I—I told him that one of his associates wanted to consult him about a very important matter, and mentioned a place where the planes don’t stop, so he’d have to take the train. He says,” she went on, “that it won’t be found for three days, the plane. It wouldn’t have meant death, it isn’t Mr. John’s time yet, but he would have lost both feet and been a helpless cripple for the rest of his—”

All of which evoked a pretty creepy feeling in me. It wasn’t any help when my uncle got off the train three days later, safe and sound. The first words out of his mouth were that he’d made the trip for nothing; a maritime strike had broken out on the Coast and his silk-shipment was tied up indefinitely at Honolulu ; he hadn’t been able to accomplish a thing.

The snow-bound plane was sighted from the air later that same day, and when the rescue parties got to it, seven of the fourteen were dead from exposure, and several of the survivors had to have their hands or feet amputated as soon as they got to a hospital. Just as he’d foretold—rescue-date, circumstances, number of casualties, and all. It was uncanny. I didn’t want to believe, I fought like anything against believing—and yet there it was.

I told my uncle the whole story of course—who wouldn’t have?—and he was as impressed as I was. What we did next was what anyone else would have done after what happened. We asked the maid to take the two of us to this man, we wanted to see him for ourselves. She wasn’t to tell him who we were, just two friends of hers. I even put on an old coat and hat of hers, to look properly working-class, and we left the car home, went there on foot.

It was a big let down, at first. This fortune teller was merely a middle-aged man sitting in a furnished room with his suspenders hanging down! His name was Jeremiah Tompkins, about as unimpressive a name as they come. And worst of all, he was just a bookkeeper. Had been, rather, for

he wasn't working just then. If I remember correctly, he was reading the want ads in a newspaper when we came in.

I could see my uncle was more disappointed; he was almost resentful. After all, Uncle John was a level-headed intelligent businessman. That a figure like this should be able to spout prophecies, should know more than he did himself about what was going to happen to him, was too much for him to swallow.

"Watch," he said to me out of the corner of his mouth, "I'll show you. I'll show you he's just a phony, that all this was just a coincidence. I've got something here that's the best little miracle-eraser in the world!"

And he took out five-hundred dollars in cold cash and pressed it into Tompkins' hand. Tompkins had been reading the want ads, remember, and Elaine told me later her people were having him in for meals out of sheer pity.

"You've done something for me that I can never repay," my uncle said as a come-on. "This is just a token of my gratitude. Call on me at any time and I'll be more than glad to—"

Tompkins didn't let him finish. He threw the money down at my uncle's feet. "I don't like being insulted," he said quietly. There was a sort of dignity about the way he said it, at that. I didn't do this for money, and I won't take money for it. This girl here—" he pointed at Elaine—"is a friend of mine. She asked me some questions about a plane and I answered them for her, that's all. Please go. I don't like being made a show of."

"But you don't know who I am," my uncle began protestingly.

Tompkins gave a bleak smile and put his hand up to his head, as though he had a headache. Not in that theatrical way clairvoyants do when they're about to "go into their trance," but as though something were hurting him.

He answered as though he were speaking against his will. "You're John Bridges," he said. "Your mother died when you

were fourteen years old, and it was the sight of the beautiful silk kimonos and wrappers she wore that really made you go into the export and import business later on . . .”

Elaine could have told him all that, was the unspoken thought in my mind.

He turned to me and answered it as though it had been said aloud. I went white and nearly fell through the floor! “But here’s something she couldn’t have,” he said. “About you. You took off your dance-slippers under a restaurant-table one night last week and a waiter accidentally kicked one halfway across the room. Rather than admit it was yours, you left in your stocking-feet. And you’ve got a diamond and ruby necklace with twenty stones in it in Safety Box No. 1805 at the National Security Bank. Also a bundle of letters you bought back from a gigolo in Paris for fifty thousand francs.”

My own uncle didn’t know about that!

“I don’t ask you to believe in me, I don’t care whether you do or not,” this Tompkins went on sombrely. “I didn’t ask you to come here in the first place. You’re going to the police about me some day, anyway, and get me in a lot of trouble.”

My hands strayed up and down the blank wall trying to find the door where there wasn’t any door. My eyes were blurred. I moaned, “Get me out of here!” The whole world was turning upside-down. I felt like a fly walking on the ceiling.

My uncle took me home. The five hundred stayed there on Tompkins’ floor. Elaine brought it back with her when she returned, after we did.

“Wouldn’t touch it,” she murmured. “What do you think he did, though? Borrowed five dollars from me, to tide himself over.”

That business of the $500 sold the fortune-teller to my uncle more than any number of bull’s-eye predictions could

have. He was convinced now that Jeremiah Tompkins wasn't a fake. That he was a phenomenon; and ordinary, in fact sub-ordinary, human being with this frightful, gift—or blight—of prognostication. In other words, the ground work of credulity had been laid. The rest followed in due course.

To begin with Uncle John tried to make the man a gift of money again—no longer to show him up, but in all sincerity and respect. He mailed him his personal check, for $1,000 this time. It came back inside a readdressed envelope, almost by return mail, torn into eight neat pieces. That failing, my uncle got Tompkins a job—and made sure he accept it by keeping his own name out of it. He had a friend advertise for a bookkeeper. The friend, without knowing the details, agreed to bar all except one of the applicants who might answer it—Jeremiah Tompkins. In other words, it was a one-man ad. Elaine was posted to call the man's attention to it in the paper, in case it should escape his eye. It all worked out according to plan; he took the job.

"But," I insisted stubbornly to the two of them, "if he's the actual mindreader he showed himself to be, how is it he didn't know at once who was in back of this paid ad you showed him? Why couldn't he see that the job came through Uncle John?"

"He doesn't go around all day reading what's in people's minds—he'd kill himself doing that." Elaine protested, as though I had disparaged the man. "It seems to come to him in flashes, only when he'll let it—and he doesn't like to. It's there in his unconscious self the whole time." She meant subconscious. "And he lets it flicker out once in awhile, or else it gets out in spite of him—I don't know."

Anyway, Tompkins took the job, and if he was a firstclass mystic, he wasn't any great shakes as a bookkeeper. My uncle's friend had to let him go in about six weeks. The friend didn't, of course, know the inside story; he claimed the man was too moony and moody—in plain English, shiftless.

Meanwhile Tompkins kept getting under my uncle's skin deeper and deeper. The strike on the Pacific Coast gave signs of going on all the rest of the summer. The silk shipment, which was worth thousands, was stuck there in Honolulu, rotting away. My uncle got an offer from a Japanese dealer in the islands, considerably below its intrinsic value, let alone any profit. It looked like a case of take what he could get or lose the whole thing. It wasn't a question of the money so much, with him, but he hated to come out second best in any transaction, hated to admit himself licked.

He'd already drafted the cable accepting the Jap offer, then at the last minute held it without filing. He went and looked up Tompkins by himself, without confiding in anyone.

I don't know what passed between them. All I know is that Uncle John came home that night and told me he'd cabled the Japs to go to hell; the shipping strike was going to be over in forty-eight hours, right when the deadlock seemed at its worst.

I don't have to remind you what happened. You've read how the Chief Executive himself intervened unexpectedly two days later and the strike was arbitrated and called off between sun-up and sundown. The president's own advisers hadn't known he was going to do it, so it was said. My uncle's consignment beat every other cargo into 'Frisco; and by getting into port first—well, it was quite a windfall. Uncle John got exactly double the usual price for the shipment.

A man in a shabby furnished-room, without a job of his own, had saved his firm exactly $200,000 all told!

I kept out of it from then on. I wanted to hang onto my peace of mind; more than that even, my sanity.

But then the thing finally clamped down on my uncle, as anyone might have known it would eventually. Three months ago, I saw the change come over him and asked him what it was. He suddenly retired from business, sold out—

or rather gave away his interest for next to nothing. He lost concern in everything and anything. He got haggard. I could see the mortal terror standing out in his eyes, day by day.

He'd gone to Tompkins again about some enormous venture he was contemplating. He was gambling more and more on these "inside tips," growing more reckless all the time. But this time there was a different answer, a catastrophic answer.

The thing under discussion was a long-term transaction, that would have taken about six months to pay off. "It doesn't matter one way or the other," Tompkins told him indifferently, "unless of course it's the firm itself you're thinking about, and not yourself personally." And then very indifferently, as though he'd known it all along; "Because you'll be dead by that time. Your life's coming to an end at midnight on the 14th-to-15th of next March."

I don't know whether Tompkins told it to him all at once, or doled it out piece-meal. I don't know how many times my uncle had to seek him out—pleaded with him maybe, or grovel on bended knees. I don't know anything at all. Uncle John wouldn't have been human if he hadn't asked the man how he would die, in what manner, and what could be done to prevent it.

"Nothing," was the merciless answer. "You can't stop it from happening. Though you fly to the far ends of the world, though you hide yourself in the depths of the earth, though you gather a thousand men about you to shield you, it will still find you out. It's there—written down for you—death by the jaws of a lion."

And then Uncle John started going slowly to pieces. Oh, it's not the money, Lieutenant McManus! It's not that he's endowed Tompkins with hundreds of thousands of dollars at a time, that he's dissipating my inheritance, trying to buy minutes and seconds of life back from a man who admits,

himself, that he has no control over it and can do nothing about it. I don’t mind that.

It’s that he’s dying by inches, before my eyes, day by day. It’s that the Spanish Inquisition never devised tortures to compare to what he’s going through now. It’s that it’s become communicated to me; I’m terrified and sick with horror. It’s that the sun has gone out and we’re trapped. It’s that there’s only tomorrow left now. I want help! I want help!

CHAPTER III

She was so overwrought that she fell forward across his desk, burying her face against it, pounding it helplessly with her clenched fist. McManus had to send out for a sedative. When she had drunk the spirits of ammonia, she lay down on a cot in another room and rested. McManus covered her up to the chin with his own overcoat, with his own hands.

When he went back again alone to his office, he spat out: “Gad, what things you run into. Twenty-million dollars, eighteen years old, and her very soul taken from her.”

He sat down at his desk; stayed there staring blankly before him as though he’d forgotten the whole incident.

After about five minutes, he picked up the phone very slowly: “Send Tom Shane in here to me. And Schafer. And Sokolsky. And Dominguez. Send out a short-wave if you have to, I want ’em here right away. Tell ’em to drop whatever they’re on, no matter what it is . . .”

Tom Shane was just a pleasant-looking fellow in a thirty-dollar herringbone suit. He didn’t look dumb and he didn’t look bright either. Just a guy you wouldn’t mind having a glass of beer with. He lined himself up to the left of the other three.

“Shane,” said McManus, “are you afraid of lions?”

“I wouldn’t go to bed with one,” admitted Shane frankly.

“Shane,” said McManus, “do you think you can keep a millionaire from being mangled by a lion at exactly twelve o’clock tomorrow midnight?”

It wasn’t really a question. McManus seemed to be talking absent-mindedly while he did a lot of thinking behind the smoke-screen of words. “I may as well tell you now that the ‘lion’ might take almost any kind of a shape. It

might be a bullet. It might be a poisoned cup of coffee. Then again it just might be an honest-to-goodness lion. I could fill that house with fellows like you, have 'em hanging from the chandeliers like mistletoe, but I don't want to do that. The 'lion' would only defer its visit, and come around some other time when it was least expected. I don't want that to happen; I want it to come when it's due to come, so I can make sure it'll never come again. So there's only one man going up there to that house with those two people, and I don't want him to fall down on the job. It's a double-header, too. If this is what I think it is, that girl's as doomed as her uncle. That would mop up the twenty-millions nicely, otherwise she could always bring suit to recover what's already been given away of it.

"So, Tom Shane, you go in there in the next room and sit by Ann Bridges, and go home with her when she's feeling fit enough. You're not a detective—you're her boy-friend on a week-end visit as her house-guest, or her new butler, or a traveling-salesman trying to sell her vacuum-cleaners, I don't care. But keep those two people alive. Midnight tomorrow's the deadline."

Tom Shane wheeled around and went out without a word. He still didn't look bright, but he didn't look dumb either. Just a well-built guy in a herringbone suit.

McManus said, "Schafer, you're on a girl named Elaine O'Brien—and all her family, too. I want to know more about 'em than they know about themselves. And be ready to pinch.

"Sokolsky, you're on a guy named Jeremiah Tompkins. And don't kid yourself by the way he looks that he's no great shakes of a guy. He's the kingpin in this, whatever it is. Don't let him out of your sight. Dictaphones and every trick of the trade. And try not to think while you're at it; the guy's supposed to be a mind-reader. Take somebody else on it with you, it's not going to be any pushover. And be even readier to pinch than Shafer. Tompkins has got to be in

custody long before midnight—whether you get anything on him or not."

There was just a guy left that looked a little like Valentino, only better looking.

"Dominguez," MaManus said, "I've gotta lotta little odd-jobs for you. But they're just as important as the other guys' assignments, don't bluff yourself they're not. Find out what zoos there are within a 500-mile radius of here. Check with every one of them and find out if they keep lions. Find out if any have escaped or been swiped."

"Swipe a lion?" breathed the detective.

"Warn the keeper at all of 'em to keep extra watch over their lion cages tonight and all day tomorrow. Report to me. Got that? Then, find out at what night club Miss Ann Bridges had a slipper kicked across the dance floor two years ago. And what became of it. Also, the mate to it. Use your Latin looks, apply for a job there or something. Find out what waiter picked 'em up after she'd gone, and what he did with them. If you can get hold of him, bring him in. Report to me. Then, buttonhole one of the big shots at the National Security Bank, ask his cooperation, see if you can trace the leak by which the number of Miss Bridges' safe-deposit box—1805—and what it had in it, came into the possession of a third party. There's nothing criminal in that, in itself, but it would give us a swell lead.

"Y'got less than twenty-four hours to do all this! Y'ain't eating and y'ain't sleeping and y'ain't even taking time off to talk from now on! Get going!"

When he was all by himself once more, McManus picked up the phone and asked for long distance. "Gimme Paris, France," he said matter-of-factly, "the Chief of the Surete."

Many blackmailing gigolos have had telephone love calls, but few have ever been the cause of a transatlantic long distance from police official to police official!

CHAPTER IV

The University Club Building has two entrances, one on the side street, the other on the avenue. An L-shaped lobby connects them. It's just for men, of course—college men—and women aren't allowed above the mezzanine floor, but the lobby's usually full of them, calling for pinch-hitters to fill in at dances, theatre parties, and house parties.

Ann Bridges and Tom Shane arrived there simultaneously, she in her car at the main entrance, he in a taxi at the side entrance. He had a cowhide overnight bag with him and had changed in the cab itself. He had Princeton written all over him, and—no offense—was now veering dangerously toward the dumb side of the not-dumb, not-bright equation. He had a polo coat hanging down his back below the elbows, orange-and-black tie (very narrow diagonals, not loud), the usual thick brogues. If you'd unbuttoned his jacket, you would see a fraternity pin on the lower tab of his vest. He looked about twenty-three. He jelled perfectly.

The girl was just coming in one side of the lobby as Shane showed up from the other, bag in hand. They were collegiately informal—and loud. He didn't raise his hat; she punched him on the shoulder. "Hi, toots."

" 'Lo ducky!" He grabbed her arm and they went sailing outside to her car, two young things without a care in the world.

Heads turned after them. Somebody mentioned her name. Everybody wondered who he was. All this to baffle watchful eyes that otherwise might have seen her drive away from Headquarters with Shane and would have known him to be a detective. A ticket for a traffic violation

she had actually received two days previously was screen enough for her visit there tonight. McManus had had the desk sergeant enter a dummy complaint against her in his records, and a Headquarters reporter had fallen for it, phoned in a couple of lines about it to his paper.

In the car she took the wheel. Shane pitched his bag into the back seat, lay back on the base of his skull. But as they shot off, he suddenly grew up again.

"Feel well enough to drive?" he asked.

"It'll keep my mind busy till we get there. College men usually let the other fellow do their driving for them anyway. If you're not one to the life—! How did you do it so quickly?"

"Borrowed the outfit from a friend who really went to one—changed in the cab . . . Who's out there with him?" he asked abruptly.

"We have a cook, and a door-opener; then there's Elaine, and Uncle John's secretary. My uncle will be all right—I know what you're thinking—but he'll be all right until tomorrow night. He wants to live too badly to do anything to himself. It's tomorrow night we've got to worry about." She drew in her breath fearfully and repeated it a second time: "Tomorrow night."

"Step it up a little," Shane said quietly. "Ninety wont hurt any."

The clock on the dashboard said midnight. The midnight before the midnight.

It was a palatial place, lost in its own grounds. Couldn't see it from the main road, it was so far back, but a private driveway led to it. Lighted by its private road lights.

Two granite lions couchant, like a sort of omen, were the first things that met Shane's eye as he got out at the entrance. A little like the lions in front of the Public Library in New York, but smaller. They went up the steps between them.

“J bet it hasn’t helped any to have those things staring him in the face every time he went in or out the last few weeks,” Shane muttered grimly.

“He’s spoken several times of having them removed and replaced by something else,” the girl said, “but this terrible lethargy, this fatalism, that’s come over him, has prevented his doing even that.”

The butler let them in. Shane, taking a snapshot of the man through his mask of collegiate vacuity, decided this wasn’t one of those crime-story butlers to be suspected at sight. He was an old man—sixty or more—had loyalty written all over him, and looked plenty worried.

“How is he, Weeks?” the girl asked in a whisper.

The butler shook his head. “I can’t stand much more of it myself, Miss Ann. He’s sat in one place ever since you left, staring at a clock on the wall.” The old man looked sort of hopefully toward Shane; then, nothing the get-up, his hopes seemed to fade a little.

“Yes, he knows about it, Weeks,” the girl said. “That’s why he’s here. Take his bag up—put him in the room next to my uncle.”

On each side of the long entrance hall a ceiling-high stained-glass panel was set into the blank wall, with electric lights hidden behind them to throw them into relief. They gleamed out in beautiful medieval tones of ruby, emerald, sapphire and mauve. Each leaded sub-division bore the head of some mythological or heraldic animal—a unicorn, a wild boar, a lion rampant, a phoenix . . .

She saw Shane looking at the windows as they went by. “They came from England,” she said dully. “Some royal abbey or other. Time of the Plantagenets.”

Shane didn’t know who the Plantagenets were. He wasn’t supposed to, anyway. “Pretty old, I guess, eh?” he hazarded. It occurred to him that, judging by the number of decorative animals around, the prophecy might very well

have originated right here in the house, in someone's evil, fertile mind.

"He ever been here, to your knowledge?" he asked.

"Who, Tompkins? Never."

She took the detective in to see the doomed John Bridges.

Bridges sat in the middle of a big room, and he had gathered three time-pieces around him. A big clock on the wall, a medium-sized one on the table before him, an expensive white-gold watch on his wrist. All three were ticking remorselessly away in the silence, like the mechanism of a time bomb. There was a minute's difference, Shane noted, between the wall and table clocks. Bridges turned two feverish eyes in hollow sockets toward them.

"Which is right?" he pleaded. "What does yours say?"

"It's twenty-nine past twelve, not half-past," the girl said.

His face lit up joyously. "Oh, Ann!" he cried. "Oh, Ann! that gives me a minute more! Just think, a minute more!"

Tom Shane thought, "For what he's done to this guy already, Tompkins deserves the chair, whether he intends to do anything more or not."

Aloud he said, cheerfully, "You and I, old timer, are going to have a good stiff highball together—then we're going up to bed!"

"Yes, yes," Bridges agreed pathetically. "My next-to-the-last night on earth! I must celebrate, I must—" His voice broke dismally. "Oh, help me forget for just five minutes! Just five minutes, that's all I ask!" He opened a drawer, pulled out a checkbook, scribbled hastily in it. "If you can take my mind off it for just five minutes, write your own figure in here over my name! Five thousand, ten thousand, I don't care!"

Shane thought: "I wonder how many times friend Tompkins has cashed in like this?" He went out to mix the highballs himself, and gave Bridges a shot of Scotch that would have lifted a horse off its shoes. McManus' words

came back to him: “It may be a poisoned cup of coffee.” He sampled the drink himself first, rinsing his mouth with it carefully. The taste was so good he hated to waste it, so he swallowed it. “Pleasant way of dying, anyway,” he consoled himself.

He took the drink inside. “You go to bed,” he told the girl. “Lock your door. It’s my job from now on.”

She said, “You’re swell. Keep us alive,” with a funny little catch in her voice as she sidled by him and went up the stairs.

The wall clock chimed one, with a horrid, shuddery, brazen sound. “Twenty-three hours to go,” John Bridges said.

Shane clicked their glasses together with almost enough force to shatter them. “Here’s to crime!” he said huskily. He winked one eye deliberately at the doomed man.

CHAPTER V

3 a.m.—Shafer, lieutenant. Sorry to wake you up, but I've lost this Elaine O'Brien twist, Miss Bridges' maid—"

You've lost her? Well, find her again! Whaddye mean by—

It ain't that. I know where she is, but she's no good to us any more. She's dead.

Dead? What happened to her?

She did the Dutch. Took a run up to the bathroom just before I closed in on her, and swallowed something. I called an ambulance right away, but it was too late.

So then she was implicated. She knew something and was afraid we'd get it out of her!

She didn't know I was on her trail. I had just about located her house, when I heard the screaming start up inside. Time I busted in, it was all over. I'm holding the rest of them. They claim it was the prophecy preying on her mind. She came home tonight and told them she couldn't stand the gaff, waiting around out there for it to happen. I checked on the drugstores where she got the stuff, and she bought it a full three days ago, long before Miss Bridges came to us. What'll I do with the rest of 'em?

10 a.m.—Dominguez, lieutenant. I took a dish-washing job at the Club Cuckoo, where Miss Bridges lost her shoes. Say, my hands are red as lobsters!"

Never mind your hands, I'm no palm-reader. What'd you get?

They knew who she was, so they knew whose shoes they were. First the manager was going to send 'em out to her house next day-after all, they cost about fifty bucks a pair—but some kind of a foreigner sitting there at one of the

tables buttonholes him. This guy gives the manager a lotta malarkey about how he's an old friend of Miss Bridges, knew her in Paris, and he'll see she gets 'em back. I got all this from a waiter, who I gave a tip on the horses to while I was massaging the crockery—

Well, you got something, Don. I was just asking about that very guy at the rate of twenty bucks a syllable. The shakedown racket made Paris too hot for him so he came over here about two years ago. You gotta descriptch, I suppose?

Yeah. Misplaced eyebrow on his lip. When he's doing the hot spots he wears one eyeglass in his right lamp. Very good-looking. A short little devil, about five—

That's enough. One of his names is Raoul Berger, but he's got twenty others. So he got the shoes?

No. The pay-off is the manager wanted all the credit for himself and hung onto them. But this Frog didn't seem to mind—

Sure he didn't. All he cared about was knowing what had taken place, so he could tip off Tompkins and get under her skin. I'm sending out a general alarm for Berger right away. They're probably working hand-in-glove together, and intend splitting the Bridges millions between 'em at the windup. Probably the idea was originally Berger's, since he'd already shaken her down once in Europe.

Now, about the safe-deposit box, chief. I been conferring with Cullinan—he's the manager of that branch of the National Security—and we questioned the vault-keeper. I think I've cleared up pretty definitely about how the number of Miss B's box, 1805, was known—but not its contents. The vault custodian seems straight enough; he's been with them for years. He recalls definitely that one day about a year and a half ago, Miss B. took her box into one of the little private cubbyholes that are provided for that purpose down in the vault room. The custodian recalls it, because she came out and absent-mindedly left her key

behind her. Now, two of these keys are used at a time, see. The custodian has one, and the owner of the box has the other. The number of the box it opens is engraved on the shaft of each key. Well, Miss B. stepped right back inside, that day she mislaid her key, and the custodian went with her to help her look. The key wasn't there. They came out again—she went through her purse and everything—no sign of it. Fie stepped in again a second time, and there it was, right on the slab! The custodian's pretty certain that the adjoining booth was occupied at the time, but he is hazy about who was in there. That doesn't matter. The partitions don't run all the way up to the ceiling. Obviously, it was our friend Berger, and obviously he'd been in there every time she was, waiting for just such a thing to happen. When it did, he probably used a fish hook or a magnet on the end of a string to draw the key up, memorize its number, then replace it again. All to add to Tompkin's build-up with her as a wizard. But about what the contents of the box was, I don't know, unless he used some kind of a mirror as a periscope—

More likely she bought that necklace in Paris. Berger'd seen it on her over there, and he figured it would be in the box. Also the letters she'd written to him. Took a guess at it and scored a bull's-eye. To get into the vaults all he'd have to do was rent a box under a phony name for five, six bucks, stuff it with old newspapers, and keep showing up each time she did. Still, it isn't as easy as it sounds. Berger had to stay out of sight—she knew what he looked like—and he had to get in right next door to her each time, not further down the line.

For twenty million bucks I'd go to that much trouble myself.

Get busy on them zoos, or you won't even be earning forty-eight hundred.

Zoos! That's gratitude for ya!

5 p.m.—Sokolsky, lieutenant—

It’s about time I was hearing from you! Where’ve you been all this time. What’ve you got?

A pretty bad case of the jitters, for one thing. And Dobbs—I took him on this detail with me—is about ready to crack wide open. I don’t think he’ll be any good for the rest of this case.

I ain’t asking for a health report, I wanna know—

It’s uncanny about that guy—Tompkins, I mean. He—he can see through walls and things—

Less words and more facts!

Yes sir. We took a room in the same house he lives in. We got a lucky break and got the one right over his.Tompkins was out at the time, so we fixed up a dictaphone and led it up through the ceiling behind the steam-pipe. The landlady don’t like him, on accounta he read what was in her mind when she insured her third husband so heavily, after losing two in a year, and also ’cause he’s hep that the color of the hair she goes around wearing ain’t her own. She didn’t tell me this; I put two and two together from the remarks she let drop. Anyway, I got around her and found some French cake-eaters been calling on Tompkins off and on for the past year or so.

Your voice makes sweet music! We’re getting places fast now!

The landlady thinks this Frenchy is the nuts, but that’s neither here nor there. The point is, he’s the only person at all—outside of the O’Brien girl and the old man Bridges himself—who has been near Tompkins since he’s living in the house . . .

Well, the O’Brien girl’s out of it now. I don’t think she was in on it, anyway. Just a stooge they used to pump facts out of about the Bridges family. I think maybe she found out there was something phony up, after it was too late, and realizing what she’d done to her benefactors, committed the old harry. Go ahead, Sock, what else?

I gave Tompkins' room a good going-over while I was in there, and came across any number of checks made out by Bridges. Way up in the high brackets, too, telephone numbers! The only thing that don't jell right was some of 'em were dated six months or more back. He hauls 'em in all right, but don't seem to bother cashing 'em! Maybe he's just cagey, afraid to go too heavy yet while Bridges is still alive. Maybe he's saving them all up until B. and the girl have been done away with!

Will those checks build us a case against him and his French shill! What you do with them?

I was afraid he'd miss them if I impounded them this soon. Dobbs and I rushed a few of the biggest ones out, had 'em photostated, and then replaced 'em again.

Good work!

Tompkins came in about midnight, just as we were getting through, so we beat it upstairs to listen in. About two in the morning this French pal of his pays him a visit. Dobbs took down everything in shorthand, until he went haywire, and I'll read it to you.

Tompkins says, "You again? What do you want now?"

"Endorse me another one of them checks—I'm running short."

T. refused at first, says he don't want Bridges' money, and Frenchy has no right to it either. Frenchy pulls a gun on him or something, and makes him do it. Then Frenchy says, "Now you get hold of Bridges tomorrow and have him change his will, while there's still time. I'll supply the lawyer, a friend of mine. He's to turn over everything to you, see? Kid him that you'll call off the prophecy if he does it."

Tompkins says, "But I can't. It's not in my power. It's there. It's going to happen."

The French guy does a slow burn. "You think I believe that stuff? Save that for him! You do what I tell you, or—"

Tompkins answers quietly, “You’re not going to get hold of his money, Berger. You’re not going to live long enough to. Why, you’re going to die even sooner than he is! His time is tomorrow night, but yours is right tonight! You’re never even going to get out of this house alive. There are two dicks in the room over us right now, listening to every word we say—their names are Sokolsky and Dobbs—”

The notes break off there, loot, because Dobbs keeled over right at the mike and pulled a dead faint on the floor. Yeah, honest! It gave me a pretty stiff jolt myself. Just seeing the leadwire of the dictaphone which I’m sure he didn’t, wouldn’t have given this Tompkins our names—nor how many of us were up there.

I’ll have to quote the rest from memory: “Death,” says Tompkins, “is rushing at you right now; I hear the beat of his swift wings. I feel it, I see it, it’s on its way. You have only minutes left. And for me there is imprisonment waiting, and lingering death in a little stone room—”

I heard the Frenchman yell out, “So you framed me, you dirty double-crossing lug! Well, see if you saw this in your crystal ball!”

With that the gun goes off, and nearly busts my eardrum. The Frog has shot him.

I didn’t wait to hear any more. I unlimbered my own gun and lit out and down the stairs hell-bent for leather. The Frog had beaten me out to the stairs; he was already a flight below.

I yelled, “Stay where you are!” Instead, he turned and fired at me, and I fired at the same time he did. He fell all the rest of the way down to the ground floor, and when I got to him he was dead.

Tompkins came out of his room unhurt, but with a powder burn across his forehead. The Frog must have fired at point-blank range, and still didn’t hit him! He started coming down slowly to where I was, with nothing in his

hands. Dobbs had come to, and came downstairs behind him, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

Well, this is the hardest part to believe. You can suspend me if you want to, but it's the God's honest truth. This man Tompkins came all the way down to where I was bending over the body at the foot of the stairs. I straightened up and covered him with my gun. It didn't faze him in the least. He kept moving right on past me toward the street door. Not quickly, either, but slowly as if he was just going out for a walk. He said, "It isn't my time yet. You can't do anything to me with that."

I said, "I can't, eh? You take one step away from me, and it'll not only be your time, but you'll be a minute late!"

Dobbs was practically useless; he almost seemed to be afraid of the guy.

Tompkins turned his back on me and took that one step more. I fired a warning shot over his head. He put his hand on the doorknob. So I lowered the gun and fired at the back of his knee, to bring him down. The bullet must have gone right through between his legs. I heard it hit wood along the door frame. Tompkins opened the door and stepped into the opening, and I got mad. I reared after him and fired pointblank at the back of his head. He wasn't five yards away from me. It was brutal—would have been murder and I'm willing to admit it myself, even though technically he was resisting arrest! I'm telling you, he didn't even stagger; it never even got him. He went on through and the darkness swallowed him up.

I leaned there against that door for a minute seeing ghosts, then I ran out after him. He was clean gone, not a sign of him up or down the block.

Loot, I'm in a frame of mind where I don't care what you do to me. My job is to get flesh-and-blood guys that know a bullet when they feel one, not protoplasms that don't even know enough to lie down when they're hit. . . .

Awright, Sokolsky, pull yourself together. Bring in the stiff and rinse yourself out with a jolt of rye; maybe it'll help you carry out instructions better next time! All I know is you let Tompkins slip right through your fingers, and we're right back where we were. We got to start all over again. We've stopped the crook, but the maniac or screwball or whatever you want to call him, the more dangerous of the two, is at large. And every minute he stays that way, Bridges and his niece are in danger of their lives! Tompkins wasn't bluffing when he walked out that door. He believes in that hooey himself; and if the prophecy don't work, he'll help it work! We've got seven hours to pick him up again, out of seven million people! Nice going, Sokolsky. Look in a mirror and get good and red in the face!

CHAPTER VI

“Don’t!” Shane yelled at the man roughly. “Take your eyes off that clock! You’re starting to get me, myself, doing that! I’m only human!” He took a quick step over to the table and turned the instrument face down.

John Bridges gave a skull-like grin, all teeth and no mirth. “You’re only human—that’s right. That’s the truest thing you ever said, son. You’re a detective, too, aren’t you, son? That’s why you’ve been hanging around here all day. Don’t try to tell me, I know. This poor child here thinks you can save me. You think you can save me, too. You poor fools! Nothing can—nothing! He said I’m to die and I’ve got to die.”

“He’s lying through his teeth!” Shane yelled hotly. “That Tompkins is a faker and a crook and a skunk. He’ll fry in hell before anything gets near you. I’ll live to see it, and so will she—and so will you!”

Bridges’ head fell forward, over his lap. “Will it hurt much?” he whined. “I guess it must. Those terrible fangs in their mouths! Those sharp, cruel claws, tearing your skin. But it won’t be the claws—it’s the jaws that will mangle me. By the jaws of a lion, he said—by the jaws of a lion!”

Ann Bridges put her hands over her ears. “Don’t,” she murmured quietly. She gave Shane a look. “I’m trying so hard to—to stay all in one piece.”

Shane poured a dynamic drink, all Scotch with a needle of seltzer. He handed it to Bridges. “Give yourself a little Bravemaker,” he suggested in an undertone.

The millionaire deliberately thrust the glass away from him. Liquor spilled all over the carpet; the glass bounded

and rocked on its side without breaking. “Alcohol! Trying to ward off death with bottled slops!”

Shane took out his gun, pointed it butt-first at the old millionaire. “Don’t this mean anything to you? Don’t it mean anything to you that every window and door of this house is locked fast, that there’s an electric alarm on them? That there’s dozens of armed men within call, hidden all around this estate, ready to jump in and grab anyone or anything the minute it shows? That we’re sealed up tight, just the five of us?”

The secretary had lit out in panic sometime during the previous night. Just as Elaine O’Brien had fled. Shane had found a note from him that morning, saying he couldn’t stand it, resigning the job.

Bridges cackled horribly, like a chicken about to have its neck wrung. “Five against Fate. Five against the stars. And what a five! A slip of a girl, a loud-mouthed boy with a gun, and I—!”

“Fate, hell! Stars, hell!” Shane smashed the butt of his gun fiercely at the face of the clock on the wall. Thick glass dribbled off it. “That for Fate, and that for the stars!”

Something happened to the clock. The damaged mechanism started whirring violently, the hands began to move—the hour-hand slowly, the minute-hand more rapidly. They telescoped, jammed together in a straight line pointing at the top of the dial, stayed that way. The whirring sound stopped, the apparatus went dead.

Bridges pointed a bloodless finger at the omen; he didn’t have to say anything.

In the silence the old butler came to the door, stood looking in at them a minute. “Dinner is served,” he said hollowly.

“The Last Supper,” Bridges shuddered. He got up, swayed, tottered toward the dining room. “Eat, drink, let us be merry, for—tonight we die!”

Ann Bridges ran to the detective and clung to him. What difference did it make, at a time like this, that Shane was still a stranger to her, that she hadn't even known him twenty-four hours before?

"And I still say it was just a coincidence," he muttered pugnaciously. "You say it, too! Look at me and say it! It was just a coincidence. That happened to be the nearest place on the dial where they both met exactly, those two hands. My blows dented them. They got stuck there, just as the works died, that was all. Stay sane whatever you do. Say it over and over. It was just a coincidence!"

Outside the tall French windows, in the velvety nightsky, the stars in all their glory twinkled derisively.

10:45 p.m.—Dominguez, Mac. I've been trying to get through to you for fifteen minutes. Must be some trouble along the line somewhere. I'm way the hell out at a little crossroads called Sterling Junction—yeah, it's only about ten miles from the Bridges place, in the other direction. Very bad grief. Checking the zoos like you told me, I dig up a traveling road show—a carnival or whatever you want to call it—making a one-night stand here.

Now they had two lions—yes, I said had, that's the grief. Two monsters, a male and a female, both in one cage. My check-up was a post-mortem. They'd both busted out not twenty minutes before—don't know if the cage was left open through the keeper's carelessness, or deliberately tampered with. I beat it right up here to find out what I could. The female was shot dead just outside the carnival grounds but the male got away clean. A posse is out after it with everything from shotguns to fire extinguishers, hoping to rub it out before it gets anyone. . . . They think it's heading toward the Bridges estate. Someone in a Ford reported sighting what he mistook to be an enormous tawny dog with green eyes in the underbrush as he went by.

Earlier in the evening, the keeper tells me, there was a peculiarlooking duck mooning around the lion cage. Kept staring at them like he was trying to hypnotize the two brutes. The keeper caught this guy teasing them with a bit of goods torn from a woman’s dress, flitting it at them through the bars. Fie sent him about his business without having sense enough to try and find out what the idea was. It may have been our friend Tompkins, then again it may not. Plenty of village half-wits can’t resist riling caged animals like that.

D’you suppose brutes like that can be mesmerized or hypnotized in some way, loot? D’you suppose they can be given the scent of one particular person, through a bit of clothing, like bloodhounds? Yeah, I know him, but then this whole affair is so screwy from first to last, nothing would surprise me any more. You better contact Shane right away and let him know he’s up against the real thing, not a metaphor any more. There’s a lot of difference between a man-eater like that and a little runt like Tompkins, when it comes to a showdown!

CHAPTER VII

John Bridges was slumped in a big overstuffed chair by now, staring wild-eyed at nothing. Shane was perched on the chair arm, his gun resting on his thigh, finger around the trigger, safety off. Ann Bridges was standing behind the chair, leaning over it, pressing soothing hands to her uncle's forehead.

The portieres were drawn across the French windows, veiling the stars outside—which were there nevertheless. In addition, a ponderous bookcase blocked one window, a massive desk the other. The double-doors were locked on the inside, and the key to them was in Shane's vest pocket. The butler and the Finnish cook were, at their own request, locked in the scullery.

It was the awful silence that was hardest to bear. They couldn't get the old millionaire to say anything. Their own voices—Shane's and Ann's—were a mockery in their ears, so they quit trying to talk after a while. Bridges wouldn't drink either, and even if he had, he was past all sensation now; it wouldn't have affected him.

The girl's face was the color of talcum. Her uncle's was a death mask, bone structure overlaid by parchment. Shane's was granite, with a glistening line of sweat just below his hair line. He'd never forget this night, no matter what else happened for the rest of his life. They were all getting scars on their souls, the sort of scars people got in the Dark Ages, when they believed in devils and black magic.

The travesty of food and drink that Shane had swallowed at that shadowy supper table a while before was sticking in his craw. How can wine warm you when the toast is death at midnight? He'd tried to urge the girl to leave while there

was time, to get out and leave the two of them to face it alone. He hadn't been surprised at her staunch refusal; he admired her all the more for it. Tie would nevertheless have overridden her by physical force if necessary—the atmosphere had grown so deadly—but for one fact.

When he'd tried to contact McManus, to have a special bodyguard sent out to take Ann away, the phone was dead. The house was cut off. Ann couldn't go alone, of course; that would have been worse than staying.

They had one clock with them in the room again. Bridges had begged and pleaded so hard for one, that Shane reversed his edict. The mental agony of Bridges, and the strain on Ann and himself were much worse without a clock than with one. It was better to know just how much time was left. Shane had got a large one with a pendulum, from the entrance hall. It said fourteen minutes to twelve.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick—and it was thirteen minutes to twelve. The pendulum, like a harried gold planet, kept flashing back and forth behind the glass pane that cased it. Ann manipulated her two solacing hands over the doomed man's temples.

"It goes so fast, so fast," John Bridges groaned, eyes on the clock. The minute hand, shaped like a gold spearhead, had notched forward again—eleven to twelve.

"Damn!" Shane said with a throaty growl, "Damn!" He began to switch the muzzle of his gun restlessly up and down on his thigh. Something to shoot at, he thought; gimme something to shoot at! A drop of sweat ran vertically down his forehead as far as the bridge of his nose, then off into one of the tear ducts beside it.

Tick, tick, tick—whish, whish, whish—ten to twelve.

Bridges said suddenly, without taking eyes off the clock: "Son—Shane, or whatever your name is—call Warren 2424 in the city for me. Ask him once more—oh, I've asked him so many times—for the last time, if there isn't any hope for me? Ask him if I've got to go, if he still sees it?"

Shane said, “Who?” But he knew. Bridges wasn’t aware yet that Tompkins would be in custody, that McManus had seen to that item right after Ann’s visit.

“Tompkins,” the ill man answered. “I haven’t—haven’t heard from him in two days. And if there isn’t any hope, say goodbye for me.”

Shane said curiously, sparring for time because he knew the phone was dead, “You want me to unlock those doors, go out there into the other room where the phone is?”

“Yes, yes,” Bridges said. “It’s still safe, we have—yes, there’s ten minutes yet. You can be back in here in a minute. His landlady will answer. Tell her to hurry and bring him down to the phone—”

Shane snapped his fingers. “Maybe I can bring this baby back to life,” he thought. He gave the girl a look. “Stay right by him, Miss Ann. I’ll just be outside the door.”

He took the doorkey from his pocket, opened the two tall doors, and stepped quickly to the phone in the room beyond. The lights were on all over the house, and everything was quiet.

The phone was still dead, of course. He spoke loudly into the silent mouthpiece, “Give me Warren 2424, hurry it up!” He feigned a pause, then, “Bring Jeremiah Tompkins to the phone, quickly! This call is from John Bridges.”

He faked another wait, slightly longer. The clock in the next room ticked remorselessly away before Ann Bridges and her uncle. He held his gun in his right hand. The phone was a hand-set. A gust of wind or something scuffed and snuffed at one of the French windows over on the other side of the house; instantly his weapon pointed in that direction. The sound was almost animal-like. Phoof! like that. A snuffle.

It wasn’t repeated. Shane remembered his charade, and said, “Tompkins? Hello! I’m talking on behalf of Mr. Bridges. Does that still hold good, for tonight at twelve? It’s nearly that now, you know.”

There was a long mirror-panel in the wall over him. In it he could see the room he had left. The girl and her uncle were bending forward, drinking in every word.

"Fight fire with fire," he thought. "I don't know why McManus didn't sweat Tompkins down to the bone, then make him eat his prophecy to Bridges' face. That would have undone the damage quicker than anything else!"

He raised his voice, "That's more like it!" he said. "When did you find this out? Re-checked, eh? You should have let him know first thing—he's been worried sick! I'll tell him right away!" He hung up, wondering just how good an actor he was going to be.

He went briskly in again, gave them the bridgework. He could tell by the girl's face that she saw through the bluff; maybe she had found out already that the phone was n.g. But if he could only sell the death-candidate himself—

"It's all off!" he announced cheerfully. "Tompkins just told me so himself. There's been a change in—in, uh, the stars. He's not getting the death-vibrations any more. Can't possibly be midnight tonight. He'll tell you all about it himself when he—" Something in the old man's face stopped him. "What's the matter, what're you looking at me like that for? Didn't you hear what I just said?"

John Bridges' head was thrown back, mouth open. He began to roll it slowly from side to side. "Don't mock me," he said. "Death's too serious to be mocked like that. I just remembered—after I sent you out there—his landlady had that phone taken out a month ago. Too much trouble calling roomers to it all the time, she said. There is no phone at all now in the house where Tompkins lives."

Shane took it like a man. He turned away without a word, closed! the doors again behind him, leaned his back against them. Tossing the key up and down in the hollow of his hand, he smiled mirthlessly out i of the corner of his mouth.

The figure in the chair was holding out a hand toward him, a trembling hand. "It's five-to," he quavered. "I'm

going to say goodbye now. Thank you for sticking by me, anyway, son. Ann, my dear, come around in front of me. Kiss me goodbye."

Shane said in a hoarse, offensive voice: "What'll you have for breakfast?" He ignored the outstretched hand.

Bridges didn't answer. The girl crouched down before him and he kissed her on the forehead. "Goodbye, dear. Try to be happy. Try to forget—whatever horror you're about to witness in this room in the next few minutes."

Shane said belligerently, trying to rally him: "Not to want to die is one thing. Not to lift a finger to keep from dying is another ! Were you always like this, all your life?"

The doomed man said, "It's easy to be brave with forty years ahead of you. Not so easy with only four minutes—"

The tick of the clock, the hiss of its pendulum, seemed louder than all their voice. Three minutes to twelve . . . two minutes. John Bridges' eyes were like tiny billiardballs in his head, so rounded, so hard, so white. Shane's trigger-finger kept twitching nervously, aching to pull, but in which direction, he didn't know.

One minute to go. The space between the two clock hands was a sliver of white, a paring, a thread. Three pairs of eyes were on it. Dying calf-eyes; frightened woman's eyes; skeptical policeman's eyes!

Then, the space was gone. The two hands had blended into one.

A bell, a pair of them, rang out jarringly. The phone that Shane had thought dead, that had been dead until now, was pealing on the other side of the door. The shock lifted him off his heels. The girl jumped too. Bridges alone gave no sign.

Bong! the clock struck mellowly, majestically repeatedly.

Before the first vibration had died away Shane was already outside at the signaling instrument, gun-hand

watchfully fanning the empty air around him. A trick? A trap to draw him away? He'd thought of that. But Bridges and the girl were in full sight of him; to get to them anything would have to pass him first. And he had to answer this weird call.

McManus' distant voice said: "Hello! Shane—Shane? Line was down, couldn't get through to you till now. Been trying for an hour. . . . Everything's under control, Shane. We've beaten the rap, the guy's saved ! No time to tell you now. I'll be out there the quickest I can—"

Bong! cut across the voice, third stroke of the hour.

"Hurry, chief," said Shane. "The poor guy is sweating his very life away with terror. I want you to tell him it's all O.K."

"General alarm was out for Tompkins. At half-past ten tonight he walks in here of his own accord, gives himself up! Yeah, Headquarters ! Said he knew he'd be arrested anyway. He's still spouting Bridges has to die. Also that he's going to conk out himself, in jail waiting for his trial to come up. The latter he Iras my best wishes on. Here's something for you, kid, after what you must have gone through out there tonight; according to Tompkins, you're marrying twenty million bucks inside a year. Yeah, Ann Bridges, before the year is out!"

Bong!

"Oh, one thing, I just got word they shot a lion that was heading your way, cornered it on the outskirts of the estate. A real one that broke out of its cage earlier tonight. We thought at first Tompkins had something to do with it, but he's been able to prove he wasn't anywhere near there when it happened. Just a spooky coincidence. Tell Bridges everything's jake. I'll be there myself in three-quarters of an hour—"

The gild's frenzied scream seared through Shane like cauterization. He dropped the phone like a bar of red-hot iron, whirled. Old man Bridges dashed by before he could

stop him and sprinted down the entrance-hall like something bereft of its senses.

"Stop him! He's out of his mind!" Ann Bridges screamed.

Bong!

Shane took up the chase. Bridges had vanished but the chatter of broken glass sounded far away. The detective turned into the hallway—and slid to a stop. Walking warily, apprehensively, he approached the distant figure of the millionaire. Bridges stood at the far end of the hall, leaning against the wall, which held two stained-glass panels.

As Shane approached, the other man's knees buckled wearily but he didn't fall. A chill swept through Shane's flesh. He stopped, unable to breath. For John Bridges was headless or seemed to be. His head had been thrust directly through one of those leaded panes, rammed straight out the other side.

Jagged teeth of thick, splintered glass which held his neck in a vise had pierced his jugular. You could see a dark shadow running down the inside of the lighted pane that was the millionaire's life-blood.

It was midnight and the square of glass he had chosen in his blind, headlong flight, out of all the many squares, was that one of the lion rampant!

Bong!

The mane and eyes and feline nostrils of the beast still showed above John Bridges' gashed throat, as though the painted image were swallowing the man bodily. And for fangs, instead of painted ones there were jagged spears of glass, thrusting into Bridges' flesh from all sides of the orifice he himself had created.

Death by the jaws of a lion!

Bong! the clock struck for the twelfth time, and then all was silence.

McManus raised worried eyes above the report he was making out, “What’ll I put in here? Would you call it murder by mental suggestion?”

“I’m not so sure,” Shane answered.

“Are you starting to go superstitious on me, too?” the lieutenant snapped. But his eyes went uneasily toward the window, beyond which the stars were paling into dawn.

They both looked long at those distant inscrutable pin-points of brilliance that no man can defy or alter.

I’LL NEVER PLAY DETECTIVE AGAIN

I sat there with my top-hat over one eye, listening to him whistle like a canary off-key while he struggled with his white tie. His engagement to Marcia had just broken in all the papers, and her people were throwing a party at the Park-Ashley to celebrate it.

“Give up,” I kidded as he fumbled his tie for the fifth time, “you’ll never get those two ends to meet.”

The telephone started-in again. “Another reporter?” he groaned.

But she didn’t sound like it when I got over there. “Tommy darling, is it really true? Let me be the first to—”

I doused it against my shirt-front and wagged him over. “Somebody wants Tommy darling. Just wait’ll I tell Marcia this.”

I could joke about it because he wasn’t that kind at all. We’d been rooming together ever since the days when we only had one dress-suit between the two of us, and whoever happened to wear it, the other guy had to stay home in bed.

I went in to get a spare collar; parties like those last all night. When I came back he’d hung up already.

“I’d have been just as pleased without her good wishes,” he told me, going down in the elevator. “That was that Fortescue gal just then.”

She'd developed rather a bad case of it the year before, before he met Marcia. The minute he found out about it, he started to dodge and duck and go into reverse; her nature was too explosive to have around the house. She'd even tried to have him beaten up by gangsters, probably so she could nurse him back to health, only he fractured the jaw of one and chased the other to the corner of First Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street, where he lost him in the traffic. Tom couldn't prove it was she, of course, but he'd had his suspicions. After that she'd given up the job as hopeless and we hadn't heard any more of her—until tonight.

"Funny thing about it," he went on, while we were waiting at the door for a taxi, "is the big change in her all of a sudden, saying maybe it was all for the best. Wonder how much of it she really meant?"

In the cab he suddenly snapped his fingers. "Forgot all about it! I should have sent Marcia some flowers."

We stopped by at a florist and he went in. I waited where I was.

"Where are they?" I asked when he came back empty-handed.

"He's rushing them down there by special messenger. Some of the swellest red roses you ever saw, kind they call American Beauties. She must be tired of orchids by now."

It was a three-ringed circus when we got there. The Park-Ashley was seething with debs, sub-debs, post-debs, Princeton and Dartmouth undergrads, dowagers, men-about-town, the whole social zoo. The party was supposed to be on the second floor but it was spilling over in every direction.

Tom and I hired a room together to change collars in later on, before breakfast. We had a highball apiece to see us through the first eighty dances, then we went downstairs and reported for duty. We found Marcia standing next to her mother on the receiving line.

“Almost thought you were going to renege on your own party,” she smiled.

“Did you get my flowers?” he asked under his breath, like a fellow in love will.

She looked blank for a minute, then began to laugh. “You must have forgotten to put a card in, in your excitement! Whole carloads of them have been coming all evening.”

“I bet I find ’em!” a crystalline voice piped up. Marcia’s kid sister was standing there, eyes alight with excitement. “I know his taste.”

“Red roses,” I said behind the back of my hand, to help her along. She turned and ran outside.

Tom began to dance with Marcia, and just as I was girding up my armor to step into the fray, the kid came darting back again. “I see you found them all right,” I said. One was pinned to her dress and she was holding a smaller one, a bud, in her hand.

“Here, this one’s for you.” She reached for my lapel and drew the long stem through the buttonhole, then snapped it off short. “Ow!” she complained, and put her thumb to her lips for a second.

“See, that’s what you get!” I grinned.

We started to dance, but before we were halfway around the room she was leaning against me in a funny sort of way all at once, as if she were tired out. I put my hand to her chin, tilted her head back, and looked into her face. Her eyes were just drooping closed. “Tired,” she murmured. “Dick, I—can hardly stand up any more—”

Suddenly she crumpled and would have toppled over if my arm hadn’t been around her waist. I managed to half-carry and half-lead her over to the door, and no one noticed; it looked like one of those crazy new dance-steps. As soon as I got her outside I picked her up from the floor altogether and made for the nearest elevator with her. She weighed less than nothing, just somebody’s baby sister.

“What do you feel, kid?” I breathed, “What hurts you? Old Man Dick’ll take care of you.”

She opened her eyes just enough to show two slivers of white, like crescent moons. “Old Man Dick ’n’ Little Girl Jean,” she sighed. Then she sort of passed out altogether. The elevator-slide opened and I snapped, “Hurry up, take me up to wherever their suite is! And get hold of a doctor!”

The Planters seemed to have taken a whole floor for the occasion. I stumbled through three rooms with her before I got to anything with a bed in it. Flowers everywhere; they were all going to be distributed to hospitals in the morning. A pert-looking number with a lace handkerchief cocked over one eye was sitting reading *Ballyhoo*, legs crossed way up to *here.*

“C’mon, get your thrills later,” I ordered. “Help me with Miss Planter.”

She squeaked like a mechanical mouse and got the expensive covers at half-mast.

A distinguished-looking man with a silver goatee miraculously found his way in to where we were without a road-map; shoving a bridge-hand into his breast-pocket. He swept aside his dinner-tails and sat down beside her. “Turn the other way,” he said to me and began to undo the shoulder-straps of her dress. Something fell across one of my patent-leathers as he tossed it aside, a huge cabbagy red rose; I kicked it out of the way. “This child is dead,” he said, in the same tone of voice he would have said “Three spades.” The French maid squeaked again, then covered her mouth.

I picked up the pale-green telephone and asked them to page Tommy Nye in the ballroom. I acted as hard as a callus on a mailman’s foot but I was crying away inside of me; too much Princeton won’t let you show what you feel. There was a long wait and the music from down-stairs came over the wire clear as a bell and out into the room, almost like a radio tuned very soft—that damned waltz of Coward’s,

Nevermore. Her first party and her last, she'd never dance again. I made a face and muffled the thing against my shirt-front. "Tom," I said when he got on, "better take Marcia and her mother back to their house, give them any excuse at all, only don't let them come up here—"

"What's up?" he said worriedly.

"The kid just died up here. Don't let it get around, you can break it to them when you get them home. Get back as quick as you can, will you?" He hung up without a word, I couldn't tell how he was taking it; but then how would anyone take a thing like that? I told the maid to take the Planters' wraps down to them, and then go home with them; she was too frilly for a death-chamber.

That society doctor, meanwhile, had gotten in my hair. He'd telephoned in his notification to the authorities all right, and exerted himself to the extent of tipping one of the pale-green sheets over the poor youngster's mouth. But the next thing I knew he was back at the phone again, had some other suite on the wire, and was bidding in his hand in the game that was awaiting his return. I'd seen some cold-blooded things in my time but that topped them all; I suppose he thought I wasn't listening. "—in that case my partner and I will double," he was saying, "you can begin leading, I'll be right down."

"Let me help you get there even quicker!" I blazed, and hurtled him through the three adjacent rooms with one hand at the back of his neck and the other at the opposite end of him. He stumbled when I let go of him, and by the time he had recovered and turned to puff himself up like a pouter pigeon, I had slammed the door in his face.

I paced back and forth for half an hour amidst the chrysanthemums, gardenias and sweet peas while the medical examiner was busy in the inner room with her. A policeman with hay-fever was sneezing his life away at the outside door. And down below they were still dancing, I suppose, and drinking fizz all over the place. Tom showed

up very pale around the gills. “God, what a ghastly experience! They both went all to pieces, had my hands full —” The inner door opened and the examiner came out and went by without a word—or would have but Tom got in front of him and blocked his way. “What’s the score?” he asked in a husky voice. Behind him the other two showed up who had come in with him; I hadn’t identified them yet, all this was new to me. But they weren’t leaving yet, far from it. I could tell by the way they strolled out and took in everything; they were there for the night—and maybe then some. The examiner tried to side-step Tom, but the latter wouldn’t let him, snagged him by the lapel. “I’m engaged to her sister—I have a right to know—the whole thing was too sudden—what’s it all about?”

One of the two watching us spoke up, in a slow drawl dripping with some sort of hidden meaning. “Funny you should say that, about it was too sudden. You seem to be ahead of us. How come you know it wasn’t all jake, when we haven’t told you yet? You a mind-reader by any chance?” His eyes never left Tom’s face.

“Anyone would say the same thing—she was only seventeen—to drop that suddenly—” Tom broke off. “Who are you, by the way?”

“Homicide squad, by the way,” the drawl came back. He snapped off a bud from a sheaf of long-stemmed La Frances and drew it through his buttonhole. We both of us sort of tensed at that. That word, ominous-sounding. He nodded to the examiner. “Go ahead, tell him, if he wants to know so bad. Then maybe after that it’ll be our turn, he’ll tell us one or two little things.”

“Tell, hell,” snapped the examiner, “I don’t get paid for overtime.”

“Poetic, aren’t you,” I murmured. “You really should be rhyming couplets for tombstones.”

“She was killed in a poetic way too,” he tossed back just before he closed the door after him, “like this was medieval

Italy. Killed by a rose. A rose whose stem was sprayed with something deadly, a rose whose thorns were impregnated with it whatever it was. She pricked herself on it separating it from its mates. The ball of her thumb tells the story. We're having an autopsy—"

"That ain't all we're having, either," observed the more truculent of the two detectives. He scanned the cardboard lid of a box he'd brought out with him, then asked for The Fernery, Incorporated, on the wire. "Every floral piece in these three rooms has a card stuck in it—except the bunch that red rose came from. We're having a talk with the florist delivered 'em—" I gave Tom a look, but he was staring down at the floor, I couldn't catch his eye. I hadn't seen him select them, but the kid had claimed she'd found them, and Marcia had said something about his having forgotten to send a card with them; it sounded an awful lot like his. The horticulturist who'd grown them must have made some ghastly slip-up, sent them on to the florist without realizing that death lurked along their stems—

But then why didn't Tom speak up, I wondered, save them the trouble of checking with the florist? It would only look worse if they got the information that way. What did he have to hide? *He* had had nothing to do with it, an accident like that could have happened to anyone. But then maybe he didn't realize even yet that they were the ones he'd sent.

I cleared my throat, said "Sounds a lot like the ones—." And then looked at him, to let him finish it himself.

He wouldn't meet my eyes, kept staring down at his feet.

Meanwhile the detective had gotten through to The Fernery and it was too late to do it the easy way. "Evans, Homicide Squad," he snapped. "You the manager? You deliver two dozen American Beauty roses to Miss Marcia Planter at the Park-Ashley Hotel this evening? That ain't what I asked you, I didn't ask if you delivered 'em personally or sent 'em by messenger! What I wanna know is, did they come from your shop? Well, who ordered 'em? . .

. Didn’t write out any card, eh? Well, would you know him if you saw him again?” His eyes flicked over at Tom and back again, as he put the question.

I shrugged violently at him, gestured with both hands, meaning in pantomime, “Why don’t you tell him, what are you standing there mum like that for?” He just looked at me and smiled a little, with the left half of his mouth.

The dick, Evans, hung up. “Any objections to accompanying us—and the flowers—up to the shop for a couple of minutes, Mr Nye?” But it wasn’t exactly a question, it was an order.

Tom saluted with one finger at his brow, turned toward the door without saying a word.

“Me, either,” I said.

“Who’s the echo?” the second detective wanted to know. “Ain’t it about time we were finding out?”

“If you’d taken the trouble to ask, you’d have found out long ago,” I remarked uppishly. “The name is R. Walsh, Princeton ’32.”

He didn’t pop any collar-buttons over it. “Well, meet B. Doyle, P. S. 62,” he said, without offering his hand.

I thought I’d kid him a little. “Howju?” I said gravely, ducking my chin. “I’m this chap’s flat-mate and slated to be his best man. Anything else you’d like to know?”

“Liking,” he said, “has nothing to do with it, Trained Tonsils. I’d like never even to have seen you yet, much less heard of you, but this is business. So pop open your trick hat and tail us.”

“Tail you?” I said, “What am I, a collie?”

“Oh,” he protested coyly, “now don’t pin me down *that* closely!” and went out after Tom and Evans. I caught up with them at the elevator, which I suppose is what he meant by tailing in the first place. The last thing I heard, at the far end of the corridor, was that poor policeman with hay-fever still sneezing his brains out back there.

The four of us got in a taxi—technically Tom was accompanying them voluntarily, there was no question of an arrest—and went up there to where he'd bought the flowers, which Evans had brought along, box and all, under his arm.

The proprietor was a silly-looking duck wearing a morning-coat. "Ah, yes," he said, taking a peep under the lid, "these are from my shop. Is there something wrong?" And he washed his hands without soap or water.

"That," said Evans bluntly, "is none of your business. The main idea is, who bought 'em?"

"Why, this gentleman did, of course." He turned to Tom, and even asked for corroboration from that quarter. "Didn't you, sir?"

Tom said quietly, "I bought two dozen roses from you and told you to send them where these were sent, yes. But I hardly think these are the same ones you brought out of the case to show me—or else there's something wrong with your stock. You see, they say one of them killed my fiancee's young sister." And he looked down at the floor again, like he seemed to be doing all evening.

The florist went "Ip!" and jumped back about a foot from the box Evans had been holding under his nose.

Doyle said, "Yeah, let's see the rest of 'em he picked these out of."

Evans gave Tom a dirty look. "Why don't you let us do the talking? We'll tell him anything we think he needs to know."

He didn't answer, so I chipped in: "What's so secret about it? She did die, didn't she, or are we having hallucinations?"

Doyle, who seemed to have it in for me—inferiority-complex probably—growled softly out of the corner of his mouth: "One more twenty-five-cent word like that outa you, and I'll send you home with a note to your mother."

The florist shoved back a glass slide all sweaty with steam and showed us triple tiers of long-stemmed roses. They had a blue light shining on them—why blue I don't know, either

to make them look pretty or ultraviolet rays to take the place of sunlight. “They came out of here,” he said nervously, “but I’m sure you won’t find anything the mat—”

Doyle reached in, said: “Mind if we take a few samples for the research lab on Poplar Street? Nothing like making sure. And don’t sell any more of them till we get the results —that’s a police order!”

The poor florist acted like he wanted to break down and cry. “They’ll be a total loss, you’re quarantining one of the most perishable items I carry in stock!”

“Watch it,” Evans advised his pal, who was pawing at them clumsily, “don’t get a puncture like she did.”

“In which case,” I murmured softly to no one in particular, “the poor rose’ll probably be the one to curl up and die!”

Doyle blew up, violently and completely. I seemed to have that sort of effect on him. “This cake-eater,” he yelled at his partner, “is getting in my hair! He must think he’s out on a party! Do we have to have him along, what’s he doing here with us anyway?”

“Slumming,” I said nastily.

Evans didn’t seem interested in this side-feud. “How is it,” he drawled indifferently, “you didn’t put a card with them when you bought them, Mr Nye?” But he was looking straight at the florist and not Tom as he asked it.

“I didn’t have one with me, and I was in a hurry to get down there, we were late as it was. It was my engagement party, after all.”

The jittery shop-owner, whom Evans was watching, didn’t seem to have any control over his eye-, eyebrow-, or lip-muscles; they all moved simultaneously. Evans didn’t wait for the signs to become audible. “Meaning he did write out a card—or what? You told me over the phone he didn’t!”

“N-no, he didn’t.” He stumbled over it, and yet he seemed to mean it. “Did you, sir?”

“You’re talking to us, not him!” Doyle jumped down his throat.

Tom was standing over by some kind of a potted plant, idly poking his index-finger into the soft mould around the bottom. I could see him getting sorer by the minute, a pulse in his jaw started bobbing up and down. He looked hard at the florist, then at them. “I didn’t,” he said irritably, coming back again to where the rest of us were. “What’s all this business about a card, anyway? I bought two dozen roses in this shop—without even putting my hands on them, just pointed at the ones I wanted! I didn’t take them down there with me, didn’t even lay eyes on them again, until you two men brought them back here with you just now! Am I supposed to have doctored them up or something? With what object? To—to endanger the girl that’s going to be my wife?” His voice was shaking uncontrollably, which showed me—if not them—how deeply affected he was by the tragedy.

Loyal-friend-like, I gave them a dirty look, most of it for Doyle. “They’ve got to make a mystery out of it, that’s what detectives are for,” I said scathingly. “You and I, Tom, we’re just laymen. It’d be obvious to us, or to anybody else for that matter, what must have happened. Some sort of spray or insecticide was used on them and wasn’t properly removed afterward. That’s all there is to it, just a frightful accident. But of course that isn’t enough for our fine feathered friends here, they’ve got to go around wanting to know why you didn’t send a copy of your birth-certificate down there with them!”

Doyle threw down the flowers, stepped up close. “I don’t like your face,” he said, “and haven’t all evening! Here’s where I change it around a little!” And he swung back, in good old 1890 style.

“Fine!” I said agreeably, “but not in here where there’s so much glass. There’s a perfectly good sidewalk outside—”

“Not there or anyplace else,” said Evans, getting in between the two of us. “Grow up, Doyle.” And to me he remarked less than affably, “You’re excused, Mr Walsh. We can get along without your company, if you don’t mind. We’re just a pair of ignorant dicks, I know, and you could carry out our routine much better; that’s why we’re being paid and you’re not. The police-lab will tell the story; shoot out there with those roses, Doyle. Keep the two bunches separate.”

“Lounge-lizard!” Doyle was muttering throatily in the background, “Ice-cream destroyer!”

“You’ll never get to meet the right people that way,” I warned lightly over my shoulder as I went out.

Tom and the two dicks got back in the cab and left me behind, sort of persona non grata. Evans wanted to ask him a few more routine questions at Headquarters—again it was a request, not an order.

“See you up at the place later,” he said to me. “Leave the key under the mat if you turn in before I get home.”

“And don’t forget to brush your teeth like a good little boy!” was Doyle’s insulting farewell out the cab-window.

“Come back and I’ll brush yours with my foot,” I promised.

The last thing I saw was the two of them holding him back by main force from jumping out then and there and taking me up on it.

It had been warm in the flower-shop and I’d taken off my neckcloth and crammed it in my pocket while we were in there. Also my gloves. When I started to put them on again, I saw that one had fallen out, I’d lost it. I turned around and went in again abruptly.

The proprietor, who evidently hadn’t gotten over the effects of our visit yet, gave a jittery jump when he saw me show up like that again. I wouldn’t have thought anything of it, but he happened to be standing close to that potted plant when he did so.

“I dropped a glove,” I said, but I let him look around for it. I looked, instead, at the finger-holes Tom had absent-mindedly punched into the mould around the plant that time when that card-business was going on.

“Here it is, I’ve found it,” he said. He meant the glove, but I suited my action to his words, pulled a hundred-dollar bill, rolled into a cylinder, out of one of the finger-holes. He promptly dropped the glove a second time—and a lot of complexion with it.

“What was he slipping you this for?” I asked quietly.

“Why, why I’m sure he didn’t mean that for me! He must have dropped that in there by m-mistake—”

“Oh no,” I said tonelessly. “He gave you a hard look just then, I saw him. I thought he was sore at the time, but it was a signal it seems. Not to tell—what?”

He didn’t know, hadn’t any idea, and all that sort of stuff.

“You’re not thinking hard enough,” I chided coldly. “I’m his friend. Wouldn’t you prefer to tell me and keep it sort of en famille? Or suppose I page those two missing links and let them start the whole thing over again?”

I wouldn’t have dreamed of doing it, because this didn’t look so hot for Tom. They’d gone already, anyway, but he didn’t know that.

Since then, people have said to me, Why didn’t you butt out? Why be nosey? I mean, what business was it of yours whether your friend had left a century-note in a florist-shop or not? Well, that’s just the whole point. If he’d been only an acquaintance, I certainly wouldn’t have snooped. He was like a brother to me; either you get the idea or you don’t.

He gave in, rather than face the detectives again. “I’m really not absolutely certain what he meant by it myself,” he stammered, and possibly he was telling the truth, “but I judge, I imagine, he didn’t want the second two-dozen roses mentioned—in front of them. So I didn’t.”

He evidently hadn’t, if there’d been any such, because he’d neglected even to mention them to me. “I imagine so,”

I agreed, as though I'd been in on it all along.

He wasn't sure I had been, though, I could see that; the mere fact I'd cross-questioned him about the bribe made him wonder. "You know about the other young lady of course?" he said hopefully.

I did now. And it wasn't in character at all. I nodded non-committally. He shrugged, trying to appear sophisticated. "I know how those things go, young fellows about town like you. But if I'd told *them*, right away it would have been in the papers—one of those gossip-columns maybe—how he sent flowers to his ex the same night he was getting engaged. Get him in hot water. That's why I caught on and shut up about it."

I'd been racking my brains. But there wasn't really much of a list to check. "Fortescue?"

"Yes, on 54th, over by the river."

"You don't have to tell me," I assured him. I was remembering the year before. How often he'd come away from there with bites on his neck. "Same messenger take them to both places?"

"Yes, he stopped off there first, then went on the Park-Ashley."

I locked my teeth. "Why, that devil!" I thought "Is it possible she snagged them away from him—the second bunch—long enough to do something to them, hoping to harm Marcia? She must have caught on whom they were for, no trick to that at all; pumped the kid." I walloped my gloves viciously against the edge of the case. "I'm going down there," I said to myself, "now—right now! Dirty little murderess!"

I speared my finger toward him, with the century curled around it the way it must have been curled around Tom's when he stuck it into the mould. "Well, this is yours," I said disapprovingly. "He seemed to want you to have it—and it's his money, not mine." It would have to come out, anyway, if she'd really done what I thought she had—Tom or no Tom.

He took it all right; I would have collapsed if he hadn't. "D'you think I'll get in trouble?" he wanted to know, though. "They didn't *ask* me point-blank, you know—"

I wasn't interested. "See you around," I said, and went out.

I got in a cab and went down seven blocks to 54th and over five to the river. I thought: would that torch-bearer be capable of doing a thing like that? But how had she known ahead of time he was going to send her flowers? How had she managed to have—whatever it was—ready? Was she a modern Lucretia Borgia or something? And yet it didn't seem possible she'd kept the messenger-boy waiting there any length of time, Marcia's flowers had gotten down to the hotel ahead of us, and we'd had just a straight ride in a taxi.

I vowed, I'll knock all her front teeth out with my own little fist, if I find out—! And *that* sap—I thought he knew his way around! That's what comes of picking up loose odds and ends at Twenty-One on rainy Fall nights!

But the sight of Third Avenue through the cab-window seemed to bring out the good old-fashioned qualities in me, the sense of fair-play and even a vestige of chivalry that I hadn't known was left any more. She hasn't brains enough, I told myself. Her speed would be to try to have him beaten up, like she did once before. Why jump at conclusions? That's what comes of associating with detectives, even for half-an-hour! Simply an accident—and what's more, if one bunch was tainted, then the whole consignment was, and she's in danger of having the same thing happen to her if she fools around with them! So between wanting to sock her in the teeth and wanting to save her from a fate worse than death, I was in a hurry to get over there.

"Get across, get across there!" I prodded the driver.

"That pretty color up ahead," he said sarcastically, "is red. They put it on just to make the street look nice. It don't mean a thing. This your first time in a New York cab?"

“Did I ask you for a civil service examination?” I flared. “You’ve talked yourself out of á quarter tip.”

“You were just looking for an excuse to welsh, you probably haven’t got one,” he let me know. “Just for that you can open the door yourself. No tip, no service.”

I didn’t seem to get along with anyone tonight. I got out, bent down, and put sixty cents on the curbstone just out of reach. “You can get out and pick it up if you want it!” I said.

A bedecked janissary inside the Taj Mahal (the décor suggested that, with just a dash of the Colosseum and a touch of the Kremlin) wanted to know who was calling on Miss Fortescue. For which bit of red tape she, I mean Somebody, paid $5 a month extra on her rent.

“Mr Tom Nye,” I said unblushingly.

It was all right, it seemed, for Mr Tom Nye to go up. Whether it would have been just as all right for Mr Dick Walsh, I misdoubted me. She’d never bit me on the neck that I recalled—and I have a very good memory for those things, the twice it’s happened.

I read into his look that Mr Tom Nye carried an aura of something as far as he was concerned—interest, without friendliness—but since he obviously didn’t know him by sight, I couldn’t get it. Had the lady spoken out of turn when she was being poured home drunk once or twice?

I tipped my hat elaborately—upstairs. Well, at least *her* roses hadn’t played a dirty trick on her. “Hi, Fritzie,” I greeted her.

Her face dropped down to her scanties nearly—and there wasn’t very much interference in between, I assure you. “What’s the idea?” she said huskily, “Don’t you know your own name any more?”

“I know how it is,” I soothed her, “a nickel’s worth of last-minute perfume behind the ears shot to hell! And all the sofa-pillows punched together for nothing! Wouldn’t I do for a stand-in, at least?”

“Don’t get so wise,” she said sultrily. “You’re jealous ’cause you never got to first base, that’s all.”

She never poisoned anyone, I told myself; just a child of nature. I walked past her as though I owned the place. “My, what nice flowers,” I said. “And some tastefully arranged too. Some guys get flowers. When I call anywhere I seem to get grocery-bills.” I sat down, flattened my hat with my elbow. Pop!

She took something out of the folds of her negligee, stuck it under one of the pillows, sat back against it. I caught a flash through her fingers, though.

“Mmm,” I said, “so he *was* going to get flowers—in a different way, without being able to smell them. I thought you liked him.”

“What’s on your mind,” she said wearily. “Do I have to sit here all night and listen to you talk like Noel Coward?”

She had one pinned to the shoulder of her gray negligee. There was another spray of them arranged in a flat blue bowl near me. I pulled one out—with a wicked webbed thorn sticking up from its stem—started to play around with it. Prod it gently with my thumb, watching her. Not hard enough to break the skin, I assure you.

Judging by her look, she didn’t seem to give a rap whether I lived or died—not even if it happened right there on her premises. So I quit doing it, because *I* did give a rap. I pitched the thing over my shoulder.

“Why did you figure you’d need a gun if he came here to see you tonight?” Doyle couldn’t have done it any better. “What’d you done to make you afraid of him? What was on your mind?”

She looked hostile, rather than frightened or guilty. “What’d *I* done?” she yapped. “That’s a good one! What’ve I ever done to make me afraid of him? When haven’t I been afraid of him?”

Which didn’t make sense to me. “Well, when haven’t you been?” I parroted.

“Not since after I first found out—” Then she let it down easy. “A few things about him.”

There was a tap at the door. One of those prearranged taps, I somehow got the feeling. She went over and opened it and the janissary was standing there. He didn’t say anything, just looked at her.

“No, it’s all right,” she said, “it wasn’t Mr Nye.” So she’d coached him over the house-phone before she let whom she thought was Tom in, “Look in on me in a minute or two, I might need you!”

Meanwhile I switched the gun to under my own pillow.

She came back and said to me virtuously, “You know, I ought to go to the police. I should have long ago.”

I knew how she meant it, but I distorted the meaning. “You ought to,” I agreed. “And maybe you will yet before the night’s over.”

“If he comes near me again I will.”

“No, it’s not a case of his coming near you. You know, a young girl died down there tonight—”

She took it big. Closed her eyes and let her head loll back and put the back of one hand between her eyes. “Oh my God!” she shuddered, “Oh, that poor girl—I should have phoned—oh, if I’d only had the courage to phone down there! I was afraid, oh I was so afraid—!” She got up and did a couple of half-turns, this way and that. “I’ve really killed her—I’m to blame—!”

“Now Dickie,” I said softly to myself, “we’re really getting somewhere. And Doyle thinks he’s so hot! Why, there’s nothing to it!”

“I’ve got to have a drink!” she shivered, and poured herself enough to launch a battleship in.

“Have one on me too,” I encouraged when she’d downed it without stopping to breathe. “And then I suppose it’ll be up to me to call the police or something. Although I hate to be a snitcher. Maybe I’ll let them do their own dirty-work.” She looked at me and I looked back at her. “So you should

have phoned!” I mimicked. “That and a couple of other little things. I’ll tell you what you should have done! You should have let those g.d. flowers alone—then there wouldn’t have been anything to phone about. You’ll probably get away with it at that. ‘Beautiful love-slave mad with jealousy. I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t want her to have him.’”

The second drink fell out of her hand and parted over her satin slippers like a gold wave. “What are you talking about?” she said in a stifled voice. “Flowers—” She gestured vaguely at the ones scattered around. “—what’ve they got to do with it?”

“You put something on them, didn’t you, and then sent them on to her from here.”

“I!” She screamed it. “I got them from him!” She glanced in horrified fascination down at the one on her shoulder. “Is that how—what happened to Marcia Planter anyway?”

“Not Marcia, her younger sister. But at least you admit whom you intended it for—which is no news to me. Why ask what happened? Something deadly on their stems got into her blood-stream—” I snapped my fingers. “Or didn’t you intend to go quite that far—did you just want to give her prickly-heat and spoil her beauty? Amateurs shouldn’t experiment with poisons—”

But she had no more time for words. I think, woman-like, my latter suggestion had frightened her even more than the thought of death itself. She was afraid to take the thing off her, the one pinned to her negligee, or touch it with her fingertips in any way, so she started pulling and tearing the whole flimsy off her shoulders. And as she did so, she kept giving little bleating wails and side-stepping around in a macabre sort of rhumba.

It should have been excruciatingly funny; it wasn’t of course anything of the kind. “Stand still!” I ordered and caught at her. “You’ll make it happen twice as quickly that way! I’ll get it off for you, I’m not afraid of it—”

I was too, but, well I wasn't afraid enough *not* to try and help her. I pulled the pin out carefully, and the thing dropped of its own weight and I kicked it away with my foot.

"So you didn't—have a hand in it," I said, breathing hard and sitting down again. What else was there to say—after what I'd just seen? Tallulah Bankhead would have been just as convincing, but not ad lib without a rehearsal or two.

She was all in, reached up and pushed her hair out of the way. "But why *before?*" she said. "Why *before*—tonight was only the engagement, wasn't it? I thought it was after their marriage that—that she had to worry about."

She poured us each a drink this time—to make what she had to say go down, perhaps.

"There are two sides to the story," she said, when she was down to the ice-cube in her glass. "Mine—and the one you've heard from him, or gathered from what he'd let drop. I know about that, because he's said to me 'Dick thinks I'm off you. All the better, let him think so.' I can just about imagine what his side of it is—that he cooled off, that I've been running after him ever since, that I even sent some friends of mine out to beat him up. Now listen to my side of it—and it's not a pretty story."

I chewed ice with my back-teeth, noisily.

"I did go for him, I was sold on him. Then one night a year ago we were sitting here eating apples. I'd given him a fruit-knife to pare them with. All of a sudden without any warning he had me pinned down here in a corner of this same sofa we're sitting on, was bending over me with that knife aimed at my throat. No rational reason, no jealousy—nothing like that—just a sudden urge. One look at his eyes, and I knew enough not to struggle. I just lay there limp, talking to him quietly, saying 'You don't want to do that—wait'll tomorrow night—' Oh, anything and everything that came into my head. Dick Walsh, it was a solid hour before I got him to put it down and take up his things and leave.

When I got the door locked, after him, I fell in the most beautiful faint you've ever seen—just behind it.

"It happened once again, about a month later. Not quite as bad. I was laughing and had my head back. 'Gee what a soft little neck you've got,' he said, and closed his hands around it, sort of measuring it. He didn't put on any pressure, and I distracted his attention by pointing to something behind him.

"I bought this gun the next day, and I've never received him without it since. Walsh, I knew then and I've known ever since—that your friend has a latent streak of homicidal mania in him. He's probably fighting it, but it's growing stronger all the time, and it's going to come out some day —"

"I've known him since we were both in school," I said. "You're talking through your hat!"

She said bitterly, "A man can go through college with another man; room with him for years, be slated for bestman at his wedding, but when it comes to knowing that other man, the hidden recesses of the mind, the dark quirks revealed in unguarded moments, it takes a woman."

"Why didn't you drop him then?"

"I was afraid to. Afraid he'd turn on me and get me for sure if I antagonized him in any way. I couldn't face it, the thought that he might be lurking downstairs by the door some night when I came home plastered, or get himself admitted up here and wait for me hidden in a closet. I told a couple of small-time racketeer friends of mine about it, and they went out to beat him up. That was their own idea, not mine. That scared me even worse, I begged them to lay off, let me handle it."

"Why didn't you go to the police, then?"

"Walsh," she said drily, "a girl like me has no social standing, she has to take her own chances. Besides, he never actually threatened me, it was just that I never knew from one visit to the next when the thing was going to pop

through the veneer of sanity that's hidden it so well from you and everyone else.

"When he first started going with Miss Planter, all I could think of was that meant an out for me, I'd finally get rid of him. I wanted to ring bells and blow whistles. But it was still there, only it had switched over to her. I'm a nice comfortable sort of person; other guys don't hide much from me, I guess I had the same effect on him. He started in by saying that he still liked me better than her, but that he'd have to marry her, because she had all kinds of dough. Then pretty soon he was saying that he'd come back to me and show me what he really thought of me, once he got his hands on that dough. Leaving it sort of indefinite what would happen to her. Then finally it became less indefinite and less indefinite, until I couldn't help knowing what he meant. He didn't say so in so many words, but you couldn't mistake his meaning—he was going to get rid of her some fine day—"

I got my own drink this time. She was getting under my skin, but every pore was fighting her.

"That's bad enough," she said, "that set-up. But there's something worse to it, something worse than that. The real horror of it is, he doesn't *really* want Marcia's money, he doesn't *really* want me. He just wants to kill someone. He's sick in the head. Oh, I looked into his eyes for sixty minutes that night, with a sharp knife at my windpipe, and no one can tell me different! If it isn't her, it'll be someone else, sometime, somewhere—"

I looked at her like I hated her for doing this to me. "Proof," I said huskily. "Proof. I've got to have proof. You've destroyed my confidence in him forever, damn you. But still I only have your say-so, your suspicions to go by. I'm with him day and night, I've never noticed anything. I've fallen between two stools now. You can't leave me like this."

"I'll give you proof," she said. She got up and looked frightened, like she was trying to get her courage up for

something. “I called him up once tonight. You were there. You didn’t hear what he said to me, though, did you?” She went over to the hand-set and dialled Butterfield 8-1200, our number. I read the slots over her shoulder.

“Don’t ever tell him,” she breathed. “For God’s sake, don’t ever let him know about this—or I’m finished.”

She sat down on the bench, and I sat down on it the opposite way with my head affectionately on her shoulder. We weren’t thinking of love, we were both listening to the same receiver. I was shaking a little.

He got on and she said, “Hello, Tommy dear. Did I get you out of bed?”

“Who is this, Fritzie? No, I just got in,” he told her. “I’ve been down at Police Headquarters until half an hour ago. Did you hear what happened?”

She looked at me quickly and I shook my head; it mightn’t be in the papers yet. She said no, and he told her. He told her that the report from the chemical lab had come in while he was there, some kind of experimental stuff they’d been trying out for a weed-killer at the hot-houses had got on them by accident; they’d gone down there now to destroy all the rest of the bushes, and were sending out a warning to the various florists around town. “Walsh said that from the beginning,” I heard him say “but for a time they had me feeling damned uncomfortable.”

She gave me a look, but I didn’t call that proof. “And will this delay your wedding?” she led him on.

“Not if I’ve got anything to say about it,” he answered.

“So it looks like I’ve got to lose you after all,” she crooned trickly.

“I’ll be back at your door in six months, darling—a widower,” he whispered. An electric current went through me. Her eyes met mine; hers were frightened, seemed to say “I told you so”; mine were horrified, incredulous.

“You don’t really mean—those things you’ve been saying all along,” she said, to spur him on.

But he was too cagey. “I don’t want to talk any more over the phone,” he said. “See you soon.”

The more we drank, the less able to get drunk we both seemed to be. “Proof enough?” she shivered, gorging on hers.

I drew my hand across my mouth, as though I had a bad taste.

“It’s in him,” she said. “And if it isn’t her, it’ll be somebody el—”

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute!” I breathed it as though afraid of the sound of my own voice. “D’you remember when that Andrea girl was killed about a year and a half ago—that case that was never cleared up—did you know him then? He got all excited, dwelt on it, that was all he could talk about for days—”

“Yes, yes!” she agreed. “I noticed that too. He came to see me the night after it happened. He brought in three papers with him, not one, and sat and read every word in them aloud to me. His face was all flushed, he seemed to get a thrill—”

“You scratched him too, didn’t you, that night—no, it was the night before that he came home from here all marked up, I first saw it that morning, and he laughed and told me how ‘emotional’ you’d gotten—”

She put an ice-cold hand on my wrist, so cold I jumped at the touch of it. “He wasn’t with me the night before. By all that’s holy I swear it! I was out at a bar with another man when the news of the Andrea girl came over the radio. I didn’t give him those marks. I noticed them myself the second night—he told me they came from improperly manipulating one of these new electric razors he’d just bought—‘burns’ he called them—”

I said it so low it’s a wonder she could hear me. “He’s never owned one, never brought one into the place from first to last—”

We were awfully quiet, awfully scared. We were both thinking the same thing. We didn't want to know for sure; I had to go back and sleep under the same roof with him, she had to receive him the next time he took it into his head to drop in on her. We didn't want to know for sure.

I left there at three that morning. I left an entirely different girl than the one I'd called on before midnight. I'd called on a slinky, jealousy-crazed vamp, who had pursued the life out of my room-mate and wasn't ready to give him up even yet, not if she had to murder her rival.

I came away from the flat of a girl who was no plaster saint, who wouldn't have thought of refusing a "present" from an admirer when it was offered in the right spirit, but who, far from pursuing Tom, had been living under the shadow of death's outspread wing for the past year or more, had never received him without having a gun handy, ever since she'd found out—

I came away with that gun of hers on me; she had urged me to take it with me herself. "I'm going to get out of here," she said. "First thing in the morning! He'll find out sooner or later I told you—"

"No he won't," I said. "He won't come near you again, don't worry."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He's—my friend."

The janissary came up with the car. I liked him; he didn't want to kill anybody. I gave him fifty bucks downstairs in the lobby. He nearly sat down on his fanny. "You're a good guy," I said. "Look after—Miss Fortescue, will you? She's a good guy too."

Her "What are you going to do?" followed me away from the place. I didn't know what to do. He hadn't poisoned those flowers, he hadn't done anything. He was *going* to do things—some day. Fritzi and I both knew that. An accident that looked like murder had revealed—a real murder, far in

the future, not yet committed. That and a suspicion of murder already committed, far in the past.

I couldn't go to the police; he hadn't done anything they could hold him for. I couldn't just sit by either, and watch Marcia Planter or some other girl drift slowly to her doom. I had my own life to live, but I'm funny that way. I couldn't have gone through the months and years with that hanging over me, not knowing when—

It would have been better not to know. But I knew now. And I didn't know what to do.

The latchkey was under the mat when I got back. That riled me for some strange reason. I felt he should have cowered behind a locked door, away from me and what I'd found out. I made faces while I unlocked, closed the door again after me. Faces like a guy going into a place where there's vermin.

I gave the foyer the lights, took off my topper, shied it into the dark living-room, not caring if I ever saw it again. I went in through the open bedroom-door and gave that the lights. He was sound asleep, a long cylinder under the covers, on the bed nearest the window. I stood there looking at the place, looking at him. A fistful of change and crumpled bills on the dresser, where my jack always went too at nights. How many times we'd had a friendly row the next morning, trying to separate the two. "That fin was mine, y' highway-robber! You only had singles!" Each feeling at the same time that the other guy would have given him the shirt off his back.

I'm not trying to be stagey, but put yourself in my place. A thousand pictures flashed through my mind, like a shell-shocked newsreel. The two of us in the Varsity Show. At proms. Trying out for football. Boning for exams. Getting chased in a second-hand roadster by a State motorcycle cop and piling it up against a tree. Standing together on the stag line at a hundred deb-parties, both going for the same wows and both dodging the same clucks.

And now, here he was. Showing a rotten spot, like an apple. Not showing it, rather, but having it in him. It didn't make me want to break down and cry, it had just the opposite effect, made me sore as blazes—because it was such a dirty trick on me, I guess.

"Get up," I growled. "Get up, you!" My voice rose as I went along. "Get up and get out of here! Murderer! Warped brain! Get out of this flat, before I—!"

He was awake then, startled, stiff-armed against the bed, blinking at me. "What's the matter with you, one too many —?!"

"Get out of here—beat it, quick!" My mouth felt all lopsided. "Dirty murderer!"

"You've gone crazy," he said. "What happened to those flowers was an accident, I waited down there till they had a full report on it—"

"Yes," I said bitterly, "that's the joke of it. An accident came along, and through a chain of circumstances, revealed a murder—in the making! A murder that hasn't happened yet—and that I'm going to see doesn't happen!"

I sloughed a chair around, sat down heavily on it, back to front, took out Fritzie's gun and broke it open. I took out a bullet and put it in my pocket.

He made a move toward his pants. "No, wait!" I said. "You'll go back to her, won't you, that poor little Fortescue hustler, and you'll do her in—for telling me!" I took out a second bullet. "Or you'll go to Marcia Planter and you'll say, 'Let's get married right away, let's give them all the slip and leave town.' And then some fine day she'll have an accident, won't she, fall out of a window or be swept overboard from a ship—or any one of a million things?" I took out the third bullet and put that away. "No she won't! She loves and trusts you, she deserves a better break than that."

"That lying little tart—" he said.

"You spoke into my ear over the phone an hour ago." I took out the fourth bullet. "And it isn't even that—I'd steer

clear of you maybe, but I'd be able to understand—if it was just the money. But it's killing for the sake of killing, that's got you. I saw how you ate up the papers when the Andrea girl was throttled. I don't know if you did that or not, and I don't want to know." I took out the fifth bullet, and I clicked the gun closed.

I saw how pale he'd gotten at the name, and how he shrank back a little.

"Whether you did or not, one thing's sure. The insulation had already started to wear in by that time. And now there's not very much left. It's going to be someone—real soon. Maybe someone you haven't even met yet. The guy that I went through school with, that I've roomed with all these years, wouldn't want that to happen—even if you do. Only Fritzie and I know." I stood up and looked at him, and he looked back at me. "And she's—nobody. And I'm—your friend. Still your friend. Think it over." I pitched the gun away from me on the bed. My own bed, not his.

I turned and I went to the door. "Think it over," I said, without looking at him any more. I closed it after me and I went out.

It hit me awfully quick, I'd hardly gotten halfway through the small-sized foyer outside when it hit me. Seemed to hit me in the back, and lift my heels clear of the floor. A boom that rattled the closed bedroom-door on its hinges.

I didn't look around at it. I went over to the phone and dialed Headquarters. I asked for Doyle, why I don't know. I guess I wanted to talk to somebody I knew, no matter how slightly, rather than just some stranger.

He was still there and they got him for me.

I said dully, "This' Dick Walsh, I don't know if you remember me or not, from the Park-Ashley and the florist-shop tonight—"

He liked me as much as ever. "Sure I do," he said sarcastically. "The amateur detective!"

“My friend just had an accident, better come around.” Something like a sob popped in my throat without my meaning it to. “You can have your job. I’ll never play detective again. You find—crawling things under the stones you turn up.”

GRAVES FOR THE LIVING

“There he is,” the grave-keeper whispered, parting the hedge so the two detectives could peer through. “That’s the third one he’s gone at since I phoned in to you fellows. I was afraid if I tried to jump on him single-handed he’d get away from me before you got out here. He’s got a gun, see it lying there next to the grave?”

His feeling of inadequacy was understandable; he was not only elderly and scrawny, but trembling all over with nervousness. One of the plarnclothesmen beside him unlimbered his gun, thumbed the guard off, held it half-poised for action. The one on the other side of him carefully maneuvered a manacle from his waistband so that it wouldn’t clash.

They exchanged a look across the keeper’s crouched, quaking back, each to see if the other was ready for the spring. Both nodded imperceptibly. They motioned the frightened cemetery-watchman down out of the way. They reared suddenly, dashed through the opening in the hedge simultaneously, with a great crackling and hissing of leaves.

The figure knee-deep in the grave stopped clawing and burrowing, snaked out an arm toward the revolver lying along its lip. One of the detectives’ huge size 12’s came down flat on it, pinning it down. “Hold it,” he said, and his own gun was inches away from the ghoul’s face. A flashlight balanced on a little mound of freshly-excavated soil like a golf-tee threw a thin, ghostly light on the scene. Off to the

left one of the other graves was disturbed, wavy with irregular furrows of earth instead of planed flat.

The manacle clashed around the prisoner's earth-clotted wrist, then the detective's. They hauled him up out of the shallow trough he had burrowed almost at full arm-length, like a piece of carrion.

"I thought you'd come," he said. "Where'd you put her? Where is she?"

They didn't answer, for one thing because they didn't understand. They weren't supposed to understand the gibberings of a maniac. They didn't ask him any questions, either. They seemed to feel that wasn't part of their job in this case. They'd come out to get him, they'd got him, and they were bringing him in—that was all they'd been sent to do.

One of them stooped for the gun, put it in his pocket; he picked up the torch too, clicked it off. The tableau suddenly went blue-black. They made their way out of the burial-ground with him, the watchman trailing behind them.

Outside the gate a prowl-car was standing waiting; they jammed him into it between them, told the watchman to appear at Headquarters in the morning without fail, shrieked off with him.

He only said one thing more, on the way. "You didn't have to hijack a patrolcar to impress me, I know better than to take you for detectives." They careened through the midnight city streets stonyfaced, one on each side of him, as though they hadn't heard him. "Fiends," he sobbed bitterly. "How can the Lord put things like you into human shape?"

He seemed vastly surprised at sight of the Headquarters building, with its green-globed entrance. When they stood him before a desk, with a uniformed lieutenant at it, his consternation was noticeable. He seemed unable to believe his eyes. Then when they led him into a back room, and a captain of detectives came in to question him, there could

be no mistaking the fact that he was stunned. “You—you really are!” he breathed.

“What did you think we were?” one of the detectives wanted to know caustically. “CCC boys?”

He looked about uncomprehendingly. “I thought you were —*them*.”

The captain got down to business. “What were you after?” he said tersely.

“Her.” He amended it, “My girl, my girl I was going to marry.”

The captain sighed impatiently. “You expected to find her in the cemetery?”

“Oh, I know!” the man before him broke out bitterly. “I know, I’m insane, that’s what you’ll say! I came to you people for help, of my own accord, before it happened—and that’s what you thought then, too. I spoke to Mercer, at the Poplar Street Station, only yesterday morning. He told me to go home and not worry.” His laughter was horrid, harsh, deranged.

“Quit it, shut up!” The captain drew back uncontrollably, even with the width of his desk between them. He took up the thread of his questioning again. “You were arrested just now in the Cedars of Lebanon Cemetery, in the act of disturbing the graves. The watchman at the Sacred Heart Cemetery also phoned us, earlier tonight, that he had found some of the resting-places in there molested, when he made his rounds. Did you do that too?”

The man nodded vigorously, unashamed. “Yes! And I’ve also been in two others, since sundown, Cypress Hills, and a private graveyard out beyond the city limits toward Ellendale.”

The captain shivered involuntarily. The two detectives in the background paled a little, exchanged a look. The captain let out his accumulated breath slowly.

“You need a doctor, young fellow,” he sighed.

“No, I don’t need a doctor!” The prisoner’s voice rose to a scream. “I need help! If you’ll only listen to me, believe me!”

“I’ll listen to you,” the captain said, without committing himself on the other two pleas. “I think I understand how it is. Engaged to her, you say. Very much in love with her, of course. The shock of losing her—too much for you; temporarily unbalanced your mind. Judging by your clothes—what I can see of them under that accumulation of mold and caked earth, and the fact that you left a car parked near the main entrance of Cedars of Lebanon—robbery wasn’t your motive. My men here tell me you were carrying seven-hundred-odd dollars when they caught up with you. Crazed by grief, didn’t know what you were doing, so you set out on your own to try and find her, is that it?”

The man acted tormented, distracted. “Don’t tell me things I know already!” he pleaded hoarsely.

“But how is it,” the captain went on equably, “you didn’t know where she was buried in the first place?”

“Because it was done without a permit—secretly!”

“If you can prove that—!” The captain sat up a little straighter. This was getting back on his own ground again. “When was she buried, any idea?”

“Some time after sundown this evening—that’s over six hours ago now! And all this time we’re standing here—”

“When’d she die?”

The man clenched his two fists, raised them agonizedly above his head. “*She—didn ‘t—die!* Don’t you understand what I’m trying to tell you! She’s lying somewhere, under the ground, in this very city, at this very minute—still breathing!”

There was a choking stillness as though the room had suddenly been crammed full of cotton-batting. It was a little hard to breathe in there; the three police-officials seemed to find it so. You could hear the effort they put into it.

The captain said, brushing his hand slowly across his mouth to clear it of some unseen impediment, “Hold him

up.” Then he said to the man they were supporting between them: “I’m listening.”

* * * *

To understand about me, you must go back fifteen years, to 1922, to when I was ten years old. And even then, perhaps you’ll wonder why a thing like that, horrible as it was, should poison my whole life . . .

My father was a war veteran. He had been badly shell-shocked in the Argonne, and for a long time in the base hospital behind the lines they thought they weren’t going to be able to pull him through.

But they did, and he was finally sent home to us, my mother and me. I knew he wasn’t well, and that I mustn’t be too noisy around him, that was all. The others, my mother and the doctors, knew that his nerve-centers had been shattered irreparably; but that slow paralysis was creeping on him, they didn’t dream. There were no signs of it, no warning. Then suddenly, in a flash, it struck. The nerve-centers ceased to function all over his body. “Death,” they called it, in ghastly error.

I wasn’t frightened of death—yet. If it had only been that, it would have been all right; a month later I would have been over it. But as it was . . .

His government pension had been all we’d had to live on since he’d come back. It had been out of the question for him to work, after what that howitzer-shell exploding a few yards away had done to him. Mother hadn’t been able to work either; there wouldn’t have been anyone to look after him all day. So there was no money to speak of.

Mother had to take any undertaker she could get, was glad to get anybody at all for the pittance that was all she could afford. The fly-by-night swindler that she finally secured, turned up his nose at first at the sum offered, she had to plead with him to take charge of the body. Meanwhile the overworked medical examiner had made a

hasty, routine examination, given the cause as a blood-clot on the brain due to his injuries, and made out the death-certificate in proper order.

But he was never prepared for burial in the proper way. He couldn't have been or it wouldn't have happened. Those ghoulish undertakers must have put him aside while they attended to other, more remunerative cases, until they discovered there was no time left to do what they were supposed to. And, cold-bloodedly figuring no one would ever know the difference anyway, simply contented themselves with hastily composing his posture, putting on his best suit, and perhaps giving his face a hurried, last-minute shave. Then they put him in the coffin, untouched, just as he was.

We would never have known, perhaps, but mother was unable to meet even the first monthly payment on the plot, and the cemetery officials heartlessly gave orders to disinter the coffin and remove it elsewhere. Whether something about it excited their suspicions, or it was of such flimsy construction that it accidentally broke open when they tried to remove it, I don't know. At any rate, they made a hideous discovery, and my mother was hastily summoned to come out there. Word was also sent to the police.

Thinking it still had to do with the money due them, she frantically borrowed it from a loan-shark, one of the early forerunners of that racket, and in an evil hour allowed me to go with her out there to the cemetery-grounds.

We found the opened coffin above ground, lying in full view, with a number of police-officials grouped around it. They drew her aside and began to question her, out of earshot. But I didn't need to overhear, I had the evidence of my own eyes there before me.

The eyes were open and staring; not just blankly as they had been the first time, but dilated with horror, stretched to their uttermost width. Eyes that had tried vainly to pierce

the stygian darkness that he found about him. His arms, no longer flat at his sides, were curved clawlike up over his head, nails almost torn off with futile tearing and scratching at the wood that hemmed him in. There were dried brown spots all about the white quilting that lined the lower half of the coffin, that had been bloodspots flung about from his flailing, gashed fingertips. Splinters of wood from the underside of the lid clung to each of them like porcupine-quills. And on the inside of the lid were even more tell-tale signs. A criss-cross of gashes, some of them almost shallow troughs, against which his bleeding nails had worn themselves off. But it had held fast, had only split now, when it was being taken up, weeks later.

The voice of one of the police-officials penetrated my numbed senses, seeming to come from far away. “This man—your husband—” he was saying to my mother—“was buried alive, and slowly suffocated to death—the way you see him—in his coffin. Will you tell us, if you can—”

But she dropped at their feet in a dead faint without uttering a sound. Her agony was short, merciful. I, who was to be the far greater sufferer of the two, stood there frozen, stunned, without a whimper, without even crying. I must have seemed to them too stupid or too young to fully understand the implications of what we were looking at. If they thought so, it was the greatest mistake of their lives.

I accompanied them, and my mother, back to the house without a word. They looked at me curiously once or twice, and I overheard one of them say in a low voice: “He didn’t get it. Good thing, too. Enough to frighten the growth out of a kid that age.”

I didn’t get it! I was frozen all over, they didn’t understand that; in a straight-jacket of icy horror that was crushing the shape out of me.

Mother recovered consciousness presently and—for just a little while, before the long twilight closed in on her—her reason, sanity. They checked with the coroner, the death-

certificate was sent for and examined, they decided that neither she nor he was to blame in any way. She gave them the name of the undertaker who had been in charge of the burial preparations, and word was sent out to arrest him and his assistants.

Fate was kind to her, her ordeal was made short. That same night she went hopelessly, incurably out of her mind, and within the week had been committed to an institution. Nature had found the simplest way out for her.

I didn't get off so easily. There was a brief preliminary stage, more or less to be expected, of childish terror, nightmares, fear of the dark, but that soon wore itself out. Then for a year or two I seemed actually to have gotten over the awful thing; at least, it faded a little, I didn't think of it incessantly night and day. But the subconscious doesn't, couldn't, forget a thing like that. Only another, second shock of equal severity and having to do with the same thing, would heal it. Fighting fire with fire, so to speak.

It came back in my middle teens, and from then on never again left me, grew steadily worse if anything as time went on. It was not a fear of death, you must understand; it was a fear of not dying and of being buried for dead. In other words, of the same thing happening to me some day that happened to him. It was stronger than just a fear, it grew to be an obsession, a phobia. It happened to me over and over again in my dreams, and I woke up shivering, sweating at the thought. Burial alive! The most horrible death imaginable became easy, preferable, compared to that.

Attracted by the very thing I dreaded, I frequently visited cemeteries, wandered among the headstones, reading the inscriptions, shuddering to myself each time: "But was he—or she—really dead? How often has this thing happened before?"

Sometimes I would unexpectedly come upon burial services being conducted in this or that corner of the

grounds. Cringing, yet drawing involuntarily nearer to watch and listen, that unforgotten scene at my father's grave would flash before my mind in all its pristine vividness and horror, and I would turn and run as though I felt myself in danger then and there of being drawn alive into that waiting grave I had just seen.

But one day, instead of running away, it had an opposite effect on me. I was irresistibly drawn forward to create a scene, a scandal, in their solemn midst. Or at least an unwelcome interruption.

The coffin, covered with flowers, was just about to be lowered; the mourners were standing reverently about. Almost without realizing what I was doing, I jostled my way through them until I stood on the very lip of the trench, cried out warningly: "Wait! Make sure, for God's sake, make sure he's dead!"

There was a stunned silence, they all drew back in fright, stared at me incredulously. The reading of the service stopped short, the officiating clergyman stood there book in hand blinking at me through his spectacles. Even the lowering of the coffin had been arrested, it swayed there on an uneven keel, partly in and partly out. Some of the flowers slipped off the top of it and fell in.

Realizing belatedly what a holy show I had made of myself, I turned and stumbled away as abruptly as I had come. No one made a move to detain me. Out of sight of them, I sat down on a stone bench behind a laurel hedge, and tormentedly held my head in my hands. Was I going crazy or what, to do such a thing?

About half an hour went by. I heard the sound of motors starting up one after the other on the driveway outside the grounds, and. thought they had all gone away. A minute later there was a light step on the gravel path before me, and I looked up to meet the curious gaze of a young girl. She wore black, but there was something radiantly alive about her that looked strangely out of place in those

surroundings. She was beautiful; I could read compassion in her forthright blue eyes. She had evidently been present at the services I had so outrageously interrupted, and had purposely stayed behind to talk to me.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" she murmured. I suddenly found myself wanting to talk to her. I felt strangely drawn to her. Youth is youth, even if its first meeting-place is a cemetery, and outside of this one phobia of mine, I was no different from any young fellow my age.

"Who was that?" I asked abruptly.

"A distant relative of mine," she said. "Why did you do it?" she added. "I could tell you weren't drunk or anything. I felt you must have a reason, so I asked them not to complain to the guards."

"It happened once to my father," I told her. "I've never quite gotten over it."

"I can see that," she said with quiet understanding. "But you shouldn't dwell on it. It's not natural at our age. Take me for instance. I had every respect for this relative we lost. I'm anything but a hard-hearted person. But it was all they could do to get me to come here today. They had to bribe me by telling me how well I looked in black." She smiled shyly, "I'm glad I did come, though."

"I am too," I said, and I meant it.

"My name is Joan Blaine," she told me as we walked toward the entrance. The sunlight fell across her face and seemed to light it, as we left the city of the dead and came out into the city of the living.

"I'm Bud Ingram," I told her.

"You're too nice a guy to be hanging around graveyards, Bud," she told me. "I'll have to take you in hand, try to get rid of this morbid streak in you."

She was as good as her word in the months that followed. Not that she was a bossy, dictatorial sort of girl, but—well, she liked me, just as I liked her, and she wanted to help me. We went to shows and dances together, took long drives in

my car with the wind humming in our ears, lolled on the starlit beach while she strummed a guitar and the surf came whispering in—did all the things that make life so worth living, so hard to give up. Death and its long grasping shadows seemed very far away when I was with her; her golden laughter kept them at a distance. But when I was alone, slowly they came creeping back.

I didn't let her know about that. I loved her now, and like a fool I was afraid if I told her it was still with me, she'd give me up as hopeless. I should have known her better. I never again mentioned the subject of my father, or my fears; I let her think she had conquered them. It was my own undoing.

I was driving along a seldom-used road out in the open country late one Sunday afternoon. She hadn't been able to come with me that afternoon, but I was due back at her house for supper, and we were going to the movies afterward. I had taken a detour off the main highway that I thought might be a shortcut, get me there quicker. Then I saw this small, well-cared-for burial-ground to my left as I skimmed along. I braked and sat looking at it, what I could see of it. It was obviously private. A twelve-foot fence of iron palings, gilt-tipped, bordered it. Inside there were clumps of graceful poplars rustling in the breeze, ornamental stone urns, trim white-pebbled paths twisting in and out. Only an occasional, inconspicuous slab showed what it really was.

I drove on again, past the main entrance. It was chained and locked, and there was no sign of either a gatekeeper or a lodge to accommodate one. It evidently was the property of some one family or group of people, I told myself. I put my foot back on the accelerator and went on my way. Joan wouldn't have approved my even slowing down to look at the place, I knew; but I hadn't been able to help myself.

Then sharp eyes betrayed me. Even traveling at the rate I was, I caught sight of a place in the paling where one of the uprights had fallen out of its socket in the lower transverse that held them all; it was leaning over at an angle from the

rest, causing a little tent-shaped gap. My good resolutions were all shattered at the sight. I threw in the clutch, got out to look, and before I knew it, had wriggled through and was standing on the inside—where I had no right to be.

"I'll just look around a minute," I said to myself, "then get out again before I get in trouble."

I followed one of the winding paths, and all the old familiar fears came back again as I did so. The sun was rapidly going down and the poplars threw long blue shadows across the ground. I turned aside to look at one of the freshly-erected headstones. There was an utter absence of floral wreaths or offerings, such as are to be found even in the poorest cemeteries, although nearly all the slabs looked fairly recent.

I was about to move on, when something caught my eye close up against the base of the slab. A small curved projection, like a tiny gutter to carry off rainwater. Then just under that, protected by it, so to speak, and almost indiscernible, a round opening, a hole, peering through the carefully-trimmed grass. It was too well-rounded to be an accidental gap or pit in the turf. And it was right where the raised grave met the tombstone. But that curling lip over it! Who had ever heard of a headstone provided with a gutter?

I glanced around to make sure I was unobserved, then squatted down over it, all but treading on the grave itself. I hooked one finger into the orifice and explored it carefully. Something smooth, hard, lined it, like a metal inner-tube. It was *not* a hole in the ground. It was a pipe leading up through the ground.

I had a penknife with me, and I got it out and scraped away the turf around the opening. A half-inch of gleaming, untarnished pipe, either chromium or brass, protruded when I got through. Stranger still, it had a tiny sieve or filter fitted into it, of fine wire-mesh, like a strainer to keep out the dust.

I was growing strangely excited, more excited every minute. This seemed to be a partial solution to what had haunted me for so long. If it was what I thought it was, it could take a little of the edge off the terror of burial—even for me, who dreaded it so.

I snapped my penknife shut, straightened up, moved on to the next marker. It wasn't close by, I had to look a little to find it, in the deepening violet of the twilight. But when I had, there was the same concealed orifice at its base, diminutive rain-shed, strainer, and all.

As I roamed about there in the dusk, I counted ten of them. Some bizarre cult or secret society, I wondered uneasily? For the first time I began to regret butting into the place; formless fears, vague premonitions of peril, that had nothing to do with that other inner fear of mine began to creep over me.

The sun had gone down long ago, and macabre mists were beginning to blur the outlines of the trees and foliage around me. I turned and started to beat my way back toward that place in the fence by which I had gained admittance, and which I had left a considerable distance behind me by now.

As I came abreast of the entrance gates—the real ones and not the gap through which I had come in—I saw the orange flash of a lantern on the outside of them, through the twilight murk. Chains clanged loosely, and the double gates ground inward, with a horrid groaning sound. Instinctively I jumped back behind a massive stone urn on a pedestal, with creepers spilling out of the top of it.

The gates clanged shut again, lessening my chances of getting out that way, which was the nearer of the two. I peered cautiously out around the narrowed stem of the urn, to see who it was.

A typical cemetery-watchman, no different from any of the rest of his kind, was crunching slowly along the nearest path, lantern in hand. Its rays splashed upward, tinged his

face, and downward around the ground at his feet, but left the middle of his body in darkness. It created a ghastly effect, that of a lurid head without any body floating along above the ground. I quailed a little.

He passed by close enough for me to touch him, and I shifted tremblingly around to the other side of the urn, keeping it between us. He stopped at the nearest grave, only a short distance away, set his lantern close up against the headstone, and turned up the oil-wick a bit higher. I could see everything he was doing clearly in the increased radiance now. Could see, but couldn't understand at first.

He squatted down on his haunches just as I had—this, fortunately, wasn't the one I had disturbed with my penknife—and I saw him holding something in his hand that at first sight I mistook for a flower, a single flower or bloom, that he was about to plant. It had a long almost invisible stalk and ended in a little puff or cluster of fuzz, like a pussywillow. But then when I saw him insert it into the little orifice at the base of the slab, move it busily around, that gave me the clue to what it really was. It was simply a wirehandled brush, such as housewives use for cleaning the spouts of kettles. He was removing the day's accumulated dust and grit from the little mesh-strainer in the pipe, to keep it from clogging. I saw him take the brush out again, put his face down nearly to the ground, and blow his breath into it to help the process along. I heard the sound that made distinctly—"*Phoo!*" Even as I watched, he got up again, picked up his lantern, and trudged on to the next grave, and repeated the chore.

A chill slowly went down my spine. Why must those orifices be kept unclogged, free of choking dust, like that? Was there something living, breathing, that needed air, buried below each of those headstones?

I had to grip the pedestal before me with both hands, to hold myself up, to keep from turning and scampering

blindly away then and there—and betraying my presence there in the process.

I waited until he had moved on out of sight, and some shrubbery blotted out the core of his lantern, if not its outermost rays; then I turned and darted away, frightened sick.

I beat my way along the inside of the fence, trying to find that unrepaired gap; and maddeningly it seemed to elude me. Then just when I was about ready to lose my head and yell out in panic, I glimpsed my car standing there in the darkness on the other side, and a few steps further on brought me to the place. Arms shaking palsiedly, I held up the loosened paling and slipped through. I stopped a minute there beside the car, wiping off my damp forehead on the back of my sleeve. Then with a deep breath of relief, I reached out, opened the car-door. I slipped in, turned the key . . . Nothing happened. The ignition wire had been cut in my absence.

Before the full implication of the discovery had time to register on my mind, a man's head and shoulders rose silently, as out of the ground, just beyond the opposite door, on the outside of the road. He must have been crouched down out of sight, watching me the whole time.

He was well-dressed, no highwayman or robber. His face, or what I could see of it in the dark, had a solemn ascetic cast to it. There was a slight smile to his mouth, but not of friendliness.

His voice, when he spoke, was utterly toneless. It held neither reproach, nor threat, nor anger. "Did you—" His stony eyes flickered just once past the cemetery-barrier —"have business in there?"

What was there I could say? "No. I simply went in, to—to rest awhile, and think."

"There was rather a severe wind—and rainstorm up here a week ago," he let me know. "It may have uprooted the sign we had standing at the entrance to this roadway.

Thoroughfare is prohibited, it runs through private grounds."

"I saw no sign," I told him truthfully.

"But if you went in just to rest and think, how is it you were so agitated when you left just now? I saw you when you came out. What had you done in there to frighten you so?" And then, very slowly, spacing each word, "What—had—you—seen?"

But I'd had about enough. "Are you in charge of these grounds? Well, whether you are or not, I resent being questioned like this! You've damaged my car, with deliberation. I've a good mind to—"

"Step out and come with me," he said, and here was suddenly the thin, ugly muzzle of a Luger resting across the doorstep, trained at me. His face remained cold, expressionless.

I pulled the catch out, stepped down beside him. "This is kidnaping," I said grimly.

"No," he said, "you'd have a hard time proving that. You're guilty of trespassing. We have a perfect right to detain you—until you've explained clearly, to our satisfaction, what you saw in there to frighten you so."

Or in other words, I said to myself, just how much I've found out—about something I'm not supposed to know. Something kept warning me: No matter what turns up, don't admit you noticed those vents above the graves in there. *Don 't let on you saw them!* I didn't know why I shouldn't, but it kept pounding at me relentlessly.

"Walk up the road ahead of me," he directed. "If you try to bolt off into the darkness, I'll shoot you without compunction."

I turned and walked slowly back along the middle of the road, hands helplessly at my sides. The scrape and grate of his footsteps followed behind me. He knew enough not to close in and give me a chance to wrest the gun from him. I

may have been afraid of burial alive, but I wasn't particularly afraid of bullets.

We came abreast of the cemetery-gate just as the watchman was letting himself out.

He threw up his head in surprise, picked up his lantern and came over.

"This man was in there just now. Walk along parallel to him, but not too close, and keep your lantern on him."

"Yes, Brother." At the time I thought it was just slangy informality on the caretaker's part; the respectful way he said it should have told me different. As he took up his position off to one side of me I heard him hiss vengefully, "Dirty snooper!"

We were now following a narrow brick footpath, which I had missed seeing altogether from the car that afternoon, indian file, myself in the middle. It brought us, in about five minutes, to a substantial-looking country house, entirely surrounded by such a thick growth of trees that it must have been completely invisible from both roads even in the broad daylight. The lower story was of stone, the upper of stucco. It was obviously not abandoned or in disrepair, but gave no sign of life. All the windows, upper as well as lower, had been boarded up.

The three of us stepped up on the empty porch, whose floorboards glistened with new varnish. The man with the lantern thrust a key into the seemingly boarded-up door, turned it, and swung the entire dummy-facing back intact. Behind it stood the real door, thick oak with an insert of bevelled glass, veiled on the inside by a curtain through which an electric light glimmered dully.

He unlocked that, too, and we were in a warm, well-furnished hall. The watchman took up his lantern and went toward the back of this, with a murmured "I'll be right in.,' My original captor turned me aside into a room furnished like a study, came in after me, at last pocketed the Luger that had persuaded me so well.

A man was sitting behind a large desk, with a reading lamp trained on it, going over some papers. He looked up, paled momentarily, then recovered himself. I'd seen that however; it showed that all the fear was not on my side of the fence. The same silent, warning voice kept pegging away at me: Don't admit you saw those vents, watch your step!

The man who had brought me in said, "I found his car parked beside the cemetery-rail—where lightning struck and loosened that upright the other night. I waited, until he came out. I thought you'd like to talk to him, Brother." Again that "Brother."

"You were right, Brother," the man behind the desk nodded. He said to me, "What were you doing in there?"

The door behind me opened and the man who had played the part of caretaker came in. He had on a business-suit now just like the other two, in place of the dungarees and greasy sweater. I took a good look at his hands; they were not calloused, but had been recently blistered. I could see the circular threads of skin remaining where the blisters had opened. He was an amateur—and not a professional—gravedigger.

"Did he tamper with anything?" the man behind the desk asked him in that cool, detached voice.

"He certainly did. Jerome's was disturbed. The sod—around *it*—had been scraped away, just enough to lay *it* bare." He accented that pronoun, to give it special meaning.

My original captor went through my pockets deftly and swiftly, brought to light the penknife, snapped it open, showed them the grass-stains on the steel blade.

The beat of Death's dark wings was close in the air above my head.

"I'm sorry. Take him out in back of the house with you," the one behind the desk said flatly. As though those words were my death-warrant.

The whole thing was too incredible, too fantastic, I couldn't quite force myself to believe I was in danger of being put to death then and there like a mad dog. But I saw the one next to me slowly reach toward the pocket where the Luger bulged.

"I'll have to go out there and dig again, after I got all cleaned up," the one who had played the part of watchman sighed regretfully, and glanced ruefully at his blistered hands.

I looked from one to the other, still not fully aware of what it all portended. Then on an impulse—an impulse that saved my life—I blurted out: "You see, it wasn't just idle curiosity on my part. All my life, since I was ten, I've dreaded the thought of burial alive—"

Before I knew it I had told them the whole story, about my father and the lasting impression it had made.

After I had finished, the man at the desk said, slowly, "What year was this—and where?"

"In New Orleans," I said, "in 1922."

His eyes flicked to the man on my left. "Get New Orleans on long distance," he said quietly. "Find out if an undertaker was brought to trial for burying a paralyzed war-veteran named Donald Ingram alive in All-Saints Cemetery in September 1922."

"The 14th," I said, shutting my eyes briefly.

"You are a lawyer," he instructed, "doing it at the behest of the man's son, because of some litigation that is pending, if they ask you." The door closed after him; I stayed there with the other two.

The envoy came back, silently handed a written sheet of paper to the one at the desk. He read it through. "Your mother?" he said.

"She died insane in 1929. I had her cremated, to avoid—"

He crumpled the sheet of paper, threw it from him. "Would you care to join us?" he said, his eyes sparkling shrewdly.

“Who—are you?” I hedged.

He didn’t answer that. “We can cure you, heal you. We can do more for you than any doctor, any mental specialist in the world. Would you not like to have this dread, this curse, lifted from you, never to return?”

I would, I said; which was true any way you looked at it.

“You have been particularly afflicted, because of the circumstances of your father’s death,” he went on. “However, don’t think you’re alone in your fear of death. There are scores, hundreds of others, who feel as you do, even if not quite so strongly. From them we draw our membership; we give them new hope and new life, rob death of all its terrors for them. The sense of mortality that has been crippling them ends, the world is theirs to conquer, nothing can stop them. They become like the immortal gods. Wealth, fame, all the world’s goods, are theirs for the taking, for their frightened fellow-men, fearful of dying, defeated before they have even begun to live, cannot compete with them. Is not this a priceless gift? And we are offering it to you because you need it so badly, so very much more badly than anyone who has ever come to us before.” He was anything but cold and icy now. He was glowing, fervent, fanatic, the typical proselyte seeking a new convert.

“I’m not rich,” I said cagily, to find out where the catch was. And that’s where it was—right there.

“Not now,” he said, “because this blight has hampered your efforts, clipped your wings, so to speak. Few are who come to us. We ask nothing material from you now. Later, when we have helped you, and you are one of the world’s fortunate ones, you may repay us, to assist us to carry on our good work.”

Which might be just a very fancy way of saying future blackmail.

“And now—your decision?”

“I accept—your kind offer,” I said thoughtfully, and immediately amended it mentally: “At least until I can get out of here and back to town.”

But he immediately scotched that, as though he’d read my mind. “There is no revoking your decision once you’ve made it. That brings instant death. Slow suffocation is the manner of their going, those who break faith with us. Burial while still in full possession of their faculties, is the penalty.”

The one doom that was a shade more awful than what had happened to my father; the only one. He at least had not come to until after it had been done. And it had not lasted long with him, it couldn’t have.

“Those vents you saw can prolong it, for whole days,” he went on. “They can be turned on or off at will.”

“I said I’d join you,” I shuddered, resisting an impulse to clap both hands to my ears.

“Good.” He stretched forth his right hand to me and much against my inclination I took it. Then he clasped my wrist with his left, and had me do likewise with mine. I had to repeat this double grip with each of the others in turn. “You are now one of us.”

The cemetery watchman left the room and returned with a tray holding three small skulls and a large one. I could feel the short hairs on the back of my neck standing up of their own accord. None of them were real though; they were wood or celluloid imitations. They all had flaps that opened at the top; one was a jug and the other three stems.

The man behind the desk named the toast. “To our Friend!” I thought he meant myself at first; he meant that shadowy enemy of all mankind, the Grim Reaper.

“We are called The Friends of Death,” he explained to me when the grisly containers had been emptied. “To outline our creed and purpose briefly, it is this: That death is life, and life is death. We have mastered death, and no member of the Friends of Death need ever fear it. They ‘die,’ it is true, but after death they are buried in special graves in

our private cemetery—graves having air vents, such as you discovered. Also, our graves are equipped with electric signals, so that after the bodies of our buried members begin to respond to the secret treatment our scientists have given them before internment, we are warned. Then we come and release them—and they live again. Moreover, they are released, freed of their thralldom; from then on death is an old familiar friend instead of an enemy. They no longer fear it. Do you not see what a wonderful boon this would be in your case, Brother Bud; you who have suffered so from that fear?"

I thought to myself, "They're insane! They must be!" I forced myself to speak calmly. "And the penalty you spoke of—that you inflict on those who betray or disobey you?"

"Ah!" he inhaled zestfully, "You are buried before death—without benefit of the attention of our experts. The breathingtube is slowly, infinitesimally, shut off from above a notch at a time, by means of a valve—until it is completely sealed. It is," he concluded, "highly unpleasant while it lasts." Which was the most glaring case of understatement I had ever yet encountered.

There wasn't much more to this stage of my preliminary initiation. A ponderous ebony-bound ledger was brought out, with the inevitable skull on its cover in ivory. I was made to draw blood from my wrist and sign my name, with that, in it. The taking of the oath of secrecy followed.

"You will receive word of when your formal initiation is to be," I was told. "Return to your home and hold yourself ready until you hear from us. Members are not supposed to be known to one another, with the exception of us three, so you are required to attend the rites in a specially-constructed skull-mask which will be given to you. We are the Book-keeper (man behind the desk), the Messenger (man with the Luger), and the Grave-digger. We have chapters in most of the large cities. If business or anything should require you to move your residence elsewhere, don't

fail to notify us and we will transfer you to our branch in the city to which you are going."

"Like hell I will!" I thought.

"All members in good faith are required to be present at each of the meetings; failure to do so invokes the Penalty."

The grinning ghoul had the nerve to sling his arm around my shoulder in a friendly way as he led me toward the door, like a hospitable host speeding a parting guest. It was all I could do to keep from squirming at the feel of it. I wanted to part his teeth with my right fist then and there, but the Messenger, with the Luger on him, was a few steps behind me. I was getting out, and that was all that seemed to matter at the time. That was all I wanted—out, and a lungful of fresh air, and a good stiff jolt of whiskey to get the bad taste out of my mouth.

They unlocked the two doors for me, and even flashed on the porch-light so I could see my way down the steps. "You can get a city bus over on the State Highway. We'll have your car fixed for you and standing in front of your door first thing in the morning."

But at the very end a hint of warning again showed itself through all their friendliness. "Be sure to come when you're sent for. We have eyes and ears everywhere, where you'd least expect it. No warning is given, no second chances are ever allowed!"

Again that double grip, three times repeated, and it was over. The two doors were closed and locked, the porch-light snuffed out, and I was groping my way down the brick footpath—alone. Behind me not a chink of light showed from the boarded-up house. It had all been as fleeting, as unreal, as unbelievable, as a bad dream.

I shivered all the way back to the city in the heated bus; the other passengers must have thought I had the grippe. Joan Blame found me at midnight in a bar around the corner from where I lived, stewed to the gills, so drunk I could hardly stand up straight—but still shivering. "Take

him home, miss," she told me afterwards the bartender whispered to her. "He's been standing there like that three solid hours, staring like he sees ghosts, frightening my other customers off into corners!"

I woke up fully dressed on top of my bed next morning, with just a blanket over me. "That was just a dream, the whole thing!" I kept snarling to myself defensively.

I heard Joan's knock at the door, and the first thing she said when I let her in was: "Something happen to your car last night? I saw a mechanic drive up to the door with it just now, as I was coming in. He got out, walked off, and left it standing there!"

There went my just-a-dream defense. She saw me rear back a little, but didn't ask why. I went over to the window and looked down at it. It was waiting there without anyone in or near it.

"Were you in a smash-up?" she demanded. "Is that why you stood me up? Is that why you were shaking so when I found you?"

I grabbed at the out eagerly. "Yeah, that's it! Bad one, too; came within an inch of winding up behind the eight-ball. Gave me the jitters for hours afterwards."

She looked at me, said quietly: "Funny kind of a smash-up, to make you say 'Little pipes coming up through the ground.' That's all you said over and over. Not a scratch on you, either. No report of any smack-up involving a car with your licensenumber, when I checked with the police after you'd been three hours overdue at my house." She gave me an angry look, at least it tried to be. "All right, I'm a woman and therefore a fibber. But I sewed you up pretty this time. I asked that grease-monkey what it was just now, and he said only a cut ignition-wire!"

Her face softened and she came over to me. "What're you keeping from me, honey? Tell Joan. She's for you, don't you know that by now?"

No, it was just a dream, I wasn't going to tell her. And even if it wasn't a dream, I'd be damned if I'd tell her! Worry her? I should say not! "All right, there wasn't any smash-up and there wasn't anything else either. I'm just a heel, I got stiff and stood you up, that's all."

I could tell she didn't believe me; she left looking unconvinced. I'd just about closed the door after her when my phone rang.

"You're to be complimented, Brother," an anonymous voice said. "We're glad to see that you're to be relied on," and then the connection broke.

Eyes everywhere, ears everywhere. I stood there white in the face, and calling it a dream wouldn't work any more.

* * * *

The summons to attend came three weeks later to the day. A large white card such as formal invitations are printed on, inside an envelope with my name on it. Only the card itself was blank. I couldn't make head or tail of it at first, didn't even connect it with them. Then down in the lower corner I made out the faintly-pencilled word "Heat."

I went and held it over the steam radiator. A death's head slowly started to come through, first faint yellow, then brown, then black. And under it a few lines of writing, in hideous travesty of a normal social invitation.

Your Presence Is Requested
Friday, 9 P.M.
You Will Be Called For
F. O. D.

"Call away, but I won't be here!" was my first explosive reaction. "This goblin stuff has gone far enough. The keepers ought to be out after that whole outfit with butterfly-nets!"

Then presently, faint stirrings of curiosity began to prompt me: "What have you got to lose? Why not see what

it’s like, anyway? What can they do to you after all? Pack a gun with you, that’s all.”

When I left the office late that afternoon I made straight for a pawnshop over on the seamy side of town, barged in through the saloon-like half-doors. I already had had a license for some time back, so there was not likely to be any difficulty about getting what I wanted.

While the owner was in the back getting some out to show me, a down-and-outer came in with a mangy overcoat he wanted to peddle. The clerk took it up front to examine it more closely, and for a moment the two of us were left standing alone on the customer’s side of the counter. I swear there was not a gun in sight on the case in front of me. Nothing to indicate what I had come in for.

An almost inaudible murmur sounded from somewhere beside me: “I wouldn’t, Brother, if I were you. You’ll get in trouble if you do.”

I looked around sharply. The seedy derelict seemed unaware of my existence, was staring dejectedly down at the glass case under him. Yet if he hadn’t spoken who had?

He was turned down, took back the coat, and shuffled disheartedly out into the street again, without a glance at me as he went by. The doors flapped loosely behind him. A prickling sensation ran up my spine. That had been a warning from them.

“Sorry,” I said abruptly, when the owner came back with some revolvers to show me, “I’ve changed my mind!” I went out hurriedly, looked up and down the street. The derelict had vanished. Yet the pawnshop was in the middle of the block, about equally distant from each corner. He couldn’t have possibly—! I even asked a janitor, setting out ashcans a few steps away. “Did you see an old guy carrying a coat come out of here just now?”

“Mister,” he said to me, “nobody’s come out of there since you went in yourself two minutes ago.”

“I suppose he was an optical illusion,” I said to myself. “Like hell he was!”

So I went without a gun.

A not only embarrassing but highly dangerous *contretemps* was waiting for me when I got back to my place a few minutes later. Joan was in the apartment waiting for me, had had the landlady, who knew her quite well, let her in. Tonight of all nights, when they were calling for me! I not only had to stay here, but I had to get her out of the way before they showed up.

The first thing my eye fell on as I came in was that damned invitation, too. It was lying about where I’d left it, but I could have sworn I’d put it back in its envelope, and now it was on the outside, skull staring up from it as big as life. Had she seen it? If so, she gave no sign. I sidled around in front of it and pushed it out of sight in a drawer with my hands behind my back.

“Take a lady to supper,” she said.

But I couldn’t, there wouldn’t be time enough to get back there again if! did; they were due in about a quarter of an hour, I figured. It was an hour’s ride out there.

“Damn! I just ate,” I lied. “Why didn’t you let me know—”

“How’s for the movies then?” She was unusually persistent tonight, almost as though she’d found out something and wanted to force me to break down and admit it.

I mumbled something about a headache, going to bed early, my eyes fixed frantically on the clock. Ten minutes now.

“I seem popular tonight,” she shrugged. But she made no move to go, sat there watching me curiously, intently.

Sweat was beading my forehead. Seven minutes to go. If I let her stay any longer, I was endangering her. But how could I get rid of her without hurting her, making her suspicious—if she wasn’t already?

“You seem very tense tonight,” she murmured. “I never saw you watch a clock so closely.” Five minutes were left.

They helped me out. Eyes everywhere, ears everywhere. The phone rang. Again that anonymous voice, as three weeks before.

“Better get that young woman out of the way, Brother. The car’s at the corner, waiting to come up to your door. You’ll be late.”

“Yes,” I said, and hung up.

“Competition?” she asked playfully when I went back.

“Joan,” I said hoarsely, “you run along. I’ve got to go out. There’s something I can’t tell you about. You’ve got to trust me. You do, don’t you?” I pleaded.

She only said one thing, sadly, apprehensively, as she got up and walked toward the door. “I do. But you don’t seem to trust—me.” She turned impulsively, her hands crept pleadingly up my lapels. “Oh, why can’t you tell me!”

“You don’t know what you’re asking!” I groaned.

She turned and ran swiftly down the stairs, I could hear her sobbing gently as she went. I never heard the street-door close after her, though.

Moments later my call-bell rang, I grabbed my hat and ran down. A touring-car was standing in front of the house, rear door invitingly open. I got in and found myself seated next to the Messenger. “All right, Brother,” he said to the driver. All I could see of the latter was the back of his head; the mirror had been removed from the front of the car.

“Let me caution you,” the Messenger said, as we started off. “You went into a pawnshop this afternoon to buy a gun. Don’t try that, if you know what’s good for you. And after this, see to it that the young lady isn’t admitted to your room in your absence. She might have read the summons we sent.”

“I destroyed it,” I lied.

He handed me something done up in paper. “Your mask,” he said. “Don’t put it on until we get past the city-limits.”

It was a frightening-looking thing when I did so. It was not a mask but a hood for the entire head, canvas and cardboard, chalk-white to simulate a skull, with deep black hollows for the eyes and grinning teeth for the mouth.

The private highway, as we neared the house, was lined on both sides with parked cars. I counted fifteen of them as we flashed by; and there must have been as many more ahead, in the other direction.

We drew up and he and I got out. I glanced in cautiously over my shoulder at the driver as we went by, to see if I could see his face, but he too had donned one of the death-masks.

"Never do that," the Messenger warned me in a low voice. "Never try to penetrate any other member's disguise."

The house was as silent and lifeless as the last time—on the outside. Within it was a horrid, crawling charnel-house alive with skull-headed figures, their bodies encased in business-suits, tuxedos, and evening dresses. The lights were all dyed a ghastly green or ghostly blue, by means of colored tissue-paper sheathed around them. A group of masked musicians kept playing the Funeral March over and over, with brief pauses in between. A coffin stood in the center of the main living-room.

I was drenched with sweat under my own mask and sick almost to death, even this early in the game.

At last the Book-keeper, unmasked, appeared in their midst. Behind him came the Messenger. The dead-head guests all applauded enthusiastically, gathered around them in a ring. Those in other rooms came in. The musicians stopped the Death March.

The Book-keeper bowed, smiled graciously. "Good evening, fellow corpses," was his chill greeting. "We are gathered together to witness the induction of our newest member." There was an electric tension. "Brother Bud!" His voice rang out like a clarion in the silence. "Step forward."

My heart burst into little pieces in my chest. I could feel my legs getting ready to go down under me. That roaring in my ears was my own crazed thoughts. And I knew with a terrible certainty that this was no initiation—this was to be "the punishment." For I was of no value to them—having no money.

Before I had time to tear off my mask, fight and claw my way out, I was seized by half-a-dozen of them, thrust forward into the center of the circle. I was forced to my knees and held in that position, writhing and twisting. My coat, vest and shirt were stripped off and my mask was removed. A linen shroud, with neck-and-arm holes, was pulled over my head. My hands were caught, pulled behind my back, and lashed tight with leather straps. I kicked out at them with my legs and squirmed about on the floor like a maniac—I, who was the only sane one of all of them! I rasped strangled imprecations at them. The corpse was unwilling.

They caught my threshing legs finally, strapped those together at the ankles and the knees, then carefully drew the shroud the rest of the way down. I was lifted bodily like a log, a long twisting white thing in its shroud, and fitted neatly into the quilted coffin. Agonizedly I tried to rear. I was forced down fiat and strapped in place across the waist and across the chest. All I could make now were inchoate animal-noises, gurglings and keenings. My face was a steaming cauldron of sweat.

I could still see the tops of their masked heads from where I was, bending down around me in a circle. Gloating, grinning, merciless death's heads. One seemed to be staring at me in fixed intensity; they were all staring, of course, but I saw him briefly hold a pair of glasses to the eyeholes of his mask, as though—almost as though I was known to him, from that other world outside. A moment later he beckoned the Book-keeper to him and they

withdrew together out of my line of vision, as though conferring about something.

The face of the Grave-digger had appeared above the rim of my coffin meanwhile, as though he had just come in from outside.

“Is it ready?” the Messenger asked him.

“Ready—and six feet deep,” was the blood-curdling answer.

I saw them up-end the lid of the coffin, to close it over me. One was holding a hammer and a number of long nails in his hand, in readiness. Down came the lid, flat, smothering my squall of unutterable woe, and the blue-green light that had been bearing down on me until now went velvety black.

Then, immediately afterwards, it was partially displaced again and the head of the Book-keeper was bending down close to mine. I could feel his warm breath on my forehead. His whisper was meant for me alone. “Is it true you are betrothed to a young lady of considerable means, a Miss Joan Blaine?”

I nodded, so far gone with terror I was only half-aware what I was doing.

“Is it her uncle, Rufus Blaine, who is the well-known manufacturer?”

I nodded again, groaned weakly. His face suddenly whisked away, but instead of the lid being fitted back into place as I momentarily expected, it was taken away altogether.

Arms reached in, undid the body-straps that held me, and I was helped to a sitting-position. A moment later the shroud had been drawn off me like a long white stocking, and my hands and legs were freed. I was lifted out.

I was too spent to do anything but tumble to the floor and lie there inert at the feet of all of them, conscious but unable to move. I heard and saw the rest of what went on from that position.

The Book-keeper held up his hand. “Fellow corpses!” he proclaimed, “Brother Bud’s punishment is indefinitely postponed, for reasons best known to myself and the other heads of the chapter—”

But the vile assemblage of masked fiends didn’t like that at all; they were being cheated of their prey. “No! No!” they gibbered, and raised their arms threateningly toward him. “The coffin cries for an occupant! The grave yearns for an inmate!”

“It shall have one!” he promised. “You shall witness your internment. You shall not be deprived of your funeral joys, of the wake you are entitled to!” He made a surreptitious sign to the Messenger, and the skull-crested ledger was handed to him. He opened it, hastily turned its pages, consulted the entries, while an ominous, expectant silence reigned. He pointed to something in the book, his eyes beaded maliciously. Then once more he held up his hand. “You shall witness a penalty, an irrevocable burial with the vents closed!”

Crooning cries of delight sounded on all sides.

“I find here,” he went on, “the name of a member who has accepted all our benefits, yet steadily defaulted on the contributions due us. Who has means, yet who had tried to cheat us by signing over his wealth to others, hiding it in safe-deposit boxes under false names, and so on. I hereby condemn Brother Anselm to be penalized!”

A mad scream sounded from their midst, and one of the masked figures tried to dash frightenedly toward the door. He was seized, dragged back, and the ordeal I had just been through was repeated. I couldn’t help noticing, with chill forebodings, that the Book-keeper made a point of having me stood up on my feet and held erect to watch the whole damnable thing. In other words, by being a witness and a participant, I was now as guilty as any of them. A fact which they were not likely to let me forget if I balked later on at meeting their blackmail-demands. Demands which

they expected me to fulfill with the help of Joan's money—her uncle's, rather-once I was married to her. It was the mention of her name, I realized, that had saved me. I was more use to them alive than dead, for the present, that was all.

Meanwhile, to the accompaniment of one last wail of despair that rang in my ears for days afterward, the coffin lid had been nailed down fast on top of the pulsing, throbbing contents the box held. It was lifted by four designated pall-bearers, carried outside to a waiting hearse lurking amidst the trees, while the musicians struck up the Death March. The rest of the murderous crew followed, myself included, held fast by the Messenger on one side, the Book-keeper on the other. They forced me into a limousine between them, and off we glided after the hearse, the other cars following us.

We all got out again at a lonely glen in the woods, where a grave had been prepared. No need to dwell on the scene that followed. Only one thing need be told. As the box was being lowered into it, in complete silence, sounds of frenzied motion could distinctly be heard within it, as of something rolling desperately from side to side. I watched as through a film of delirium, restraining hands on my wrists compelling me to look on.

When at last it was over, when at last the hole in the ground was gone, and the earth had been stamped down flat again on top of it, I found myself once more in the car that had originally called for me, alone this time with just the driver, being taken back to the city. I deliberately threw my own mask out of the side of the car, in token of burning my bridges behind me.

When he veered in toward the curb in front of my house, I jumped down and whirled, intending to grab him by the throat and drag him out after me. The damnable machine was already just a tail-light whirring away from me; he hadn't braked at all.

I chased upstairs, pulled down the shades so no one could see in, hauled out my valise, and began pitching things into it from full-height, my lower jaw trembling. Then I went to the phone, hesitated briefly, called Joan's number. Eyes everywhere, ears everywhere! But I had to take the chance. Her peril, now, was as great as mine.

Somebody else answered in her place. "Joan can't talk to anyone right now. The doctor's ordered her to bed, he had to give her a sedative to quiet her nerves, she came in awhile ago in a hysterical condition. We don't know what happened to her, we can't get her to tell us!"

I hung up, mystified. I thought: "I did that to her, by asking her to leave tonight. I hurt her, and she must have brooded about it—" I kicked my valise back under the bed. Friends of Death or no Friends of Death, I couldn't go until I'd seen her.

* * * *

I didn't sleep all that night. By nine the next morning I'd made up my mind. I put the invitation to the meeting in my inside pocket and went around to the nearest precinct-house. I regretted now having thrown my mask away the night before, that would have been more evidence to show them.

I asked, tight-lipped, to see the captain in charge. He listened patiently, scanned the invitation, tapped his lower teeth thoughtfully with his thumbnail. It slowly dawned on me that he considered me slightly cracked, a crank; my story must have sounded too fantastic to be altogether credible. Then when I'd given him the key to my falling in with them in the first place—my graveyard obsession—I saw him narrow his eyes shrewdly at me and nod to himself as though that explained everything.

He summoned one of the detectives, half-heartedly instructed him: "Investigate this man's story, Crow. See what you can find out about this—ahem—country-house and

mysterious graveyard out toward Ellendale. Report back to me." And then hurriedly went on to me, as though he couldn't wait to get rid of me, felt I really ought to be under observation at one of the psychopathic wards, "We'll take care of you, Mr. Ingram. You go on home now and don't let it worry you." He flipped the death's-head invitation carelessly against the edge of his desk once or twice. "You're sure this isn't just a high-pressure circular from some life-insurance concern or other?"

I locked my jaw grimly and walked out of there without answering. A lot of good they were going to be to me, I could see that. All but telling me to my face I was screwy.

Crow, the detective, came down the steps behind me leisurely buttoning his topcoat. He said, "An interstate bus'll leave me off close by there." It would, but I wondered how he knew that.

He threw up his arm as one approached and signalled it to stop. It swerved in and the door folded back automatically. His eyes bored through mine, through and through like gimlets, for just a second before he swung aboard. "See you later, Brother," he said. "You've earned the Penalty if anyone ever did. You're going down—without an air-pipe." Then he and the bus were gone-out toward Ellendale.

The sidewalk sort of swayed all around me, like jelly. It threatened to come up and hit me flat across the face, but I grabbed hold of a bus-stop stanchion and held onto it until the vertigo had passed. One of them right on the plainclothes squad! What was the sense of going back in there again? If I hadn't been believed the first time, what chance had I of being believed now? And the way he'd gone off and left me just now showed how safe he felt on that score. The fact that he hadn't tried to hijack me, force me to go out there with him, showed how certain they felt of laying hands on me when they were ready.

Well they hadn't yet! And they weren't going to, not if I had anything to say about it. Since I couldn't get help, flight was all that remained then. Flight it would be. They couldn't be everywhere, omnipotent; there must be places where I'd be safe from them—if only for a little while.

I drew my money out of the bank, I phoned in to the office that they could find somebody else for my job, I wasn't coming in any more. I went and got my car out of the garage where I habitually bedded it, and had it serviced, filled and checked for a long trip. I drove around to where I lived, paid up, put my valise in the back. I drove over to Joan's.

She looked pale, as though she'd been through something the night before, but she was up and around. My arms went around her. I said, "I've got to get out of town—now, before the hour's out—but I love you, and I'll get word to you where I am the minute I'm able to."

She answered quietly, looking up into my face: "What need is there of that, when I'll be right there with you—wherever it is?"

"But you don't know what I'm up against—and I can't tell you why, I'll only involve you!"

"I don't want to know. I'm coming. We can get married there, wherever it's to be—" She turned and ran out, was back again in no time, dragging a coat after her with one hand, hugging ajewelcase and an overnight-bag to her with the other, hat perched rakishly on the back of her head. We neither of us laughed, this was no time for laughter.

"I'm ready—" She saw by my face that something had happened, even in the brief time she'd been gone. "What is it?" She dropped the things; a string of pearls rolled out of the case.

I led her to the window and silently pointed down to my car below. I'd had the tires pumped up just now at the garage; all four rims rested flatly on the asphalt now, all the air let out. "Probably emptied the tank, cut the ignition,

crippled it irreparably, while they were at it," I said in a flat voice, "We're being watched every minute! Damn it, I shouldn't have come here, I'm dragging you to your grave!"

"Bud," she said, "if that's where I've got to go to be with you—even that's all right with me."

"Well, we're not there yet!" I muttered doggedly. "Train, then."

She nodded eagerly. "Where to?"

"New York. And if we're not safe even there, we can hop a boat to England—that surely ought to be out of their reach."

"Who are they?" she wanted to know.

"As long as I don't tell you, you've still got a chance. I'm not dooming you if I can help it!"

She didn't press the point, almost—it occurred to me later—almost as though she already knew all there was to know. "I'll call the station, find out when the next one leaves —"

I heard her go out in the hall, jiggle the phone-hook for a connection. I squatted down, stuck the pearls back in the case for her. I raised my eyes, and her feet were there on the carpet before me again.

She didn't whimper and she didn't break; just looked through me and beyond as I straightened up. "They mean business," she breathed. "The phone's gone dead."

She moved back to the window, stood there looking out. "There's a man been standing across the way reading a newspaper the whole time we've been talking in here. He seems to be waiting for a bus, but three have gone by and he's still there. We'll never make it." Then suddenly her face brightened. "Wait, I have it!" But her enthusiasm seemed spurious, premeditated, to me. "Instead of leaving here together to try to get through to the station, suppose we separate—and meet later on the train. I think that's safer."

"What! Leave you behind alone in this place? Nothing doing.

“I’ll go first, without taking anything with me, just as though I were going shopping. I won’t go near the station. I can take an ordinary city-bus to Hamlin, that’s the first train-stop on the way to New York. You give me a head-start, show yourself plentifully at the window in case he’s one of their plants, then slip out the back way, get your ticket and get aboard. I’ll be waiting for you on the station-platform at Hamlin, you can whisk me aboard with you; they only stop there a minute.”

The way she told it, it sounded reasonable, I would be running most of the risk, getting from here to the station. I agreed. “Stay in the thick of the crowd the whole way,” I warned her. “Don’t take any chances. If anyone so much as looks at you cross-eyed, holler blue murder, pull down the whole policeforce on top of them.”

“I’ll handle it,” she said competently. She came close, our lips met briefly. Her eyes misted over. “Bud darling,” she murmured low, “a long life and happy one to you!” Before it had dawned on me what a strange thing to say that was, she had flitted out and the door had closed after her.

I watched narrowly from the window, ready to dash out if the man with the paper so much as made a move toward her. To get the downtown bus she had to cross to where he was and wait beside him. He took no notice of her, never raised his eyes from his paper—a paper whose pages he hadn’t turned in a full ten minutes. She stood there facing one way, he the other. They could, of course, have exchanged remarks without my being aware of it. The bus flashed by and I tensed. A minute later I relaxed again. She was gone; he was still there reading that never-ending paper.

I decided to give her a half-hour’s start. That way, the train being faster than the bus, we’d both get to Hamlin about simultaneously. I didn’t want her to have to wait there alone on the station-platform too long if it could be avoided. Meanwhile I kept returning to the window, to let the

watcher see that I was still about the premises. I—Joan too for that matter—had long ago decided that he was a lookout, a plant, and then about twenty minutes after she'd gone, my whole theory collapsed like a house of cards. A girl, whom he must have been waiting for the whole time, came hurrying up to him and I could see her making excuses. He flung down his paper, looked at his wristwatch, took her roughly by the arm and they stalked off, arguing violently.

My relief was only momentary. The cut phone-wires, my crippled car, were evidence enough that unseen eyes had been, and still were watching me the whole time. Only they did it more skillfully than by means of a blatant look-out on a streetcorner. At least with him I had thought I knew where I was at; now I was in the dark again.

Thirty-five minutes after Joan had gone I slipped out through the back door, leaving my car still out there in front (as if that would do any good), leaving my hat perched on the top of an easy-chair with its back toward the window (as if that would, either). I followed the service-alley between the houses until I'd come out on the nearest sidestreet, around the corner from Joan's. It was now one in the afternoon. There wasn't a soul in sight at the moment, in this quiet residential district, and it seemed humanly impossible that I had been sighted.

I followed a circuitous zig-zag route, down one street, across another, in the general direction of the station, taking time out at frequent intervals to scan my surroundings with the help of some polished show-case that reflected them like a mirror. For all the signs of danger that I could notice, the Friends of Death seemed very far-away, non-existent.

I slipped into the station finally through the baggageentrance on the side, and worked my way from there toward the front, keeping my eyes open as I neared the ticket-windows. The place was a beehive of activity as

usual, which made it both safer and at the same time more dangerous for me. I was safer from sudden seizure with all these people around me, but it was harder to tell whether I was being watched or not.

"Two to New York," I said guardedly to the agent. And pocketing the tickets with a wary look around me, "When's the next one leave?"

"Half-an-hour."

I spent the time by keeping on the move. I didn't like the looks of the waiting-room; there were too many in it. I finally decided a telephone-booth would be the likeliest bet. Its gloom would offer me a measure of concealment, and instead of having four directions to watch at once, I'd only have one. Then, too, they were located conveniently near to the gates leading outside to the tracks. Passengers, however, were not being allowed through the latter yet.

I took a last comprehensive look around, then went straight at a booth as though I had a call to make. The two on each side of it were definitely empty; I saw that as I stepped in. I gave the bulb over me a couple of turns so it wouldn't flash on, left the slide open on a crack so I could catch the starter's announcement when it came, and leaned back watchfully against the far partition, eyes on the glass in front of me.

Twenty minutes went by and nothing happened. An amplifier suddenly came to life outside, and the starter's voice thundered through it. "New York Express. Track Four. Leaving in ten minutes. First stop Hamlin—"

And then, with a shock like high-voltage coursing through me, the phone beside me started pealing thinly.

I just stood there and stared at it, blood draining from my face. A call to a tollbooth? It must, it must be a wrong number, somebody wanted the Information Booth or—! It must have been audible outside, with all I had the slide partly closed. One of the redcaps passing by turned, looked

over, then started coming across toward where I was. To get rid of him I picked up the receiver, put it to my ear.

"You'd better come out now, time's up," a flat, deadly voice said. "They're calling your train, but you're not getting on that one-or any other."

"Wh—where are talking from?"

"The next booth to yours," the voice jeered. "You forgot the glass inserts only reach halfway down."

The connection broke and a man's looming figure was shadowing the glass in front of my eyes, before I could even get the receiver back on the hook. I dropped it full-length, tensed my right arm to pound it through his face as soon as I shoved the glass aside. He had a revolver-bore for a top vest-button, trained on me. Two more had shown up behind him, from which direction I hadn't noticed. It was very dark in the booth now, their collective silhouettes shut out all the daylight. The station and all its friendly bustle was blotted out, had receded into the far background, a thousand miles away for all the help it could give me. I slapped the glass wearily aside, came slowly out.

One of them flashed a badge—maybe Crow had loaned him his for the occasion. "You're being arrested for putting slugs in that phone. It won't do any good to raise your voice and shriek for help, try to tell people different. But suit yourself."

I knew that as well as he; heads turned to stare after us by the dozens as they started with me in their midst through the station's main-level. But not one in all that crowd would have dared interfere with what they mistook for a legitimate arrest in the line of duty. The one with the badge kept it conspicuously tilted in his upturned palm, at sight of which the frozen onlookers slowly parted, made way for us through their midst. I was being led to my doom in full view of scores of people.

I tried twice to dig my feet in when we came to ridges in the level of the terraced marble floor, but the point of the

gun at the base of my spine removed the impediment each time, I was so used to not wanting to die. Then slowly this determination came to me: “I’m going to force them to shoot me, before they get me into the car or whatever it is they’re taking me to. It’s my only way out, cheat death by death. I’m to be buried agonizingly alive, anyway; I’ll compel them to end it here instead, by that gun. That clean, friendly gun. But not just shoot me, shoot me dead, otherwise—” A violent wrench backwards would do it, compressing the gun into its holder’s body, discharging it automatically into me. “Poor Joan,” I thought, “left waiting on the Hamlin station-platform—for all eternity.” But that didn’t alter my determination any.

The voice of the train-dispatcher, loudspeaker and all, was dwindling behind us. “New York Express, Track Four, leaves in five more min—”

Sunlight suddenly struck down at us from outside the station portico, between the huge two-story high columns, and down below at the distant bottom of the long terraced steps there was one of those black touring-cars standing waiting. “Now!” I thought, and tensed, ready to rear backward into the gun so that it would explode into my vitals.

A Western Union messenger in typical olive-green was running up the sloping steps straight toward my captors, arm extended. Not a boy though, a grown man. One of *them* disguised, I knew, even as I looked at him. “Urgent!” he panted, and thrust a message into the hand of the one with the badge. I let myself relax again in their hands, postponing for a moment the forcing of death into my own body, while I waited to see what this was.

He read it through once, then quickly whispered it aloud a second time to the other two—or part of it, anyway. “Penalty cancelled, give ex-Brother Bud safe-conduct to New York on promise never to return. Renewed oath of eternal silence on his part accepted. Interment ceremonies

will take place as planned—" He pointed with his finger to the rest without repeating it aloud, that's how I knew there was more.

The messenger had already hurried down again to where the car was, and darted behind it. A motorcycle suddenly shot out from the other side of it and racketed off, trailing little puff-balls of blue gas-smoke. A moment later the three with me, scattered like startled buzzards cheated of their prey, had followed him down, at different angles that converged toward the car. I found myself standing there alone at the top of the station-steps, a lone figure dwarfed by the monolithic columns.

I reeled, turned and started headlong through the long reaches of the station behind me, bent over like a marathon runner reaching for the guerdon. "Board! 'Board!" was sounding faintly somewhere in the distance. I could see them pulling the adjustable exit-gates closed ahead of me. I held one arm straight up in the air, and they saw me coming and left a little opening for me, enough for one person to dive through.

The train was gathering speed when I lurched down to tracklevel, but I caught the handrail of the last vestibule of the last car just before it cleared the concrete runway beside the tracks. A conductor dragged me in bodily and I fell in a huddle at his feet.

"You last-minute passengers!" I heard him grumbling, "you'd think your life depended on it—"

I lay there heaving, flat on my back like a fish out of water, looking up at him. "It did," I managed to get out.

I was leaning far out from the bottom vestibule-step at nearly a 45-degree angle, holding on with one hand, when the Hamlin station-platform swept into sight forty minutes later. I could see the whole boat-shaped "pier" from end to end.

There was something wrong; she wasn't on it. Nobody was on it, only a pair of lounging darkies, backs against the

station-wall. The big painted sign floated up, came to a halt almost before my eyes: “HAMLIN.” She’d said Hamlin; what had happened, what had gone wrong? It *had* to be Hamlin; there wasn’t any other stop until tomorrow morning, states away!

I jumped down, went skidding into the little stuffy two-by-four waiting-room. Nobody in it. I dashed for the ticket-window, grabbed the bars with both hands, all but shook them. “A girl—blue eyes, blonde hair, brown coat—where is she, where’d she go? Haven’t you seen anyone like that around here?”

“Nope, nobody been around here all afternoon, ain’t sold a ticket nor even had an inquiry—”

“The bus from the city—did it get here yet?”

“Ten full minutes ago. It’s out there in back of the station right now.”

I hurled through the opposite door like something demented. The locomotive-bell was tolling dismally, almost like a funeral knell. I collared the bus-driver despairingly.

“Nope, didn’t bring any young women out at all on my last run. I’d know; I like young women.”

“And no one like that got on, at the downtown city-terminal?”

“Nope, no blondes. I’d know, I like blondes.”

The wheels were already starting to click warningly over the rail-intersections as the train glided into motion; I could hear them around on the other side of the station from where I was. Half-crazed, I ducked inside again. The agent belatedly remembered something, called me over as I stood there dazedly looking all around me. “Say, by the way, your name Ingram? Forgot to tell you, special messenger brought this out awhile back, asked me to deliver it to the New York train.”

I snatched at it. It was in her handwriting! I tore it open, my head swivelled crazily from left to right as my eyes raced along the writing.

I didn't take the bus to Hamlin after all, but don't worry. Go on to New York and wait there for me instead. And think of me often, and pray for me sometimes, and above all keep your pledge of silence.

Joan

She'd found out! was the first thunderbolt that struck me. And the second was a dynamite-blast that split me from head to foot. She was in their hands! That gruesome message that had saved me at the station came back to me word for word, and I knew now what it meant and what the part was that they'd kept from me. "Penalty cancelled. Give Brother Bud safe-conduct. Renewed oath on his part accepted—" But I hadn't made one. She must have promised them that on my behalf. "*Interment will take place as planned—*" Substitute accepted!

And that substitute was Joan. She'd taken my place. She'd gone to them and made a bargain with them. Saved me, at the cost of her own life.

* * * *

I don't remember how I got back to the city. Maybe I thrust all the money I had on me at someone and borrowed their car. Maybe I just stole one left unguarded on the street with the key in it. I don't remember where I got the gun either. I must have gone back to that same pawnshop I'd already been to once, as soon as I got in.

When things came back into focus, I was already on the porch of that boarded-up house at Ellendale, battering my body apart against the doorcasing. I broke in finally by jumping from a tree to the porch-shed and kicking in one of the upper-story windows, less stoutly boarded.

I was too late. The silence told me that as soon as I stood within the room, and the last tinklings of shattered glass had died down around me. They weren't here. They'd gone. There wasn't a soul in the place! But there were signs, when I crept down the stairs gun in hand, that they'd been

there. The downstairs rooms were heavy with the thickly cloying scent of fresh flowers, ferns and bits of leaf were scattered about the floor. Folding campchairs were still arranged in orderly rows, as though a funeral service had been conducted. Facing them stood tapers thick as a man's wrist, barely cool at the top, the charred odor of their gutted wicks still clinging to them. And in a closet when I looked I found her coat—Joan's—her hat, her dress, her little pitiful strapped sandals standing empty side by side! I crushed them to me, dropped them, ran out of there crazed, and broke into the adjacent graveyard, but there were no signs that she'd been taken there. No freshly-filled in grave, no mound without its sprouting grass. I'd heard them say they had others. It had grown dark long ago, and it must be over by now. But how could I stop trying, even though it were too late?

Afterwards, along the state highway, I found a couple sleeping overnight in a trailer by the roadside who told me a hearse had passed them on its way to the city, followed by a number of limousines, *a full two hours earlier*. They'd thought it was a strange hour for a funeral. They'd also thought the procession was going faster than seemed decent. And after an empty ginbottle had been tossed out of one of the cars, they were not likely to forget the incident.

I lost the trail at the city-limits, no one had seen them beyond there, the night and the darkness had swallowed them up. I've been looking ever since. I've already broken into two, and I was in the third one when you stopped me—but no sign of her. She's in some city graveyard at this very minute, still breathing, threshing her life away in smothering darkness, while you're holding me here, wasting precious time. Kill me, then, kill me and have it over with-or else help me find her, but don't let me suffer like this!

* * * *

The captain took his hand away from before his eyes, stopped pinching the bridge of his nose with it. A white mark was left there between his eyes. “This is awful,” he breathed. “I almost wish I hadn’t heard that story. How could it be anything else but true? It’s too farfetched, too unbelievable.”

Suddenly, like a wireless-set that comes to life, crackling, emitting blue sparks, he was sending out staccato orders. “For corroborating evidence we have her note to you sent to Hamlin station; we have her clothing at the Ellendale house, and undoubtedly that ledger of membership you first signed, along with God-knows what else! You two men get out there quick with a battery of police-photographers and take pictures of those campchairs, tapers, everything just as you find it. And don’t forget the graveyard. I want every one of those graves broken open as fast as you can swing picks. I’ll send the necessary exhumation-permits after you, but don’t wait for them! Those grounds are full of living beings!”

“Joan—Joan—” Bud Ingram whimpered as the door crashed after them.

The captain nodded tersely, without even having time enough to be sympathetic. “Now we stop thinking like policemen and think like human beings for this once, departmental regulations to the contrary,” he promised. He spoke quietly into his desk-phone. “Give me Mercer at Poplar Street And then, “This man Crow of yours . . . He’s off-duty right now, you say?”

“He’s at the wake, he’s beyond your reach,” Ingram moaned. “He won’t report back until—”

“Sh!” the captain silenced him. “He may be one of them, but he’s a policeman along with it.” He said to Mercer, “I want you to send out a short-wave, asking him to call in to you at his precinct-house at once. And when he does, I want you to keep him on the wire, I want that line kept open until his call has been traced! That man must not get off until I’ve

found out where he's talking from and had a chance to get there, and I'll hold you responsible, Mercer. Is that clear? It's a matter of life and death. You can make whatever case he's on at present the excuse. I'll be waiting to start out from here the minute I hear from you." And then, into the desk-transmitter: "I want an emergency raiding-party made up at once, two cars, everyone you can spare. I want shovels, spades and picks, plenty of them. I want a third car, with an inhalator-squad, oxygen-tent and the whole works. Yeah, motorcycle escort—and give orders ahead: *No sirens, no lights*."

Ingram said, "The short-wave mayn't reach him—Crow. And if it does, he may not answer it, pretend he didn't get it."

"He's got his car," the captain said, "and he's still a policeman, no matter what else he is." He held the door open. "There it goes out." A set outside in one of the other rooms throbbed: "Lawrence Crow, detective first grade. Lawrence Crow, detective first grade. Ring up Mercer at your precinct-house immediately. Ring up Mercer—"

Ingram leaned against the door in silent prayer. "May his sense of duty be stronger than his caution!"

The captain was buttoning on a coat, feeling for the revolver at his hip.

"It's no use, she's dead already," Ingram said. "It's one in the morning, seven hours have gone by—"

The desk-phone buzzed ominously, just once. "Hold him!" was all the captain rasped into it, and thrust Ingram out ahead of him. "He's calling in—get out there to the car!"

And as the car-door cracked shut after them outside the building, he gave a terse: "All-night drugstore, Main on the 7oo-block!" They started off like a procession of swift silent black shadows, the only sound of their going the muffled pounding of motorcycles around and ahead of them.

Crow's car was standing there outside the lighted place as they swept up, and he was still inside. Two of them

jumped in, hurried him out between them. The captain stood facing him.

"Your badge," he said. "You're under arrest. Where was she taken, this girl, Joan Blame? Where is she now?"

"I don't know who she is," he said.

The captain drew his gun. "Answer me or I'll shoot you where you stand!"

Ingram said hopelessly, "He's not afraid of death."

"No, I'm not," Crow answered quietly.

"He'll be afraid of pain, then!" the captain said. "Take him back inside. You two come with me. The rest of you keep out, understand?"

The glass door flashed open again after they'd gone in and the drugstore nightclerk was thrust out on the sidewalk, looking frightened. A full-length shade was suddenly drawn down behind him.

Ingram stayed in the car, head clasped in his arms, bowed over his lap. A muffled scream sounded somewhere near at hand in the utter stillness. The door suddenly flew open and the captain came running out alone. He was stripping off a rubber glove; the reek of some strong acid reached those in the car. Through the open door behind him came the sound of a man sobbing brokenly like a little child, a man in pain.

"Inhalator-squad follow my car," the captain snapped. "Greenwood Park, main driveway. The rest of you go to a large house standing in the middle of its own grounds over on the South Side near Valley Road. Surround it and arrest every man and woman you find in it."

They separated; the captain's and Ingram's car fled silently westward along the nightbound boulevard toward the immense public park on that side of the city.

Trees, lawns, meadows, black under the starlight, suddenly swept around them, and to the left there was the faint coruscation of a body of water. A bagpipe of brakes

and a puff of burnt-rubber stench and they had skidded to a halt.

"Lights!" ordered the captain, stumbling out. "Train the heads after us—and bring those tools and the oxygen-tanks!" The sward bleached vividly green as the two cars backed sideways into position. It was suddenly full of scattered, moiling men, trampling about, heads down like bloodhounds.

The one farthest afield shouted: "Here's a patch without grass!"

They came running from all directions, contracted into a knot around him.

"That's it—see the oblong, see the darker color from the freshly-upturned—!" Coats flew up into the air like waving banners, a shovel bit in, another, another. But Ingram was at it with his raw, bared hands again, like a mole, pleading, "Be careful! Oh be careful, men! This is my girl!"

"Now keep your heads," the captain warned. "Just a minute more. Keep him back, he's getting in their way."

A hollow sound, a *Phuff!* echoed from the inch of protruding pipe, and the man testing it, flat on his stomach, lifted his face, said, "It's partly open all the way down."

The earth parted like a wave across the top of it, and they were lifting it, and they were prying at the lid, gently, carefully, no blows. "Now, bring up the tanks—quick!" the captain said, and to no one in particular, "What a night!" They were still holding Ingram back by main force, and then suddenly as the lid came off, they didn't have to hold him any more.

She was in a bridal gown, and she was beautiful, even as still and as marble-white as she was, when they lifted the disarranged veil—when they gently drew aside the protecting arm she'd thrown before her eyes. Then she was hidden from Ingram by their backs.

Suddenly the police-doctor straightened up. "Take that tube away. This girl doesn't need oxygen—there's nothing

the matter with her breathing, or her heart-action. She needs restoratives, she's in a dead faint from fright, that's all!"

Instantly they were all busy at once, chafing her hands and arms, clumsily yet gently slapping her face, holding ammonia to her nose. With the fluttering of her eyelids came a shriek of unutterable terror, as though it had been waiting in her throat all this time to be released.

"Lift her out of that thing, quick, before she sees it," the captain whispered.

Back raced the cars, with the girl that had come up out of her grave—and beside her, holding her close, a man who had been healed of all his fears, cured-even as the Friends of Death had promised.

"And each time I'd come to, I'd go right off again," she whispered huskily.

"That probably saved you," the doctor on the other side of her said, "lying still. You'll be all right, you've had a bad fright, that's all."

Bud Ingram held her close, her head upon his shoulder, eyes unafraid staring straight ahead now.

"I never knew there could be such a love in all this world," he murmured.

She smiled a feeble little smile. "Look in my heart sometime—and see," she said.

* * * *

There were sensational disclosures the next day, when the Friends of Death appeared in court. A number of leading citizens were among them—men and women whom the weird society was draining of their wealth. Others, there were, who claimed they had been brought back from the grave—and, indeed, there were doctor's certificates and burial permits to testify to the truth of this. Only later, at the trial of the leaders of the cult, did the whole story come to light. The people who had "died" and been buried were

those chosen by the leaders for their reputations for honesty and reliability. They were then slowly poisoned by a member planted in their household by the society for this purpose—sometimes it was a servant, sometimes a member of the person's own family. But the poison was not fatal. It induced a state of partially suspended organic functions which a cursory medical examination might diagnose as death, the rest was handled by doctors and undertakers—even civil employees—who were members of the "Friends." Then the victim was resuscitated, persuaded he had been restored to life by the secret processes of the society, and initiated as a member. His testimony, after that, was responsible for gaining many new members, without the dangerous necessity of "killing" and reviving more than the first few. And the "penalties" inflicted upon recalcitrant members made those remaining, participants in capital crime—and made the society's hold on them absolute.

But the greatest hold of all—the one which made the vast majority of the members rejoice in their bondage, and turn into rabid fiends at the least suspicion of disloyalty in the organization—was the infinitely comforting knowledge that no longer need they fear death.

And, in the words of the state prosecutor, most of them had been punished sufficiently for their sins in the terrible awakening to the realization that they were not immortals—and that somewhere, sometime, their graves awaited them . . .

YOUR OWN FUNERAL

THE demure little lady stepped into the grocery store, rested her large parcel on the counter, and stood by to be waited on. Outside a man just passing glanced incuriously in through the glass front of the shop as he went by. Just a brief turn of his head, one quick glance, no more. The only unusual feature about it being that male passersby will glance at haberdasheries, cigar stores, even barber shops, but seldom at groceries as a rule.

She was a pretty little thing, and she gave her order in a low, pleasant, half-shy voice, keeping her eyes on the list in her hand. She looked absurdly like a child, gravely reciting a lesson. But there was a wedding ring on her ungloved hand. So she must have been at least eighteen.

“Want me to send it over for you?” he offered. “Kind of heavy—”

“No, thanks, I’ll carry it myself,” she murmured. “No trouble at all.”

She emerged, her arms pretty full, and continued on her way. She wore a short sealskin jacket that swung as she walked; her clothes were plain and inexpensive looking.

The man who had passed the grocery as she’d gone in hadn’t progressed very far. He had stopped at the newsstand at the next corner to buy a paper, then he retreated, his back to the line of buildings, to glance

through it quickly before taking it home with him. The hands that held the paper wore stained pigskin gloves.

The little lady with the bundles passed him a moment later. Neither of them glanced at the other; there was no reason for them to. He was lost in the baseball scores boxed at the top of the page, she was eying a light diagonally opposite to make sure she could cross on red. Halfway down the next block she stopped in at another store, a bakery.

A moment after, by one of those coincidences that so often happen, Pigskin Gloves passed in front of the bakery. He was carrying the paper in his pocket now. Once more his eyes strayed indifferently to the inside of the store, then out again. But the average man on the street isn't particularly interested in the interiors of bakeries either. This one may have been thinking of the supper he was going home to—so leisurely.

She accepted her change from the counterman, put it in her purse, and came out more bebundled than ever. Pigskin Gloves, who was obviously in no great hurry to get home, had stopped at last at the proper kind of showcase—that of a men's furnishing store a few doors down—and was gazing in at a luscious display of trick shirts. The window had been recently washed, unlike most of its neighbors; except that it lacked a little quicksilver backing, it was every bit as good as a mirror.

The busy little housewife marched by with her packages, and her watery reflection followed across the glass store front. But just as she came abreast of Pigskin Gloves who was standing there with his back to her, the pupils of her eyes flicked briefly sideward toward him, then looked away again. It was as instantaneous, as hard to catch, as the click of a camera shutter.

She went a few steps farther. But there was a change coming over her eyes now. Or rather over the skin around them. It was hardening, tensing a little. Instantly, as though

she realized it herself, she relaxed them, and they became as smooth as ever. But she seemed to remember a purchase she had forgotten to make. She stopped, turned abruptly, and began doubling back the way she had just conic.

Pigskin Gloves was still idly looking at shirts and ties as she passed behind him a second time. But this time her eyes were blankly unaware of him; there was no flick toward him; and his oblivious back expressed equal unawareness of her.

At the corner that had the traffic light, she didn't cross a second time but turned up the side street and passed from sight, remaining just a demure little figure carrying bundles.

Instantly, from nowhere at all a second man had materialized beside Pigskin Gloves. Pigskin Gloves gave him a quick almost unnoticeable prod in the side, as though urging him forward, and then they separated. No one could have seen it, it was no more than a gesture of recognition between two passing acquaintances. The second man, who was dressed in a gray ulster, a gray soft hat, reached the corner and turned it, taking the same direction as the little housewife. The first one, Pigskin Gloves, was hurrying onward to the corner above, but going much faster now. He took the second side street, parallel to this one.

On the one the little housewife had taken, Gray Hat also was going along briskly. A discarded bag full of groceries caught his eye, just outside an area way entrance. An untouched loaf of bread in wax paper had rolled out. He didn't stop to examine it; on the contrary his brisk pace changed to a jog trot. Further along was a second bag of groceries. This one had rolled toward the street and spilled out over the curb. The jog trot became a headlong run, the unfastened gray coat ballooning out behind him like a parachute. The street ahead was empty.

TO BE accurate, not strictly empty, but there was no little housewife on it. And that was all that Gray Hat was interested in. Down at the corner, crashed open against a fire hydrant, was the third and last brown paper bag. A pair of bright tin cans had rolled out of it; two boys were bearing down on it from across the way, frantically urged on by a plump maternal figure in an open upper story window.

As Gray Hat, by one of those coincidences that were now becoming a little overworked, reached the corner, Pigskin Gloves was coming at a full run toward him, having rounded the block from the other side. They both turned and followed a single direction.

They went one more block east, then one south. It was incredible how the girl had managed to get so far so quickly. Just beyond the next corner the demure little housewife, packageless now, and hatless, was careening along at a frantic, lurching speed, hugging her arms to her body as most women do when they run. That she could get anywhere at all on such spindly heels, much less as far and as fast as she had showed to what limits the human mechanism can force itself.

Halfway down, a doorway seemed suddenly to engulf her, and she was gone. The white and violet crepe ribbons fastened there fluttered with her passing. Long after she was gone, the glass street door was still slowly jolting back into place on reluctant hinges.

Just too late to catch sight of her, Pigskin Gloves and Gray Hat turned into the block, raced to the next corner. But they didn’t turn it. An elderly man, standing there, approached at their command and said something to them. He made an abortive gesture with his arm, as though to point, and one of them slapped it down. Once again, as they had before, they separated. Gray Hat stayed where he was, pulling his hat brim further down over his eyes. Pigskin Gloves hurried off toward a very little thing, an almost

inconspicuous little thing that he had spotted a second before. A blue and white enamel disk affixed to the baseboard of a store window that said *Public Telephone.*

Twilight was deepening into night; the street lights suddenly came on in long serried rows as far as the eye could reach . . .

On the second floor of the hallway the demure-faced girl was leaning breathlessly against a door, limp as a rag doll, not making any sound, her face pressed flat against the wood to still the gasping of her breath. Her hands roamed up and down it on each side of her, not knocking but pushing against it, incoherently seeking admittance. She turned just once to look fearfully at the stairs, then pressed despairingly flat against the door again. It opened without a sound; she vanished like a shadow; the door closed again.

On the other side of it, in the orange dimness of a single bulb from far down the long hall, she spoke. A steamy whisper, with no larynx sound at all. “Feds, Champ! Whiskers’ boys, Champ! Right on top of me, almost, before I knew it!” She passed the flat of her hand across her brow, staggered a little from so much running.

THE man in the blue shirt finished putting away the blue-black automatic and interlacing the door-seam with chains, as though he hadn’t heard her. Then they moved down the long hallway together, away from the door. In the room at the end he flexed his arm just once, and she was down suddenly on one supporting arm.

“And you came back here! Right straight back, like in a paper chase!” He reached up and turned the bulb out, went over to the blank wall opposite, and from there diagonally up to the windows. Spider-webby net curtains criss-crossed the silvery arc-light glow coming in from the street. He didn’t touch them, didn’t even let his breath disturb them,

as he pushed his face close up against them. Champ Lane, in the dim light, looked a good deal like a kid. His hard, cunning face was obscured; his body in silhouette was small, almost stunted; its movements wiry and tense.

“I made it, Champ, I lost them.” Her voice sounded muffled somewhere in the darkened room behind him. “I had to get in out of the open, I had to pull a hole over my head, and I didn’t know which way to turn. If I’d stayed out I’d have been picked up sure as—”

“Why didn’t you pull the river over you, then?” he said bitterly, eyes glinting through two intersections in the closely webbed net.

She picked herself up, swung open a closet door, stepped behind it—outside the closet but away from the windows. Sandpaper hissed once, there was a momentary match-glow, then darkness again. She came out from behind the door with her hand turned down and under over a winking red spark. “I lost all the grub too. I don’t know what we’re going to do, I can’t show my face in those same stores again. My seal coat’s hot, too, and it’s the only thing I’ve got to go out in—”

The red spark moved restlessly back and forth in the velvety darkness of the room. In the silence as she stopped whispering, a muffled wail, an eerie piping sound, came thinly through the ceiling over them.

She shivered. “They still got that stiff up there with them?” she said querulously, tilting her head back. “Why don’t they take it out? It drives you wacky listening to them.”

The man at the window, Champion Lane, wanted by almost the whole nation these last few weeks, hadn’t stirred, hadn’t taken his eyes from the two net pinholes that served each pupil as a frame. He hadn’t seemed to breathe all this time. He spoke again at last.

“You lost ’em!” was all he said, in a clipped, choked voice.

Instantly, without a sound, she was at his shoulder, peering over it down into the street. The red spark in the hollow of her hand was hidden from the window by her palm. He didn't hit her any more, just dug abruptly back with his elbow. She went away, came back again without the glowing cigarette.

Three men were gathered into a tight little knot on the opposite side of the street; they weren't looking over this way at all. They melted apart, each went up a different brown-stone stoop. One wore a cravenette waterproof coat. One carried a violin case tucked high up under the pit of his arm. No doors opened to admit them at the tops of those stoops, they just ebbed into the shadows. There were some uniformed policemen, too.

"Warm weather on its way," Champ said grimly.

She pulled at his sleeve. "Let's get out. Maybe we still can make it. This is an awful set-up to be caught in—a dead end without any turns!"

"It's too late, you fool, it's too late. We've got the whole District of Columbia on our hands."

A FELLOW and his girl were coming up the street arm in arm from the lower corner. A man suddenly accosted them from an areaway, dropped back again. The couple turned, went hastily back the way they had come, turning their heads repeatedly to look over their shoulders.

"Roping us off, eh?"

"The back yard, Champ. We can get out that way."

"If they're on this street, they're on the next one over." He turned briefly away, shrugged into a suit coat. Instantly the ghostly blue of his shirt darkened to invisible black. He took the gun out again from under it. "They're not getting me alive," he said quietly.

The futile bleating coming down through the ceiling sounded weirder than ever in the tense prickling stillness; it was like the monotonous fluting tune an Indian snake charmer plays, or the whistle of a peanut stand on a lonely street corner.

Champ Lane had always had a sense of humor; perverted, perhaps, but it was there. His eyes flicked upward.

"Move over, whoever you are," he chuckled, "there's two more coming up!"

The girl in the room with him winced, drew in her breath sharply, as though something sharp had cut her.

Out in the street a taxi halted, was reversing with difficulty. A directing figure jumped off the running board as it started back the wrong way on a one-way street. Lights were going out by the roomful in the houses opposite. They became strangely blank, inscrutable. A woman came hurrying out of one of them guided by a policeman, a birdcage in her hand. He gave her a parting shove at the elbow and she went waddling down the street to safety.

"Any minute now," said Champ Lane, showing his teeth in what might have been a grin.

Suddenly the mourners' lament above broke off short, razor-clean. The waspish buzzing of a door-bell battery, clearly audible through the paper-thin floor, took its place. *Z'Z'Z-Z.* Footsteps hurried to and fro across the planking up there, scuffled briefly as though someone were being forced to leave against his will.

Then, incredibly, it sounded right there in the same flat with them—louder, as angry as a stirred-up hornet's nest at the other end of the long hall.

"What do they expect me to do?" he said, "Walk down tp the door with my hands up? Take it," he instructed her briefly, "or else they'll know for sure which flat—"

She moved down the hall on soundless feet. "Yes?" she breathed into the perforated disk on the wall.

“Everybody out! Everybody down to the street! That’s a Department of Justice order!”

She came back. “They’re clearing the house.”

“Gas, that means,” he said.

“Champ,” she pleaded hoarsely, “don’t just stay in here with your back to the wall and die! Don’t count on your arsenal in the kitchen, you’ve got a whole Government against you! The minutes are going, once they’ve emptied the other flats it’ll be too late—”

An incessant throbbing of feet was sounding from the galvanized iron framework of the staircase outside—all going one way—all going down. It was vibration rather than sound. The warning buzz kept sounding distantly as doors opened. Below, above, somewhere on the same floor. The thin, keening sound suddenly burst into full volume again, but it wasn’t overhead any more, it was going down and around the stairwell, ebbing to the street below.

Champ surged forward swiftly.

He was at the window again. A bowed figure in widow’s weeds, face veiled, was being hurried on reluctant feet across to the other side of the street, a policeman on one side of her, the building superintendent on the other, holding her up.

She, Champ’s wife, must have been at the door without his knowing it; he would probably have shot her down if he had. She came running back. “The roof, Champ, the roof!”

Whaddya think they are—hicks?” was all he said, not turning his head.

“Then do your dying out in the open hall at least, not sealed up in this sardine can! The stairs’re still clear from this floor up. Let’s give it a try, at least. We can always beat it down in again, if it’s no go—” She was pulling at his left arm with both of hers.

“All right,” he said suddenly, “get started, up there. I’m going to begin it from here. It’s coming anyway—and I

never yet fired second in my life. Here goes your friend with the raincoat."

She could just about make out the figure, across his shoulder and through the curtains and the window glass, up on top of a stoop there on the other side, signaling to someone unseen on this side.

He didn't touch the curtain or the pane. "Watch your eyes." She squinted them protectingly. It went off like a cannon, the flash lighting up both their faces, and bits of glass spattered all over them like raindrops. The curtain quivered violently; a singed hole was in it now. The figure on the stoop took a nose, dive down the whole twenty brownstone steps, rolled all the way across the sidewalk into the gutter.

INSTANTLY a whole unguessed insect world came to life. Swarms of yellow butterflies fluttered from every areaway, from every stoop, all up and down the street. Whole hivefuls of angry bees seemed to loose themselves against both windows, and hop around inside the room like Mexican jumping-beans. In an instant there wasn't a shred of glass left in either frame. Champ jerked back, cursing, and threw himself flat on his belly pulling her down with him. The curtains were doing a buck-and-wing. Wisps of smoke came from the roof line across the way and floated off into the nigh t sky. A searchlight beam suddenly shot down from somewhere, found the range of the windows, and bleached the room inside talcum-white.

They were both flat on their stomachs, wriggling snake-like for the safety of the hall, the girl in the lead. Champ swung bodily around his gun, like a rudder steering a floundering boat, ducked his chin to the carpet, and shot *up* the beam to a cornice across the street. Glass fluted plaintively, the white-hot whorl that centered the beam

went yellow, then red, then out. The beam itself snuffed out, like an erased white line. They couldn't see anything themselves for a minute, much less the others over there around it.

He felt his way after her, hand on her uprighted heel; then they both reared behind the hall wall. "C'mon," he said, "we're good for ten minutes yet, after that. They probably think Frankie or somebody else is in here with me."

A window in the hallway looking out on a shaft that led to the back shivered to pieces just after they'd gone by, their flitting forms must have silhouetted against the light-toned wall behind them.

"Tomcats out on the back fence too," he gritted. He pitched his gun into the kitchen, grabbed up an unspiked one from a china cabinet where they were hanging from hooks like cups. The place was a regular munitions depot. At the door he took the lead, slithered out to the turn of the stairs, peered down to the floor below. She took the branch leading up.

"Champ, don't!" she breathed. "Isn't the rap tough enough as it is?" His gun blasted just once, malevolently, and thick door-glass jumped apart somewhere below. A swarm of bees winged up to the second floor with a noise like a coffee grinder, and the smooth wall broke out with blackheads. But he was already on his way up to the third at her heels. "Tommy gun," he said. "All they need is tin hats and a flag!"

They shot out around the third landing, past a door with a wreath, and on up to the fourth. The house was all theirs. Below it sounded like a very enthusiastic Fourth of July. On the fourth floor somebody had lost a supper-table napkin in his hurry to get out, probably from under his chin. An overlooked radio was still jabbering away:

"And then little Peter Rabbit said to the Big Bad Wolf—"

Above the fourth the stairs shed their fake marble trim, took on a sharper incline. A roof door sealed them. “Get that hall light!” he ordered, hand on the latch. She high jumped, and couldn’t reach it.

“All right, skip it.” He sighted on it almost casually and it popped into nothingness like a little balloon.

HE motioned her down behind him, took off the latch, and began to ease the roof door out with shoulder pressure. Instantly, as though it were high noon out instead of well into the night, the gap was fuming with radiance like a seidlitz powder from some waiting beam, and the usual bees were singing all over the outside of the metal door. One of them, getting in, ricocheted directly across the girl’s feet on one of the lower steps, like some kind of a warm little bug. She shook it off with a kick.

“Musta mobilized the militia,” he said with a flash of sardonic humor. They started down again, on the bias, hugging the inside wall away from the stair rail. Out in the street somewhere a futile bombardment—at nothing—was in full blast. They got down to the third again unopposed. Champ’s wife had picked up the discarded napkin, perhaps with some unspoken wish that he’d surrender alive, and was holding it balled in her hand without his seeing it. They re-passed the door with the crepe, hurriedly left on an inch-wide gap by its routed tenants.

He stopped, wavering by the stairs. Her hand pressed against his arm. “Oh.” It was a small sound—a little, throaty gasp. “Oh—you’re hurt—bleeding—”

“It’s nothing,” he said shortly. “It was that first blast—here, gimme that napkin.” He grabbed it from her, wrapped it around his upper arm just below the biceps, held the ends for her to tie.

“I won’t leave you, Champ. I won’t. You’re hurt.”

“You’ll do like I tell you. I’m all right. Stop snivelin’ over me. It’s just a little blood.” He pushed her away from him, mounted the first steps, then stopped short. “You know what I’m going to do, don’t you?” he said.

She looked frightened—in a new way. “I—I guess so, Champ,” she said, and shivered.

His eyes were hard, commanding.

“Then here’s what it’s up to you to do—” He told her rapidly, in short, sharp phrases. “Don’t worry,” he said, finishing. “And as soon as you get a chance get in touch with Eddie. I’ll leave a message, see? So just sit tight. Now go ahead—” He pushed her from him.

She crept fearfully down a flight further, to the second—alone. Upstairs in the depths of the building somewhere Champ was firing his gun again—into wood, at close range, it sounded like. It was drowned out in the repeated thud and boom of gas grenades coming in now through the windows of the second floor flat.

SHE came wavering down to the vestibule through the haze of the gas, her hand pressed to her stinging eyes. They led her out to the street, and the barrage against the windows died down shamefacedly. Up at either end were roped-off black masses that were spectators, here in the middle a big bald patch of empty sidewalk and roadway, like a setting for a stage play.

She came out into the middle of this with a knot of men around her—so very fragile and girlish, she looked, to be the cause of so much racket and commotion. She mayn’t have been crying, but the gas made it seem as if she was. “Where is he?” she was asked.

“He got out right at the start,” she said simply. “He must have slipped right through your fingers along with the

others. I couldn't do it, because you'd already seen me this afternoon—" And she gave them a rueful little smile.

They rushed the flat—and got a kitchenful of assorted weapons for their trouble.

"Rigged himself up and put one over on us, huh?" someone in command said wrathfully. "I told you to check those tenants carefully when you cleared the house!"

"We did, but the extras all accounted for themselves as guests from a party they were having on the top floor, and mourners from a wake on the third—"

"Sure! But you didn't check them *with* each other, you let them come out in any old order, and didn't keep any of them in custody after they did. This ain't the last you're going to hear about this, McDowell!"

The building was searched from top to bottom, but the girl seemed to have told the truth. Once again as so many times before, Champ Lane had eluded capture by a hair's breadth. They had the net to set all over again. At least this time they had his wife, whatever good that did them.

The other tenants were allowed to return to their homes, and she was taken to the local headquarters of the Bureau of Investigation for questioning. A questioning that continued relentlessly all the rest of the night and well into the morning of the next day. Without any other brutality, however, than its length.

The girl was able to satisfy them that she had not known who Champ was, or at least that he was a wanted criminal, when she had married him less than three weeks before. The similarity of names between her husband and the outlaw she had ascribed at the time to mere coincidence; Lane was not the most uncommon name there was, after all. Even the nickname Champ itself she had mistakenly thought had been given him in joking reference to the wanted man and not because he himself was the original. He had not, and they knew that as well as she, committed

any overt act during those past three weeks, had been hiding out.

"But then if you didn't know, how is it you ran for your life from a couple of our agents this afternoon?"

She did know by then, she admitted; she had found out meantime—from the collection of weapons in the kitchen; his resemblance to pictures of the real Lane she had seen. She had intended leaving him at the first opportunity, but he had watched her too closely until now. She had wanted to avoid capture this afternoon, however, for fear she would be forced to reveal his hiding place. He might think she had intentionally betrayed him, and then she would be in danger of her life night and day; he was the kind would have tracked her down remorselessly and paid her back.

IT ALL sounded convincing as she told it. She was calm, and in her answers was the composure of one who has a clear conscience. She wasn't defiant or intractable, but submissive, resigned. Just a little lady who had let her heart lead her head into trouble, that was all; one who was no criminal herself. If they were aware of the one glaring discrepancy between her story and the facts—namely, the two shots, one from the window and one from the stairs, that had been fired *after* the building was emptied—they gave no sign. It was not to her interest to remind them of that. Even though the man in the waterproof coat had not been killed, she knew the penalty for taking up arms against a government agent. And if Champ had made good his escape, as she claimed, then it must have been she who had fired those shots.

But as the night wore out into wan daylight, and that in turn brightened into full morning, a change began to come over her. It may have been that the strain of the protracted questioning was beginning to tell on her. At any rate, her

composure began to slip away from her little by little. At six-thirty she was fidgety, at seven-thirty noticeably nervous and strained, by eight-thirty harried, distracted. They even sent out for a cup of coffee for her, to see if that would brace her up a little, restore her some—but it seemed to have no effect.

As the city outside stirred, awoke to the new day, and went about its business, she began to verge almost on collapse. As butchers, barbers, bakers, elevator operators, bus conductors, street cleaners, bootblacks, newspaper vendors—and pallbearers—took up their daily tasks she commenced to beg them:

"Oh, please let me go! I can't stand any more of this! *Please* let me go! I haven't done anything! I tell you I don't know where he went!" Her distress became almost unendurable; she couldn't even sit still on her chair any longer; her fidgeting hands plucked her handkerchief into threads. It was obvious that unless they dismissed her soon they were going to have a first-class case of hysteria on their hands.

After holding what seemed to her like an endless conference in an adjoining room, they sent out word that she would be released on her own recognizance. She was, of course, to hold herself at their disposal for further questioning at any time. If she tried to leave town, she would be arrested.

It was now ten minutes past nine. She fled downstairs to the street like one possessed. She must have sensed that their object in suddenly letting her go was in the hope that she would eventually lead them to Champ Lane.

So she was careful—very careful—even in her frantic haste. She dodged, apparently aimlessly, through the stream of pedestrians, darted into a large department store, dashed down into the basement and left the store by a side-street entrance. Then she plunged across the street and entered a small and grimy but quite respectable hotel.

She had to call Eddie—right away. If she used the pay booth in the lobby, someone might overhear her. She wasn't sure that she'd actually lost whoever might be trailing her. So she went into the ladies' washroom and used the telephone there.

In a minute, Eddie's low-pitched voice came to her over the wire. She identified herself. "What about—him, Eddie? Is he all right? Where is he?"

"Hold it, sister. I haven't heard a thing."

"But he said—Eddie, he said he'd call you." Her voice rose as panic stirred through her; her fingers squeezed around the mouthpiece of the phone until they ached.

"Look. Don't come over here. Call me later. I'll let you know if I hear anything . . ."

"But, Eddie, *something* must have—" The phone clicked in her ear, and to no one in particular she said, loudly, shrilly, "His arm—the bleeding—dear God, *nor*

When she was on the street again, she was a woman gone mad. Her face was all pulled apart—the mouth wrenched open, eyes wide and staring. She forgot that someone might be following her, she forgot to be careful, she forgot everything but Champ—and his arm—and the blood—and where he was, lying unconscious, maybe dead, in that awful place . . .

She waved to a taxi, jumped in with a swift, sprawling movement, and gave the driver the address of the house she'd left the night before.

THE crêpe was still affixed to the front door, and but for the two yawning second-floor windows, and some strips of tape holding the glass in place in the street door, there was nothing to witness last night's battle. The superintendent was sweeping up glass shards from the side-walk as she got out of the cab and accosted him with a white, strained face.

“I came back to get my things,” she said, staring at him with a peculiar fixed tensity.

He glowered at her over his shoulder. “The quicker the better!” He spat, virtuously if inaccurately. “Go on up, help yourself. Fine people to have living in a respectable house!” She couldn’t seem to tear herself away, though. She kept looking from him to the crepe and from the crepe to him. Her eyes strayed up the bullet-pitted facade of the building—stopped a little higher than the second floor, where the blinds were drawn down full length.

“What time,” she asked as casually as she could, “are they having their funeral?”

“Yah, *you* should ask!” he growled resentfully. “Fine funeral you and that loafer husband of yours give ’em!” And then as she hovered there in the middle of all his glass-sweepings, he went on, “It’s all over with long ago. Eight o’clock sharp they come by and screw down the lid. Eight-thirty already they left the house! He’s under the ground at Evergreen Cemetery by now, poor man, and may his soul rest in peace—”

Something that sounded like the twang of a snapping violin string fell on his ears, and when he looked, his carefully collected glass-sweepings were scattered all over the sidewalk again.

She got the door of the taxi open and fell in. She didn’t climb in, she *fell* in on her face. The driver heard a choked sound that he translated as “Evergreen Cemetery,” and acted upon it. Her legs were still sticking out through the open door as the cab veered off.

Down at the lower corner, by one of those coincidences that were happening again, there was another cab drawn up at the curb with three men in it. She had managed to get up on her knees by the time her machine flashed by. She screamed out at them through the open window, “For God’s sake, follow me—if you’re Feds!”

Which was a strange invitation to come from Champ Lane's wife. Her outthrust arm, beckoning them on wind mill fashion, continued to wave frantically out the window for blocks down.

"Quit it, lady!" warned the driver at one point, when she had caught him by the shoulders with both hands to help him get some speed up. "Or I'll turn you over to a cop!"

One cop did overtake them shortly, on a motorcycle, but instead of stopping them, he shot ahead, holding the crosswise traffic in the side streets until they had gone by.

No vehicle had ever yet arrived outside a burial ground with such indecent haste as this one, squealing to a skidding stop and filling the peaceful air with a smell of burned-out bearings. But she was already tumbling through the dignified ornamental gateway, into the tranquil setting of well-groomed shrubbery, neat white markers, and winding, sanded paths.

She drew up abruptly, cupped both hands despairingly to the sides of her head, as though not knowing which way to turn. A distant muffled explosion, like a percussion cap buried in the ground, solved her dilemma for her. She sped in that direction like an arrow out of a bow.

HALFWAY she met a crowd of people running toward her —in fact scattering in all directions from a single focal point. Frightened people, squalling, gibbering people, one or two of them even stumbling over the turf in their frantic, heedless haste to reach the gates. She battled her way through them until she reached the spot where the stampede had started. An equally frightened but more courageous sexton stood at bay on a little mound of freshly upturned earth, a prayer book extended exorcisingly toward a coffin that was precariously balanced on the very lip of the grave. It was pounding as though it contained a

dynamo. And as it pounded it rocked, almost seesawed, with a violent inner agitation. The sexton's white lips moved in hurried exhortation, but no sound passed them.

The widow stood, wavering, by him.

Just as she got there a second gun shot echoed hollowly inside the monstrous thing, and wisps of smoke filtered out of bullet holes that the coffin must have received the night before. Champ Lane's wife dropped down beside it, threw her arms over it in maddened, forestalling embrace, to keep it from going over. She was aware of three men running up after her from the direction of the entrance gates. She recognized one of the men who had questioned her.

"Help me," she sobbed. "You followed me because you wanted Champ Lane—he's in there—help me get him out—"

The man's face went hard and incredulous. "In there—how?"

"He was going to hide in there—until the raid was over. In—with the dead man. He was so small he could do it all right. He was going to get out as soon as you'd gone—but his arm—it must have bled—Champ must have passed out and now they . . . Oh, don't stand there—help me get him out. A crowbar, a chisel—anything—"

A DISTORTED mask of gray-faced terror that bore a remote resemblance to the widely publicized features of gunman Champ Lane, gazed up into their faces a few minutes later with mute, dog-like gratitude. His sworn enemies, at that moment, must have seemed like angels to him. Angels with handcuffs.

He handed them the gun that he had emptied, in his mad terror, when he came alive and found himself lying, weak and dazed from loss of blood, in the coffin with the dead man's cold body. The way he gave up the gun was almost like a gesture of devotion.

“They didn’t hear my first shot—or maybe they thought it was the hearse backfiring.” He shivered. A hoarse rattle shook in his throat as he looked down at the disarranged corpse. “I was—under that—for hours—all night . . .”

As they held him upright between them and as one of them reached out a hand with the open jaws of the manacles reaching for his wrists, the small, tough man who had been the terror of forty-eight states suddenly dropped to his knees. The detective jerked the handcuffs back before Champ Lane could press his mouth against them.

“Bring on Atlanta, Leavenworth—even Alcatraz,” he whimpered. “Lead me to ’em. They’re *all* right with me!”

The headline in the papers that evening was, in a way, Champ line’s epitaph.

CORNERED DESPERADO
KISSES CAPTORS’ HANDS

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

It was like rain on the roof at first, licketty-split, licketty-split, licketty-split. Mr. Theodore Cobb came back from another world to his present surroundings with a wrench. The other world, of swift sudden homicides, of many many homicides per typed page, faded away beyond hope of immediate recapture. Cigarette in the far southeast corner of his mouth hanging by a thread, hair a bird's nest, collar open, shoes unlaced, fingers poised predatorily above the keys, he blinked and looked about him dazedly. It wasn't coming from above. This was the top floor of the Plantagenet-Turret Furnished Apartments, Mrs. Olivia Everard, manageress, so it couldn't have been coming from above. Now it was going licketty-split, licketty-split, licketty-split, getting faster and more furious all the time. There was an undercurrent of music in it somewhere.

Mr. Theodore Cobb got up and went to the window to see if it was hailing out or something. He had to; the room was too thick with smoke to be able to tell from where he had been sitting. It definitely wasn't; the sun was going down in perfect propriety. He opened the window and let a little of the fog out. Instantly, page 23 left its mates and went volplaning flatly across the room. Pages 22, 21, 20 and 19 in that order went migrating after it. He closed the window again hurriedly, just in time to keep the rest of "Murder on a Dark Night" from following suit. All this was very bad for an artist's nerves.

He picked them up, frowning, patted them together again, got down to the business of blood-letting once more. At a cent-and-a-half a word, “keep it fast, keep it clean, keep it unexpected.” But his gory muse seemed to have deserted him. He had cooled off just as he was getting nicely steamed up. He couldn’t remember for a moment who had killed whom, nor why. He couldn’t even remember who was next on the list.

The cause of this professional catastrophe, the licketty-splitting, was working itself up into a fine frenzy. It was like a roomful of crickets, all mixed up with woodpeckers, and all being very busy at one time. He ran a hand through his Fiji-Islander coiffure, peered at what there was of page 25. Right at the climax, that had had to come along—whatever it was. His fingers plunged; the roller shot over to the left; a tiny bell rang warningly. Then he stopped, aghast. He had killed the wrong party. Someone who wasn’t in the story at all. Someone who had been killed last month, in last month’s story.

Out came page 25 with a rip, in long tatters. The cigarette left his lips for the first time since it had been lighted, hit Mrs. Everard’s floor with a bounce and a shower of sparks. He ground it out on his way to the door and the hallway outside. Anyone not knowing him and seeing the look on his face at the moment might have taken him for a character from one of his own stories. As a matter of fact he fed horses sugar on the street, but he wasn’t in a sugar-feeding mood just now.

It was louder out there in the hall. Like a train going over split-rails. Clicketty-clack, clicketty-clack! Sure, it was coming from right next door, on his left. What the hell were they doing in there anyway—roller-skating across the bare floor boards? He scowled darkly at the oblivious door. He controlled the urge to go down the hall and give it a good, swift kick. He’d follow the proper procedure about this,

relay the grievance, although he longed for personal contact, devastating contact at the end of a fist.

He gave his own door a bang, picked up the house-phone, asked for Mrs. Everard.

“Look,” he said, “I’ve got a deadline. What’s going on next to me in 6-C, riveting? I can’t hear myself think!”

Mrs. Everard clucked soothingly. “Oh, I guess that’s your new neighbor,” she said. “I guess maybe she’s practicing. I told her she could—”

Visions of personal contact at the end of a fist faded reluctantly from Mr. Cobb’s inflamed mind.

“She? I might have known it,” he echoed cynically.

“She’s a lovely little dancer,” placated Mrs. Everard, who had strong pacifist tendencies as long as you paid your rent.

He was already, even this early in the game, strongly disinclined to agree with this opinion.

“What does she practice with, ball-bearings?” he wanted to know.

“I put her in there because, well, there’s no one under her, you know, and I didn’t think you’d mind, well, on account of your typewriter, you know—” said Mrs. Everard, by way of a gentle hint.

“I do mind,” he said severely. “If you’d come up and listen to it—”

”It’s only six in the evening,” she said distressedly. “I don’t like to inter—I tell you what,” she said hurriedly, as a way out of the dilemma offered itself. “If it keeps you up, you call me back and I’ll let her know. I’m sure she wouldn’t want to—”

She hung up before she had finished, before he could protest. “Yeah, but if I put a burn in one of your rugs, I never hear the end of it!” He glowered at the disconnected phone.

He went back to his death-dealing machine, opened the flat tin of cigarettes, stuck one into his gums, put a new, bloodless page 25 into the roller.

Click-click-clop, click-click-clop, it was going now. He gave the wall a lethal look over one shoulder, hitched up his trousers, began whacking at the keys.

> *Duke squeezed the trigger and lead whistled at the dick. His own gun talked back in the same bullet-language. Suddenly Dolores was standing there in the same beautiful evening-gown as when she'd killed Mickey. She had a gun in her hand too. Click-click-clop, click-click-clop—*

He'd put in a whole line of the things before he caught himself. He said bad language, very bad. Language worth a dime a word, not just a cent-and-a-half. He hit out a concealing row of X's, shrouding the mishap.

Rat-tat-tat, rattety-tat-tat came blithely through the wall. "Call me back and I'll let her know!" he mimicked Mrs. Everard savagely. "I'll let her know myself!"

There was quite a heavy glass ash-tray at his elbow. Cheap but substantial. Mrs. Everard got them wholesale. It was the nearest thing at hand, and it was just about ideal for the purpose anyway.

Sock! it went, like a cannon-ball, and dropped to the floor in two neatly-split halves. There was a sudden stunned silence. Muted music continued for a bar or two; then that stopped too.

"That did it!" said Cobb with grim satisfaction.

He tore out the second page 25 and put in a third. He washed his hands without soap and water. He pressed his nails back and blew on them vigorously like a pianist. He poised them clawlike over the well-worn keys that had slaughtered their thousands—

Wham! It sounded as if a battering-ram had struck the other side of the wall behind him. He jumped a full two inches above his chair, came down again limp. He was a very high-strung young man. Most crime-story writers are.

Then, twice as loudly as before, in defiance, in despite, in open animosity, it resumed where it had broken off. Clackety-bang! Clackety-bang! Clackety-bang!

It was the beginning of a beautiful feud.

He saw her for the first time two days later. They hadn't placed each other yet, coming up together in the automatic elevator, so there was no hostility displayed. He sized her up with an open mind, unprejudiced as it were. Not a bad-looking girl, not a bad-looking girl at all. In fact sort of swell-looking. Lithe and lissome. Copper-colored hair in the three-quarters length he liked best. Nice hazel eyes. He was even wondering whether he should risk some remark about the weather to this prepossessing fellow-tenant when the car stopped and they both got off at the same floor.

He put his key in the lock, then turned his head to look after her. The corridor was empty. He looked up the other way and there she was, right in front of that hostile door to the left. Identification was mutual and instantaneous. A mutual glare followed. A sizzling glare that should have set the hallway afire in spontaneous combustion. Two doors slammed as one like a double-barreled sunset gun.

He got to the typewriter first. Maybe she had to change to practice clothes or something. The head start was only a matter of seconds. There was a warning blast of music and then sounds suggesting a Spaniard with St. Vitus dance playing the castanets.

There was temporarily a dearth of ash-trays. He'd broken two in two days. "Miz Everard ain't gonna give you no mo'," the dusky chambermaid had announced that morning. "She say you run through 'em too quick." He picked up one of his unlaced shoes instead and flung that. One thing about a shoe, you can use it over and over again. This time there wasn't even a pause in the complicated routine.

He flung the door open and stood there peering out aggressively. “Am I a man or a mouse?” occurred to him. He stepped quickly down to the offending door, bopped it commandingly with his knuckles. Then, taking most of the courage out of the act, he retreated halfway to his own. To neutral ground, so to speak. But the Rubicon had been crossed. The feud was out in the open now.

She was flushed and panting when she stuck her head out to see who it was. She had on shorts and a blouse. The copper-colored hair was delectably awry. To an unjaundiced eye she might have seemed quite lovely. Both of Cobb’s were a vivid orange as far as she was concerned, though.

“Say, d’you have to practice all the time? I’m trying to get some work done in here!”

She regarded him balefully. Up and down and back up again.

“Work!” she scoffed.

That hit home. “It takes brains!” was all he could think of. Which was not only beside the point at the moment but gave her a swell opening. Too late he saw his mistake.

“Exactly,” she said icily. “When are you going to get wise to yourself?”

For the next hour he thought up beautiful come-backs, one after the other, but since she’d closed her door again immediately afterwards and he’d closed his, he didn’t derive much satisfaction from it. “Murder by the Yard,” the masterpiece in progress at the moment, suffered considerably as a result. He put her into it and cut her throat on page 3, then brought her back to life and had her thrown off a ship at sea on page 10. Which made him feel a whole lot better, vicariously if not otherwise. But no matter how often he slew her on paper, the tap routines went on unimpeded on the other side of the wall. He had never

known anyone could practice that much—and live through it.

"It couldn't," he cried aloud more than once, running both hands through his brambled hair, "be a soft-shoe dancer. It couldn't be an adagio-dancer, or even a fan-dancer. No-o! It hadda be a tap-dancer!"

He could have moved out and found other quarters. But almost at once it became a point of honor not to. He'd been here first. He liked it here. It was reasonable and comfortable and Mrs. Everard was easy-going. No leggy hoof-swinging stage-struck chit of a girl was going to drive him out like a whipped cur!

Their hours unfortunately seemed to chime almost to a T. They were never in at different times; they both always seemed to be at home simultaneously and busy at their respective arts. If not, then they were both out at once, and the lesser mortals around them got a much-needed reprieve. On the rare occasions when Cobb was home and the menace wasn't, unkind nature arranged it so that he wasn't in the mood for writing, couldn't take advantage of the lull. Her tapping seemed to act as a sort of spur on him, driving him to a point where he had to type or bust. And the same was true of her. She could be in there without a sound, reading a book or washing hankies maybe, but he no sooner got the lid off his machine, batted out the first couple of words, than bingo! She had dropped everything and was practicing again a mile a minute. As much as to say, "You're not gonna get ahead of me, Smarty! I've got a career too."

Cobb was not a particularly vindictive young man. If she had only gone one day, one whole day, without practicing, his feelings might have had a chance to cool off. Maybe that was the exact way she felt about his typing, herself. One sure thing, if she had come to him and proposed that he knock off for a day, he would have resented it to the point of apoplexy. The way it was, they each took turns adding fuel

to the fire, so it really had no chance to die down. The wear and tear on ash-trays, coat-hangers, shoe-trees and all other easily movable objects within reach was something terrific.

But when she held up his work to ridicule, aloud and publicly, that was more than adding fuel: it was pouring gasoline. He certainly didn't intend eavesdropping. You didn't need to where she was concerned; you usually needed cotton stuffed in your ears. But there was something vaguely familiar about those cadenced phrases coming through her transom one night as he stepped out of the elevator. Pressed, he might have admitted people didn't actually talk that way in real life.

She had a couple of girl-friends in there for her end-men. Mrs. Everard had evidently passed on one of the pulps with his stuff in it. Perhaps she had been asked to, out of malign curiosity. The menace was doing the reading aloud—she would!—and her voice sounded strangely thick, almost strangled.

"Lead spat over his shoulder. He swerved in the nick of time, fired behind him under one arm. There was a clump as a body hit the floor. Mercedes' screams were coming down from the roof where the Chinamen had dragged her —"

Gales of laughter drowned out the rest of it. They were laughing at something that was meant to frighten you! At something that thousands—well, all right, hundreds—of people sat up in bed shivering over at night, with their hair standing up!

"Can you stand any more? Or have you had enough?"

A choked voice begged, "Don't—please! My ribs hurt as it is!"

"And can you imagine? He gets boiling mad every time I—I thought I must be living next door to Shakespeare, or at least Anatole France. When I asked Mrs. Everard, she passed me this!"

Righteous indignation, and maybe just a touch of something else besides, sent the color flaming to his neck and ears. He funneled his hands, megaphoned: “Not a brain in a roomful!” and banged the door shut after him.

If she was only a man! Oh, if she was only a man! Or if he only had a good husky sister, or even a female cousin, to take up the cudgels for him! He visualized a scene in which the latter planted a punishing foot where it would do the most good, but swiftly, against the offender’s person. And then stood threateningly over her. “You gonna tap-dance any more? You gonna so much as put a cleated shoe to the floor? Just you lemme catch you!”

He sighed. Most of the girls he knew were fragile little things, totally unfit to be proxies in any physical combat. Especially with someone who had the endurance she had. Anyway, you couldn’t very well go to a girl and ask her to—

In the end he took it out on her in the same old way as before, the only way he really had. He thought up such horrible predicaments for her that night, never at his own hands, of course, that was beneath his masculine dignity, but at the hands of malign Orientals and such, that it really made a story. He jotted it all down from force of habit.

His phone rang the next day and it was Elkins, his editor. Privately known to him as Simon Legree, the Man with the Whip. A rejection of course. Well, no wonder, trying to work next to a female Fred Astaire!

“Say, you’re going good. What’s come over you lately?” Elkins’ voice boomed out jovially. “Just thought I’d let you know. Boy, are you getting bloodthirsty! That last one nearly scared me myself when I read it! Wow, what you didn’t do to that poor girl!”

“So then how about a boost in rate?” Cobb managed to get off instinctively, while the rest of his mind was trying to adjust itself.

Elkins’ voice instantly lost lots of its ill-advised enthusiasm. “What? Oh, sure,” he said glumly. “Er—I’ll jack

you up to a cent and five-eighths; how'll that be? Now don't let it go to your head. G'bye."

Cobb hung up, turned and glared at the blank wall. A glare that was meant to go through it to the other side. "See? Laugh at me, will ya?" he said pugnaciously.

Almost as though by mental telepathy, Blah! went the introductory music, and then tappity-tap, tappity-tap—far into the afternoon.

He had one of those allegorical struggles with himself, like in "Pilgrim's Progress," that night. It was participated in by his Better Self, his Worse Self, a pair of pliers, and a radio-antenna outside the open window that led diagonally downward and over toward hers.

She can have it repaired inside a half-hour, said his Better Self; but it's sort of a dirty trick any way you look at it.

Afraid, huh? sneered his Worse Self. Are you a man or a worm?

He reached out, caught the wire, and snipped it neatly in half. "And now," he gloated, reverently closing the window again, "for a little peace and quiet around here!"

If he was a trifle ashamed of what he'd just done, he refused to admit it even to himself, kept it severely soft-pedaled. That's the trouble with allegorical struggles.

She came back inside of half-an-hour; he could tell by the challenging bang she gave her door. Came the usual change-of-clothes pause. He forgot to type for a minute, waiting for the pay-off. Bla-ah! blared out familiarly. And then, allegro fortissimo or something, clacketty-clack, clacketty-clack!

He just sat there with a very funny look on his face.

"No, there's no radio in 6-C," explained Mrs. Everard the next morning, collecting the two dollars the people on the third floor insisted he owed them for the repair of their aerial. "She uses a portable phonograph and records. You really shouldn't be so impulsive, Mr. Cobb," she rebuked mildly. "It's not a nice trait." At the door she turned and

added: “You should try to meet her halfway. She’s really got a heart of gold.”

“Silence,” he seethed, “is golden too. Doesn’t she ever,” he wanted to know hopelessly, “work at it—I mean somewhere else except where she lives?”

Mrs. Everard promptly came to her defense. He was not in particularly high regard just then, after the discovery of the incriminating pliers on his desk. “She has lots of offers—lots!” she championed stoutly. “She’s waiting for the right thing to come along. She doesn’t want to do night-club work. She’s a refined girl, here on her own, and so many of these fly-by-night offers have strings attached. I think she deserves a lot of credit.”

“A lot,” he agreed sombrely, “but just a little soundproofing too.”

Mrs. Everard coughed apologetically. “I have a nice little one-room available in the rear. You wouldn’t, er, consider—”

He rose to his full if somewhat lean six feet, behind the portable.

His fist came down soggily on a bunch of carbon paper.

“Never!” he stormed. “A man’s home is his castle! I wanna be where I can see the sun go down!”

Mrs. Everard coughed again through the layers of fossilized cigarette-smoke that all but veiled the window-frame itself, let alone what lay beyond. She didn’t press the suggestion.

However, every dog has his day. Opportunity with a capital O arrived only two nights later. The barrier to physical onslaught was suddenly removed. The outlet he craved was given him. His heart’s desire was granted. Although he had been unable to conjure up a sister or female cousin to manhandle her, she suddenly supplied herself with a male retainer or familiar of some kind whom he could deal with personally. Which was a whole lot better. Not too old or decrepit, either, to make it worthwhile.

The tap-dancing had been unusually unbearable the night this male first appeared on the scene. She seemed to run through the whole gamut of her routines, from clicketty-click to biff-bing-bang! Almost as though she were giving a private audition there in her room.

He had learned by now that throwing things at the wall was no deterrent; she took it for applause, gave encores. Besides, there wasn't much that was throwable left around unbroken any more. Half-insane, he jammed the lid on his machine, went out to get a glass of beer, or three, or even six, as a surcease for his suffering ear-drums. The monthly deadline was due tomorrow, and he wasn't half-way through "Murder in a Dreadful Way." He was grinding his teeth like the leading character in it.

It was while he was waiting for the car to come up that he discovered she had finally gotten herself an audience. A male voice came through the transom above the din of hoof-beats.

"Tricky, that," it said judiciously. "Very good, sweetheart, very good!"

Cobb clenched his fists. "I'll very-good-sweetheart you if I get my hands on you, whoever you are!" he smoldered. "Coming around encouraging her! I only hope I run into you sometime—"

Coming back an hour later, he did. Mars must have been in the ascendant that night. He went into his room quietly and heard something. Something very different from the tap dancing and the sweetheart stuff. It was a muffled scream from his next-door neighbor. He stopped and listened. Beauty in distress, he thought, rather sneeringly, and then he wondered, what was the matter with the girl? He couldn't help listening.

"Oh, oh!" she was saying. "You leave me alone!" Then came mutterings from the man of which Cobb couldn't make sense, and the girl's frantic, "I'm not that kind! No!

No!” There came a sound of scuffling and the girl’s voice full of terror: “Get out! Oh, get out!”

Then Cobb, who was listening breathless, heard a foul word and a door opened. That nasty word did things to him. Calling a girl that—any girl! And that kid was a nice girl! Yes, he really thought that, much as it amazed him. He pulled open his door and stepped out into the hall. A man stood there, a very Broadway-looking man, trying to adjust his collar and tie. There was a long red scratch across his face and Cobb was pleased. Serves him right, he thought.

Cobb had six beers in him but he didn’t need them in a good cause like this. He moved to the man. “Who ya crowding?” he demanded pugnaciously.

The man looked surprised, fell back another step, didn’t answer. “Oh, yeah? Izzat so!” said Cobb. Her door had opened again and she was looking out. That was about all he needed if incentive had been lacking until now. He gave her a belligerent stare over the shock absorber’s shoulder, he wasn’t doing this for her, and then gave the man a punch in the jaw. A beauty.

The man went down flat. He didn’t know it but he hadn’t been hit by a fist; he had been hit by thirty days of accumulated tap-dancing as well as that nasty word.

“Dance-hound!” hissed Cobb, shooting daggers over at her. Then: “Calling a girl such a name!”

The only reason he didn’t give the man a second biff was because he had never seen anyone get up and scramble into an elevator so quickly in his life before. Whisht! and he was gone. He left a shattered gardenia behind him on the floor.

She came out into the hall step by step as though drawn against her will. He could tell at a glance, right through the beer and all, that this had had a salutary effect on her. Gone was all her arrogance, her cocksureness. She acted sort of droopy, as if she wanted to cry and was looking around for a nice comfortable shoulder to do it on. There was a rip in the

shoulder of the beach-robe she wore over her practice clothes; her hair was tousled, her face streaked with tears.

Cobb felt a lot better, a whole lot better than he had for weeks. He felt like a new man. He felt swell. He stared at her unrelentingly so she wouldn't get the idea he was weakening or anything.

"Thanks," she conceded grudgingly, twisting an edge of the robe around in her hands and looking down at it. "I don't know how you knew but thanks anyway. He was horrid. I was afraid of him."

Cobb wasn't interested. It wasn't her—it was that name—a man pulling a girl about!

"Ah, shut up!" he growled half audibly.

Her morale instantly improved. Her dispirited eyes blazed up anew. "Shut up yourself !" she snapped back. Again as so many many times before, two doors banged as one.

It was a sort of farewell salute, although he didn't realize that at the time. He was at his old machine-gun next day ready to go, tin of cigarettes at his elbow, stack of blank pages beside him, shoes unlaced, when he first noticed that something seemed amiss. He couldn't place it for a moment, looked around, even looked under the desk. Slowly it dawned on him what was holding him up. Silence. He was waiting for the counter-blast from next door, and there wasn't any.

"Sure put her in her place," he murmured approvingly. But his typing sounded hollow in the strange stillness. He kept waiting for that racket to chime in and it didn't, and after a while he lost interest, quit trying. He blamed it on last night's beers.

There wasn't a peep, or rather a tap, all the next day either. Mrs. Everard was formal to the point of stiffness when he encountered her.

"She moved out the first thing yesterday morning," she told him cuttingly. "I pleaded with her not to but I can't say

that I blame her, you know. She told me what happened. She said she was too grateful to you for putting that low-down night-club man in his place, after the way he came here and insulted her, to wish to annoy you with her practicing any longer. And of course she isn't ready to give that up for anyone. She was a sweet child. You might have," she added, fixing him sternly with her eye, "been just a little more tolerant."

"She didn't have to move out on my account," he growled shamefacedly.

Victory, now that it was his, didn't have as much savor to it as he'd expected. That was just like a woman, always going to extremes when there was no need to, and always managing to put you in the wrong too.

"I hope you'll find conditions more suitable for your work now," Mrs. Everard said with a distinctly unfriendly toss of her head.

But that was just it; he didn't. They should have been but they weren't. The strange oppressive stillness weighed him down. He couldn't seem to get warmed up any more. One thing about that erstwhile din, it had managed to heat him to boiling-point almost instantaneously each time it occurred. Trying to work without it now was like an actor walking on "cold," without a cue. He got stage-fright every other paragraph, went ahead by fits and starts. It was like pulling teeth to drag the stuff out of himself. Doors didn't bang around him any more; things didn't hit the wall. All was silence. It—it didn't seem like home any more.

On the way back from mailing his latest bunch of junk to Elkins, he paused in front of his door, looking down at that other one. After a while he went over, stood there by it with his hands in his pockets. "I'll be damned," he said softly. "You'd think I actually missed her or—or something." He leaned the side of his head and one shoulder up against the door disconsolately. He hadn't suspected there was this streak of sentimentality in him. He who slaughtered his

characters so ruthlessly right and left. A variation of a poem passed through his mind.

“Noisy feet I love
Beside the Shalimar,
Where are you now—?”

It didn’t scan very well but it fitted his mood. Not that he really loved her of course, or anything like that, he hastened to explain to himself; but anyone who penetrated one’s consciousness as loudly as she had, you sort of felt lost without. Like a sudden shut-down in a boiler factory. He sighed gustily.

Just as he was about to straighten up, he was saved the trouble. The door fell in unexpectedly and he all but did too with it. A stoutish, severe-looking person wearing rimless glasses stood holding the knob.

“My goodness!” she stated. “What next? Sniffling through people’s keyholes!”

“’Scuse me,” he said hastily, and slunk back where he belonged. No other word would describe it, the way his knees were bent under him.

Elkins rang up next day, within twenty-four hours of submission.

“I might have known it!” he boomed. “Raise you an eighth of a cent and you go soft on me right away! There wasn’t a single violent death for ten whole pages! Whaddye think I’m running, Godey’s Lady’s Book? Of all the wishy-washy stuff ! Matter, you in love or something?”

Cobb scorned to answer this rude editorial thrust. “So it’s coming back,” he said indifferently.

“It oughtta be there already, the speed I kicked it outa my office! Now for Pete’s sake, stick a pin in yourself and get good and sore, if that’s what makes you turn ’em out the way I like ’em!”

Cobb went from the phone straight downstairs.

“Where’d she go?” he demanded without preliminaries.

“Where’d who go?” asked Mrs. Everard.

“That girl. Where’d she move to?”

“Now, young man,” she began sternly. “Hasn’t there been enough trouble between you two already? I call such a thing willful persecution! It so happens that she left no forwarding address, but even if she had, I’m not sure that I’d care to—”

“She take lessons?” he snapped. He seemed to be in a great hurry.

“Lessons? Oh, you mean dancing-lessons. No, she didn’t need them any more; she’d learned everything they—”

”Well, did she have a trunk then?” he interrupted.

“She had two trunks,” Mrs. Everard said boastfully as though he were trying to disparage one of her favorite ex-tenants. “A little one and a big one.”

He grabbed a classified directory from her desk, began calling express companies one by one.

They met again in the hall that night. Blocks away from where they’d last met. All the way across town as a matter of fact. Hers, naturally, was the greater surprise of the two. She stood stock-still and surveyed him darkly.

“It’s me,” he admitted so she wouldn’t take him for an apparition and faint or something. She dropped her purse to the floor, poised both hands at her hips.

“Well, of all the nerve! And right next door to me again! I’m going to see the management about this right now!” She took an infuriated step toward the elevator. “Deliberately hounding me! There ought to be some way of stop—”

“You—you can practice all you want,” he said hastily. “Tell you the truth, that’s why I did it,” he blurted out. “I got so used to it I found I can’t work without it now. I even paid ’em a premium to get in next to—where I could hear it good and clear.”

She deferred her intention of going downstairs. “Mm,” she said undecidedly. She went back and picked up her purse. Hostility gave place to pensive abstraction as though she were mulling something over in her own mind. “I noticed something like that myself,” she admitted guardedly. “I haven’t been practicing nearly as conscientiously since I came here where no one objects.”

“Maybe we need each other for inspirations,” he said hopefully.

“Maybe,” she said noncommittally. “But mind you, the first ash-tray you slam against the wall—the very first!”

Two doors closed as one, tactfully, restrainedly, yet with a jaunty fillip to them.

It occurred to him that it was really very uneconomical for two young people like themselves, trying to get somewhere in the world, to keep two separate apartments going side-by-side when for a mere two dollars, the price of a license, they could cut their rent in half. He must mention that to her, see whether she agreed with him. Not right away of course, but some day real soon.

CLEVER, THESE AMERICANS

Frisco was holding down the thirty-foot bar of the cantina single-handed with a bottle of *mescál* on one side of him, a chaser on the other, and a stack of cartwheel silver half-pesos in front of him. The halfpesos and the *mescál* kept going down, the chaser didn't. It was just for decorative purposes, the Chinese bartender's idea more than his own. Frisco could not only hold down any bar single-handed, he could hold down any amount of *mescál*—straight. But he didn't, he always quit this side of too much. He always wanted to know just what he was doing. And he always did. Clever lad, Frisco. The Chief of Police of the town he came from thought so, too. So did the chiefs of police of Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver, San Diego—you could make a train despatch out of stringing them all together. They'd said so, in print and on the short waves, not once but many times, beginning *Wanted for . . .*

The night breeze, at eighty degrees a throw, rustled the fringe of paper streamers that served the cantina for a door-screen, dyed from left to right in the national colors, red, white and green, blurred now by the rain. Gold moonlight spilled in through the barred windows. A guitar *plinked* mournfully somewhere down one of the crooked streets.

Frisco slapped viciously at the back of his neck, said a couple of short and pointed Anglo Saxon words. The Chinese barman picked up a palm-leaf fan, and

industriously air-conditioned his customer with it. “Moskleeto like white meat,” he grinned, waving vigorously.

Frisco said for the third time that evening, with growing irritation, “And you mean to say there aren’t any banks at all in this dump, Charlie?”

“No bank.” The Chinaman shrugged. “Wha’ fo’ ?”

“Well, ain’t this supposed to be the capital of this layout? Where do they keep their money? Where do you keep yours, for instance?”

“I keep by.” The Chinaman pulled a cord around his neck, brought up an oil-silk packet through his white bar-jacket. Paper money in here, slilva money in dlaw.” He pointed farther down the bar.

Frisco looked slightly interested for the first time. “How much you take in, on the average, a night?”

“Fi’ peso, mebbe ten.”

Frisco looked disgusted. “You’re safe,” he muttered somewhat enigmatically. “I *would* pick a hole-in-the-wall like this to pull over my head!” He hadn’t had much choice in the matter; he’d had to jump ship in a big, hurry. The next stop down had been Panama, which was uncomfortably close to American territory; and Frisco didn’t have to be told that a wireless message could beat a slow banana boat any day in the week. The fruiter hadn’t had any radio, and this penny-ante country had no extradition laws. Both were modern improvements which Frisco was heartily against. He approved of banks, though. In fact, he felt lost without them. If he’d known this place was going to be like this, he’d have stayed on the boat and taken his chances. Now he was good and stuck. No way to get out again. No trains to anywhere—just a narrow-gauge railroad leading back to the banana and coffee country. Both those industries were in the hands of American companies, and he wanted to give them a wide berth. There was another boat in two weeks, but going back to the Golden Gate. No, *thanks.* The next one out wouldn’t touch here for a month.

Bad as all that was, he wouldn't have minded so much, but he'd been caught short this time. His departure had been so hurried, for reasons that needn't be gone into here, that the dwindling stack of half-pesos on the bar before him represented his total worldly capital. This would not at any other time have mattered so much to Frisco, for he carried his "financier" around with him. It was a flat object shaped like a T-square, packed under his left arm, and it removed money from banks with the greatest of ease. But in a place where there were no banks, what good was it to him?

He still couldn't believe his ears. "These, f'rinstance." He snapped a fingernail at the stack of half-pesos and the top one fell off with a musical *clink.* "Where do they come from?"

"They make up in Frisco, send down hea'. When get all wo'out, send mo'. Last long time, though."

"So they don't even mint their own money!" He picked one of the coins up, gazed at it moodily. "Are you from Frisco? 'Cause I'm from Frisco too." He flipped it to within a foot of the low ceiling, stuck his hand out behind his back palm up, caught it without moving a muscle when it came down. "Don't they use any gold here?"

"Only wan, too lich people got gold. Melican dolla. Keepum in house fo' rainy day."

"Ain't they afraid of it being swiped?"

"Got no t'ief, no lobba. No place lobba can hide. Qot no lobba hea' in twenty-fi' year."

"Something tells me," murmured Frisco softly to himself, "that record is about to be busted."

Nine o'clock tolled dismally from the: belfry of the three-hundred-year-okl cathedral across the plaza. "Business get better bimeby," promised the barman, and tucked his hands

comfortably inside his own sleeves just like China men do in comic strips.

"It couldn't," growled Frisco, "b any worse." And he added under his breath: "For either of us."

Carriage wheels sounded on the cobbles outside, springs creaked dismally, the paper streamers parted with a hiss, and a perspiring, balloonlike figure came waddling in, followed by a group of more physical proportions. The balloon was evidently a person of influence ; the others, his hangers-on. Possibly a local *politico.* The chirp of staccato Spanish filled the air. Most of the others were just saying *"Si!"* enthusiastically.

Frisco had never seen anyone with such a bay-window before. It had touched the bar already while its owner was still way out at the three-mile-limit. Nothing daunted, the fat man turned sidewise and managed to get one foot within planting distance of the brass rail. His blimplike form was encased in dazzling linen, his shoes were white canvas, his hat was a bleached panama—everything about him was white but his mahogany face.

He took out a wallet the thickness of a tile, peeled off two or three bills, slapped them down with a lordly air that made Frisco's stack of half-pesos shrink to dimes. "*Refrescos! Musical*" he commanded. The Chinaman nearly went haywire, setting out five glasses in a row, slicing limes, spooning sugar, measuring gin, slapping a 1920 record on the victrola, and bowing every time he turned around, both to his customers and to his reflection in the mirror.

Frisco took it all in. He took in the wallet*;* he took in the walnut-sized diamond on his pinkie and the bean-sized one in his tie. He didn't miss the "Keep-the change" gesture that turned over to the Chinaman more of a kitty than he himself had before him.

"Who," he asked when the Celestial had waited on them and come back to him, "is the kewpie?"

"Him velly lich lubba-man."

“Rubber-man, eh? He *looks* like he’d bounce.”

“His name Senlo Zacata. He own whole town, he plesident’s light-hand man. Evly time gubbament go bloke, he lend plenty money.”

“Gold?”

“Sure, gold. Paper money no good. Gubbament no want its own money, they too sma’t.”

“But if there are no banks, where does he keep all this gold of his?”

“Evlybody know. He keep in stlong-loom in house long wheah he live.”

“And I suppose he’s got a lot of guards posted around it day and night?”

“He got two, thlee *mozo,* that all.” Frisco lurched at the bar as though the *mescál* had finally gone to his head, steadied himself with both hands. “Them Indian runts in pajamas?”

“Sure, *mozo,* houseboy.”

Frisco reached down surreptitiously and pinched himself on the thigh. “Wake up, kid,” he murmured, “you’re dreaming.”

He reviewed his, wanderings of that afternoon, while he’d been killing time waiting to lose his boat. “That big house out on the edge of town, with a wall around it and busted bottles stuck in the mortar along the top of it?”

“You ketch.”

Frisco took a good long look at Señor Zacata. A long fond look. He poured himself another dose of *mescál,* and, as he hoisted it, jacked his elbow up briefly in the fat man’s direction, in a sort of silent toast.

Midnight tolled lugubriously from the cathedral belfry, the only thing in town that seemed to have stayed awake that long. Señor Zacata, or rather a mound that represented

him, belched fitfully from within a triple-ply howdah of mosquito-netting, hanging from a hook in the ceiling. His shape was roughly that of the dome of the National Capitol at Washington. The mound shifted, began turning slowly on its axis, and an arm thrust out, parted the mosquito netting, groped toward a night-stand nearby on which stood a water jug and bicarbonate of soda. The stand was within easy reach, but the arm never made it; it remained poised in a sort of fascist salute out over it.

The faint sound came again; the muffled tread of a hard leather sole on tiling, in the adjacent room. Señor Zacata was the only one in the house who wore shoes, his *mozos* were shod in noiseless hemp sandals.

More ominous still, a thread of silver radiance shone under the door-seam of the strong-room, so called because unlike the rest of the room, it had a door, and Señor Zacata kept the key to it. There was no electricity in Señor Zacata's house, and the kerosene and oil lamps gave yellow light, not this icy-white kind, hard as nails. And it wasn't the moon, because that had already gone down. The government's financial wizard, the country's one-man brain trust, with a flash of inspiration that was almost miraculous, came to the conclusion that something was going on in his house that shouldn't be.

His outstretched arm finally descended on the nightstand, but no longer in quest of bicarb.

With tick-tack-toe motions, he felt for the key to the strong-room door, on top of the marble slab where he always left it. His mound of change was there, removed from his pockets at night. His diamond ring was there. His stickpin was there. Even the spoon was there for measuring bicarb. But no key to the strong-room. Stealthy footfalls came from inside it while he was still looking for the key to it.

Señor Zacata was unused to emergencies. He did all sorts of wrong things at once. He struggled up to a sitting

position, a slow maneuver that took from three to five minutes even when he was at his best—and he was too full of fright and Shanghai Charlie's gin-rickeys tonight to be anywhere near top form. The bed snapped, grunted, barked under him while he labored. The light under the door still fluffed out instantly. But the only way out was through Zacata's bedroom.

Zacata had begun to jerk the bell pull beside his bed frantically up and down. Way over on the other side of the patio a clamorous ding-dong started up. And meanwhile Señor Zacata was bellowing his lungs out. "Miguel! Esteban! There is a thief in my strongroom! Bring machetes, *pronto!*" Finally the bell cord snapped in two.

There was a Heavy shifting sound across the tiled flooring, as though someone were dragging a weighted valise after him. The door opened and a figure in dark clothing blurred against the pale walls. It was too dark in the room to be able to distinguish it clearly.

A muffled voice, in a language unknown to Señor Zacata, said dryly: "You'll never make it, Fatso. Better lie down again or I'll deflate you!"

The slap-slap of sandaled feet were coming on the run from across the patio. The feeble glint of an oil lamp burst through the open doorway, held shakily by a frightened *moso* with a deadly but ineffectual machete in his other hand. The dull rays of wavering light, while they lasted, showed the terrified Zacata, goggling out through three layers of fine netting, and a motionless figure across the room from him, with one of Zacata's own valises at his feet One white hand showed, holding something almost casually. An inch of white forehead and a pair of eye-slits showed between a turned-down hat brim and a handkerchief stretched from ear to ear.

There was an almost immediate orange squirt from the negligent white hand, a thunder-clap that sent Zacata flat on his back and brought all the mosquito netting down on

top of him. The lamp hit the floor and went out and the *mozo* landed on top of it. The machete fell with a clash beside him.

"Leave it dark," commanded the muffled voice, "I like it that way!"

The dragging sound passed out into the front garden of the house; moments later there was a distant thud from the street outside, as though something had been tossed over a wall.

Zacata was writhing there helplessly, like something all wrapped up in gauze bandages, by the time the second *mozo* arrived, carefully timing himself to miss the fireworks. "A thief! A thief has stolen some of my gold! After him, quick!" sputtered his master in a strangled voice. The man went out into the garden at a run, waving his machete, as soon as he was sure the intruder had vanished.

He came back again minutes later. "He is gone, *señor,"* he reported relievedly.

"He left behind him a folded blanket spread across the glass on top of the wall, that is all."

The *mozo* lying on the floor of Señor Zacata's bedroom must have been a good Indian, if the old saying is to be believed. He was a dead one if there ever was one.

Frisco woke up at noon the next day to find a reception committee two rows deep around his bed at the *Gran Hotel del Universo*. There were an army corporal and two privates—armed—and in the second row, the hotel-keeper and assorted *mozos* stood looking apprehensively on. The *Gran Hotel* hadn't had a paying guest since the last boat before Frisco's had touched port, and now that it had one, he seemed to be in trouble. In the background, a third private was going through Frisco's pants and coat, already

having hunted futilely for Frisco's non-existent baggage. He hadn't come ashore with any.

Frisco was not an easily disconcerted person. He opened one eye. "Where is the fire?" he drawled languidly. No one in the first row, it seemed, spoke English; he had never been in such a benighted country before. The hotelkeeper, who fondly imagined he did, stepped forward offering himself as interpreter. He got the corporal's comeback on Frisco's question.

"No fire—espeench."

"What, no brass band?" Frisco flipped a derisive fin at them, turned over on his other side. "Tell 'em to see my secretary. I'm too busy."

The ubiquitous mosquito netting was rudely wrenched aside and he was dragged out backward onto the chill tiled floor in his track clothes. *"Señor,"* explained the manager to his threshing, buckling guest, "they say you have rob the gold of the Señor Zacata and have keel one of his *mozo* daid with a gun."

Frisco was propped up by eight assorted copper-color hands. "All right, where is it then, if I took it?" he snarled. "Where's the gat, too, while they're at it?"

The corporal rolled up an edge of the mattress, looked under it, disappointedly let it flop back again.

Frisco's face darkened at the injustice. "I wasn't outa this room from the time I got back from Shanghai Charlie's until you busted in on me just now. Ask the *mozos*—go ahead, ask them!"

They asked. One of the *mozos* nodded. "It is true. The wind blew the *señor's* door open twice and woke me up. Each time I closed it he was sleeping under the net."

Mosquito netting plus truncated pillows plus no electricity is a fairly reliable combination.

The corporal shrugged. "I have my orders, *Vamos!"* He motioned to the door. The three buck privates, or whatever they were, started to haul Frisco out with them as he was.

“Hey, wait!” the captive brayed. “Don’t they even let you put on your pants when they haul you in in this country?”

The corporal looked surprised at such niceties, but thumbed permission for the delay. Frisco, as they started out with him a second time, sartorially complete, grabbed the hotel-keeper by the arm and hung on. “You’re coming with me,” he said grimly. “It’s my pinch and I wanta know what goes on at it!”

He rolled up a sizable following as he was escorted through the blinding, blazing-hot streets. By the time they got to the crumbling pink-plaster building labeled *Comandancia* across its face, half the juvenile population and all the stray dogs in town were at his heels. Shopkeepers came out to their store fronts, shading their eyes and gawking. Tawny girls peeped down across balcony rails. It was the first time in anyone’s recollection that a white man was being arrested.

The object of all the excitement walked along cockily. He had a perky air about him, that plainly expressed his knowledge that anyone could beat a rap like this with one hand tied behind his back. No gold, no gun, no chance for positive identification. He gave Shanghai Charlie the high sign as he was led past his place. “Start stirring me up a rickey,” he called out. “I’ll be in tonight at my usual time!”

The *Gran Hotel* had another guest at the time. The non-paying one was in his usual morning position, sleeping it off, face down, arms out, across the little table in his room, when the manager came in three days later. An empty whisky bottle lay lengthwise on the floor at his feet. Jumbled up in a corner lay a pile of about twenty others with a rumpled sack thrown over them. The heap increased at about the rate of one-quart bottle a day. Once a month, when it had run up to thirty, the room’s owner dumped the

whole batch into the sack and sold it to native masons to be broken up and studded into the tops of walls, the local panacea against trespassing. The pin money thus acquired went into the purchase and emptying of additional bottles; a sort of virtuous circle that never got anywhere, but was a lot of fun—except to the hotel-keeper, who hadn't been paid now in eighteen months. But since the *Gran Hotel* had twelve rooms, and the other eleven were vacant except when a boat was in, the proprietor didn't do much about it. Up until a year ago he had had this permanent guest thrown out regularly once a week, but since the guy always came right back in again as soon as his back was turned, he'd given that up too. The tropics make any man a philosopher.

He took the somnolent one by the scruff of the neck, tilted his head back, wobbled it a little bit. " 'Ey, no-good!" he said, "I got something for to tell you!"

The face that came up off the table top was Nordic, bleary, and glinted with a fine platinum stubble, from ear to ear. The eyes wouldn't open and the mouth stayed all out of shape, like a hole punched in unbaked dough.

The manager reached down to the floor, picked up the discarded bottle, and with wisdom born of long experience, wafted its odorous mouth to and fro under the sensitized nose a couple times. The nose twitched longingly, the eyes opened, and the subject came to thirstily. Then when he saw who it was, he pushed the bottle away. "Scram!" he said. "No money. I'll pay you when my ship comes in—"

"What sheep?" said the hotel-keeper, "You no got sheep!"

"How'd you guess?" jeered the beachcomber. "You been readin' my mail!"

"You no got mail idder."

"Skip it," said Gillman wearily. "Take your mitt off my neck, it's hot enough as it is. And if you throw me out, I'll come back in again and haunt you."

This was all such an oft-told story to the hotel-keeper that he didn't bother discussing it. He drew up a chair for himself, sat down, lit a villainous native cigarette. Gillman reached haphazardly for the paper package, and he snatched it away from him.

"Listen, no make monkey business, I got something for to tell you. You know that American falla come here three nights ago—the one they took to jail?"

"Naw," said Gillman, holding his head up on one hand.

"He was tri' yesterday, and foun' guilty. They gonna take heem out and shoot heem, mebbe tomorrow, mebbe next day. He keel one of Zacata's men, rob hees gold, and you know how Zacata stand with *El President."*

"Whadda I care?" said Gillman, swatting lazily at a gnat that danced in front of him.

The hotel-keeper gabbled on, undeterred. "I seet with heem through trial, he no can spik Spanish. He no even know when eet start. You know how queeck they do anytheeng eef Zacata say so. When he ask me when eet going begin, and I tell heem eet all over already, he going to get *fusilado,* he start to yell and holler something tarrible. They no can make him tell where gold is, so I think he's still got. Now, *escucka.* He say to me, 'You get me American lawyer, I pay good money. There must be wan in country somewhere,' he say. 'I don't care who he ees, how no-good he ees, you find and bring. Two-year-old keed, he say, can get me out of this feex, but I must have someone who spik my language.' "

"Why doesn't he appeal to the nearest American consul? There's one at San Jose, Costa Rica."

"He don't want nothing to do with no consul. Banana company nidder. I think maybe heem wanted for something."

Gillman showed a slight flicker of interest. "Well, where do I come in? Why teil me about it?"

“You use to be lawyer in State, no? Well, holl right. He say he give good money, mebbe two, t’ree thousand dollar.”

The hotel-keeper sliced the flat of his hand stingingly against Gillman’s unfiexed arm. “For two year now you don’t pay me a centavo! You go see thees man. Maybe you can halp him. He pay you, then you pay me what you owe, get out!”

“Eye to the main chance, eh, *amigo?”* Gillman said with a weary grin.

The hotel-keeper was not to be trifled with. He got up, went to the door, bawled: “Joaquin! *Agua frio!”*

A *mozo* brought a bucket of cold well-water and sloshed it unceremoniously over Gillman from head to foot He leaped up spasmodically, drowning and half blinded.

“There, you awake now,” said his host complacently. “Now you go over to jail, ask for to see thees man, and don’t come back until you get money for wheech to pay me. The sun dry your clothes on street; don’t worry.” The *mozo* and he, between them, hustled the dripping Gillman out through the door and gave him a parting shove that sent him stumbling.

Frisco’s first impression of the legal talent that had been sent him wasn’t flattering. “The rain’s bringin’ things up outa the ground,” he muttered, as the guard banged the cell door and departed.

“Who’d you expect to see, William J. Fallon?” Gillman growled dropping down next to him on the pallet.

“You any good?” was the next skeptical question.

“I was disbarred up home years ago, that’s why I drifted down here.” Frisco seemed to find this good news. “You guys usually make the best mouths going, at that!” he remarked, perking up. “Think you can do anything for me?”

“Did you do it?” An air of understanding was beginning to grow between them. Birds of a feather.

“Sure I did it!” bragged Frisco unhesitatingly. “I got out twenty thousand bucks’ worth in twenty-dollar gold eagles! Made three round-trips before he woke up. And half of it’s yours if you’ll get me out of this soup.”

“You sure you did it, and got it?” queried Gillman sharply. “I mustn’t work for nothing.”

“I got it. Ask me a question.”

“What’d Zacata have next to his bed?”

“Bicarb of soda and a teaspoon.”

“You were there, all right,” said Gillman. “Now, how’d they pin it on you? Where’d you slip up”

“They got Shanghai Charlie to tell ’em I was asking him all kinds of questions the night before about where and how Zacata kept his dough. That was one thing.”

“That’s only a Chinaman’s word against yours. What else?”

“Zacata himself. Get this. He comes and puts the finger on me because I got shoes on like the guy who was in the room that night! J’ever hear of such a thing? He couldn’t see my face, when the guy dropped the lamp, but I’m white, and I’m about the same height and weight, and wearing a dark suit instead of linen! And that’s enough for them—they gimme the works! They never found the gold, they never found the gun, they wasn’t able to prove I was out of my room—why, up home I woulda been turned loose before you could bat an eye!”

“But we aren’t up home,” Gillman reminded him. “They have what they call martial law down here. The president is a dictator, and Zacata is his right-hand man. The constitution and all civil guarantees were suspended five years ago; if you hadn’t been white, they probably wouldn’t have even bothered trying you at all.” He scratched his silvery hair luxuriantly. “Zacata’s the answer. A word from him put you here. And a word from him is enough to spring

you. And nothing else will. They don’t have superior courts in this country to appeal to. You prove to him he was mistaken, that it wasn’t you he saw that night.”

“Yeah, I thought of that myself already,” said Frisco cuttingly. “Try and do it!”

“You could talk to him from now until you’re blue in the face and he wouldn’t believe you—”

“I couldn’t even do that. He don’t talk my language and I don’t talk his!”

“And he wouldn’t listen to you if you could. Anyone in your spot would say they didn’t do it. There’s only one answer: You gotta let him *see* that he was wrong, with his own eyes—that’s the only way I can dope out. You’ve gotta give him another look at you, *doing the same thing over,* after you’re already supposed to be locked up here safe and sound. Then he’ll say to himself—”

“Go back and do it over!” Frisco edged nervously away along the pallet. “Hooch has rotted your brains away!”

“It has preserved them, *amigo.* When Zacata sees the same white man, same height, same build, same handkerchief over his face, he’ll say to himself: ‘This is the same guy as the first time, but it couldn’t be the man I identified because he is in jail now. So it wasn’t him the first time either! L&s most fat men, he’s not naturally vindictive; he has nothing against you personally. He comes here to report the second burglary. You’re still here safe and sound, as though you never stepped out—” He snapped his fingers airily. “You’ll be out of here so fast you won’t know what bounced you. *And* you’ll still have your haul. *And* you’ll even have a second haul. *And* out of remorse at the mistake he made and the disgrace he put you through, he might even come through with a little contribution to salve your lacerated feelings.”

Frisco got up and went over to the barred window, so narrow there was only room for one bar to bisect it. Outside a slice of blue sky showed and part of a roof cornice. On this perched a buzzard—probably one of many, but the only one Frisco could see. It was one too many; he'd heard about them—hanging around waiting for check-outs. This one cocked its head quizzically at him—or seemed to—and gave a slight flip of its wings. Frisco turned away in a hurry.

"If I got out of here," he said wrathfully, "you think I'd be fool enough to come back in again, sit twiddling my thumbs?"

"You'd be a fool not to!" snapped Gillman drily. "Where would you go? You think a white man could hide out anywhere in this town more than thirty minutes? You think the banana company wouldn't turn you over in a jiffy if you tried riding their railroad? It pays them to stay in good with the government. Did you ever try one of these jungles on your own? Snakes and fever and thirst and poisoned arrows . . ."

Frisco took another look at that buzzard, which stayed there as though it; had put the Indian sign on him, "I'U give your way a whirl," he said nervously. "Looks like I gotta."

"You're practically acquitted," Gillman said, confidently. "These tropical clinks are worse than the ones we got up home in every way but one—they're a darned sight easier to get out of. They don't have any system at all. Now if I was to send you over a present of a bottle of spiked *mescál* tonight, for instance, the chances are that it would get sidetracked on its way and right where it would do the most good. The two guards would become very sleepy. They would even snore, I think."

"But that wouldn't be getting the key to this cage off them," Frisco pointed out. "They'd be down in the guardroom just off where you come in from the street. And if you was to try to help things along, you'd have to rouse

them to be let in yourself, and then we'd be right back where we started."

Gillman pondered, brightened. "I'll bring the bottle over myself, good and late, after the officers are off duty, and join them over the bottle. That way I'll be on the inside when the curtains go down. I'm known all over town as a souse; they wouldn't think anything of it. Then I can let you out, let you back in again, and replace the key."

"What's to keep you from fading out with them?"

"Frisco," the master-mind said, "the shell crater where my stomach used to be wouldn't know the difference between knockout drops and a cup o' weak tea. I'll guarantee you I'll outlast any gunzo going, between Vancouver and Valparaiso." He got up and shook the bars to bring the jailer back.

"Now don't cross me up," Frisco warned him. "I've come clean to you, but you try spilling to them, yiz'll all be still looking for it a hundred years from now!"

"Say, don't y' suppose I'm sick of this hole myself? I want to get out of here before I'm carried out. We'll lam together on the next boat."

"We've both got each other dead to rights," admitted Frisco, "so maybe for the first time in our lives we'll each play square."

Gillman gave him the office with one eyelid, followed the jailer down the moldy flagged corridor.

Frisco turned his head to the window slit. That same buzzard was parked out there, with a knowing air. Frisco put his thumb to his nose and wigwagged it vigorously.

The cathedral chime broadcast twelve o'clock, but the night seemed already to have lasted a week.

Down in the guard room a guitar *plinked* and voices were raised in snatches of song. The jail wasn't doing much

business. There was practically no one to be disturbed, only Frisco. A jailer and a guitar, in a tropical Latin country, is not such a freak combination as it sounds.

The repertoire was strictly limited —*La Cucaracha* and *La Paloma.* The guitar kept getting more and more languid until finally it dropped out altogether and the vocal harmony wavered on unaccompanied. Then that kept getting more and more off key. Finally it went all to pieces, and droned snores started creeping in.

“Something tells me,” Frisco said to himself, “Gillman is down there with them.” He just sat tight, but he wasn’t as calm and collected as he looked. There wasn’t a sound from below now.

A soft tread wavered along the corridor and he heard Gillman’s whisper. “Which one are you in? It’s dark as the devil out here!”

Frisco stuck his arm through the bars and sliced it up and down, as if he were flagging a train. After Gillman got the right cell, he couldn’t locate the keyhole in the gloom. “I’m full of dope,” he breathed, “I got some kind of ground weed they use, from one of the China-boys—”

“Gimme the key, I’ll do it from here!” Frisco ordered. “If you drop it out there in the dark, it’ll take you all night to find it again—”

They felt their way back toward the ground-floor tier. Gillman nearly came down on top of Frisco on the stairs, but recovered neatly.

Feeble rays of light gleamed from the guard-room. Both jailers were spraddled in chairs, mouths open like fish.

“What are you going to do for a gun?”

“I’ll take one of theirs and bring it back with me. I put my own in with the haul when I cached it. If you pass out, how’m I gonna get in again?”

“Leave the front gates open on a crack. There’s no one on the streets of this town after twelve.”

They got the ponderous gates open with the guards' key. Gillman stuck his head out, pulled it in again. "Okay! If you have any trouble with me when you get back—remember, the smell of an empty bottle always brings me to. Don't show without a handkerchief, you aren't supposed to be twins, you know!" He lurched back inside the guard-room, closed the door, and Frisco heard a chair creak as he bounced into it.

He eased through the gate, narrowed it after him without closing it altogether, and slipped away hugging the shady side of the moon-bleached streets and lanes. There wasn't a single man-made light showing anywhere in town, not even from Shanghai Charlie's.

The mound that was Señor Zacata blinked and popped its eyes open. Somebody had just stamped a hard-soled shoe on the tiled floor nearby, as though to attract attention. "It is my imagination," said Señor Zacata to himself. "It is the after effects of that terrible experience I had the other night. The man is safely in jail and—" His eyelids drooped closed again; he started to roll over on his foundation to go back to sleep.

The stamp came again, a double one this time, like a soldier marking time or a tap dancer about to go into a routine. Señor Zacata's eyes flew open for keeps; he stiffened, if any one of his general flabbiness could be said to stiffen. Then he noticed something he'd been too sleepy to catch the first time. His bedroom oil lamp had been lit. The wick was turned very low, but it was gleaming there on his dresser. It just gave enough light to show the door to his strong-room standing wide open.

Señor Zacata had learned a little about emergencies by this time—not much, but a little. He didn't bother groping for the key to see if it was there or not. He went straight

into the bellrope-pulling and hollering stages of the emergency. *“Esteban! Por dios!* Again they rob me! Help, help!”

The figure that came out of the strong-room moved languidly. The man even stood still for a minute, his back to the wall, looking square over at Zacata. Again he had a weighted valise; again a pair of eyes from a white face looked amusedly over the top of a handkerchief mask; again one white hand held something negligently out at wishbone-level. It posed there motionless in the dim lamplight for a full sixty seconds—that must have seemed a lifetime to the hapless Zacata—as though waiting for Esteban. But Esteban, evidently, was remembering what had happened to Miguel the last time. There were distant shouts of *“Si, señor! Si, señor!* Right away!” but the rushing patter of sandals was cagily delayed. Only throaty gurgles were emanating from Zacata. by this time.

The masked figure finally said something indistinct that sounded like, “Can’t wait all night—” There was another of those terrifying squirts of orange from its cupped hand, a boom, a tinkle of glass from the dresser, and the room went black.

“Now you see it, now you don’t, Fatty,” commented a matter-of-fact voice, and the laden valise and the hard-soled shoes moved slowly toward the front garden and the glass-barbed wall.

The bell-arrangement, meanwhile, had broken at the other end this time, in the *mozos*’ quarters. There was a distant clunk and only silence rewarded Zacata’s tugs after that. By the time the long-delayed Esteban finally arrived his master was reduced to spasmodic hand-flappings, and was black in the face from yelling.

Frisco was sleeping peacefully as a baby when his cell gate ground inward the next morning. His old friend the corporal was standing there-with a couple of soldiers. Frisco could have done with a little more sleep, even if he was to be released. He had been up late last night. He rubbed his eyes, stretched, sat up. He glanced at the window-slit, and that same buzzard was out there big as life, preening itself.

"Haven't you got a home?" he grinned crookedly at it.

The corporal parked in front of him, unfolded a long paper, and started to read out loud. It didn't mean a thing to Frisco.

"Sure, sure, I know," he said impatiently, "You found out you had the wrong guy. All right, skip it—just turn me loose and never mind the graduation speech!"

He started to go to sleep again sitting on the edge of his pallet; Spanish is a very musical, lulling language.

The corporal finally got through and they were standing him up. They led him out and down the stairs. He whistled a couple bars of La *Cucaracha* and he saw them all look at him admiringly. When they got down to the ground floor, they started toward the rear courtyard with him instead of the street entrance. A guy in a black skirt homed-in on them and started to walk along next to Frisco, talking to himself. Frisco didn't pay any attention.

"Hey!" he said to the corporal. "What are you taking me out the back way for? Are you ashamed to let any one know you pulled a boner?"

They came out into the early morning sunlight of the prison courtyard. A high wall ran around three sides of it, and the prison building was on the fourth. There was a very low little wooden gate set in one of the walls, and the side opposite that was all pitted and pockmarked, as if from buckshot. Five droopy soldiers were lounging in a row on their upright rifles. They led Frisco out in front of them and left him there alone facing them.

The hotel-keeper was peeping out nervously from the jail entrance. The corporal went over to him and borrowed a handkerchief. He came back to Frisco pleating it, and offered him a cigarette. The corporal had a peculiar look on his face—a very peculiar look. That buzzard had followed them over from, the other side of the jail and was perched interestedly on the wall. Frisco beckoned violently to the hotel-keeper, and the corporal nodded permission to him to come over.

"Hey!" the pride of the Pacific Coast crooked. "What—what are they doin' all this for?"

The hotel-keeper offered him a light for his cigarette, sighed sympathetically. "It is too bad for you—now what happen' to Zacata las' night?"

"Too bad? Why too bad? Tha' oughta prove—"

"You see, he was no sure he accuses right man. Hees conscience bodde heem. I meet him on street yesterday an' he say to me, 'First theeng tomorrow morning I going over to jail and as they'—how you say eet?—commute that man to rubber-gang instead of shoot heem. Ees better they no keel him, in case I find out later I make mistake. An now, before he have a chance to te' them that—" He shrugged mournfully.

"Now, what?" squawked Frisco. "What's to keep him from—?"

"Oh, you don't have heard what happen' last night? He have bad dream, or he think he see a ghost or something—he very fat, you know, and he get very bad fright and drop dead from hearts-attack. Now he no can tell them not to shoot you. Eet ees too bad for you, no?"

The corporal had finished whipping the handkerchief into a neat little bandage ; he came toward Frisco holding it.

And just as the daylight was shut out from Frisco's eyes, he wondered bitterly how long it would be before Gillman opened the steamer case under his bed and discovered the fruits of Frisco's robbery, placed there hastily, with the gun,

on that very first night, just a matter of precaution. Gillman had been promised half to save him and now—

A very loud sound introduced the complete blackness that turned off Frisco’s power to think of anything at all . . .”

BLACK CARGO

I

AT sundown the longboat made its last trip out from the shore, bringing the captain, Matthews, and Goodblood, the coastal interpreter, back to the *Sea-Wolf*.

Pritchard the mate, his job of cramming one hundred and forty unfortunate blacks into the long narrow slave-hold at an end, leaned moodily over the gunwale watching their approach. This was his first trip on a slaver, and it would be his last; they'd ship a new mate next time. He'd hoped for a brush with the Frenchies, a glimpse of the Spanish Main, something high and stirring like that. He had not, until they'd reached Barbados on the first leg of the triangular voyage, known what the actual purpose of the enterprise was. Glamor! Adventure! Was this it? *Pah!* The young Virginian spat into the turgid water overside to show what he thought of the undertaking.

"Cargo all stowed, Mr. Pritchard?" the captain asked, climbing over the side.

"All below, sir, and linked fast. I've left the hatch off for your inspection."

Matthews, pock-marked face glistening with sweat, peered down over the edge of the black chasm. Dozens of white eyeballs rolled fearfully upwards toward them. They could not, of course, stand erect down there; each sitter

was chained to his neighbor, and every twelfth one fastened to a staple.

There was no pain yet, that would come later with the rolling of the ship at sea and the draining of the oxygen in the air.

“Good enough,” said Matthews. But then, noting a lane left down the center between the soles of their outstretched feet, he added regretfully, “There’d have been space for the few he had left on his hands. Could have had them cheap, too. Pity to waste them; he kills the ones he can’t sell, y’know. Batten her down, Mr. Pritchard, and let’s get under way before we all come down with a fever.” Then noting the disapproval in his mate’s face as he relayed the order, “Smile, man, smile—this day’s work’s put money in all our pockets.”

“There’s better ways of making it,”

Pritchard said, giving him a hard look, “I’m new at this stuffing of live cargo.”

“Aye, that’s to be seen,” agreed Matthews sarcastically, turning on his heel.

UNDER a vast white African moon, like a grinning skull shining above the water, they coursed slowly down the estuary, and by dawn were far out upon the bosom of the Guinea Gulf, sailing westward to round the vast snout of Africa that juts out into mid-Atlantic. The shoreline was out of sight, but the mud and silt that still discolored the water revealed its hidden presence. A full day and a night they sailed, and by mid-morning of the second day hove to before the rotting Portuguese “factory” (trading-post) where they were to drop Goodblood. From the open roadstead where they rode at anchor, out beyond reach of the coastal rollers, it was nothing more than a huddle of shacks about a mildewed stone watch tower dating from Da

Gama’s day, one of a dozen such that strewed the road to India, and forgotten by the very nation that owned it.

To Pritchard’s surprise, Matthews went ashore with the interpreter. There was nothing to be had here, not even fresh water. Slavers always brought out enough to last them both legs of the voyage, anyway. He asked no questions, however, and the captain gave no explanations. It had to do, obviously, with something he had learned from Goodblood, In about an hour the longboat reappeared, riding the long rollers out like a dancing cork. There were now two other people in it with the captain, and one was—a woman! The mate strained his eyes at the figure bunched there in

the prow, thinking the heat-haze over the glistening water must be playing him false. But no, it was a woman, and a European at that. Some light-lady of the town, perhaps, come out to satisfy a whim and look over the ship. The mate’s face set stonily; he had no love for fancy-women thrusting in where they had no business to be.

And then when she stood upon the deck before him, he saw that he was wrong, she was no fancy-lady. She was little more than a girl, blue-eyed, holding her traveling-cloak to her affrightedly, a wisp or two of honey-colored hair escaping from beneath its hood. Her eyes dropped at his searching look, and her arm went solicitously about the wasted, malaria-ridden old man they were helping over the side. He was a very ill old man; he had the mark of death upon him. Matthews came last, smirking and scraping with great show of courtliness. And behind him, Pritchard saw, the men were already bringing up the dripping longboat.

“Surely, sir, these people are not taking passage with us?” he blurted out.

“Why not?” Matthews removed a small bag of gold from his waistband, tossed it, caught it lightly again. “Would you refuse two stranded fellow-countrymen a favor? Their ship

was wrecked in these waters three full months ago and they've had no means of getting out ever since."

"And where are they to quarter?"

"Why, as to that," said Matthews softly, "there's naught for it but to give them up your quarters, and berth you with the men. Surely you will not begrudge so fair a creature and her father—" Then noting that the girl had led the tottering old man inside and out of earshot, he changed his tune subtly. "Especially when the old man will not last a fortnight by the looks of it." And he batted his eye and nudged Pritchard in the ribs.

"So that's the game, is it?" the latter said scathingly. "You'd better get them off the ship, sir, before we cast off."

Matthews turned ugly all at once. "We *are* casting off—at once, sir! Is this my ship or yours, Mr. Pritchard? She stays then!"

"I take no heed of superstitious nonsense," the mate said sharply, "but have you never heard a woman on a ship is an omen of ill-luck?"

"I'll chance it!" Matthews roared in his face. "What of the ten others below? Are you in command here or am I?"

He stepped closer until they were eye-to-eye, clenched his great ham of a fist, drew it back. Pritchard's own went back, as if both worked on a single tendon.

"You are, sir. But if you strike me once," he warned, "you'll not strike twice!"

They both stood their ground for a moment. Finally Matthews' hand came back to his side again, fell open. "See to your duties, Mr. Pritchard, or I'll report you for mutiny at Bridgetown," he said gruffly. "We weigh anchor at once."

II

AFTER that they stood directly out to sea at last, helped by a land-breeze blowing off the coast of Guinea, headed due west for Bridgetown, halfway across the world. The heat didn't abate any, but at least it cleared itself of the fetid mists that clung to the shoreline of Africa. Their two passengers, whose names Pritchard learned were Dominick Lowrie and his daughter, Mary, remained secluded in his former quarters, the girl presumably spending her nights in a rug on the floor beside the ailing man's bunk, attending to his wants. Once Pritchard caught sight of her for a few moments at the bulwark, where she had come for a breath of air, her hair blowing prettily in the evening breeze. She turned at the sound of his tread, then seeing who it was, gave him a flashing look of indignation and turned away again. She had overheard his opposition to their coming aboard, evidently, and misunderstood its grounds.

An ironic smile formed at his mouth. "Good even, mistress," he greeted, and went on his way.

Her shoulders shrugged impatiently. Then when she thought him far enough away, she turned and stole a look after him. He looked back at the same moment, and she quickly gazed seaward again.

The third day out the seaman who fed them reported to him in the forecastle: "Two dead, mister; and one who won't open her eyes, though she still breathes."

Pritchard went down to inspect, then reported to Matthews, whom he had steered clear of as much as his duties would permit since they'd left the Bight. He found the captain at sodden ease in his quarters, a heavy odor of rum in the air. "Two dead, sir, one dying," he reported curtly.

"Easy to get at?" Matthews wanted to know indifferently.

"Furthest from the hatch. All females."

Matthews looked slightly relieved; they brought a lower price. "Aye, they always go first. Must have been defective

to start with. Detach them then, Mr. Pritchard, and throw the three of them over. Hereafter just do the like, you needn't come to me each time."

The mate was staring at him. "All three, sir? But one isn't gone 761!"

"Do it anyway and have it over with!" Matthews snapped. "Any that fail this early, won't last the voyage, you'll only have your trouble over again." And then as Pritchard still stood there, undisguised repugnance on his face, he reared up suddenly and brought his fist down on the side of the bunk. "Those are my orders! Am I to give two for every one necessary on this ship?"

PRITCHARD turned and strode out and sent two seamen down with a mallet and chisel to free the "dead weight" from the others. He stood by while the three were brought up, propped side by side along the gun-whale, the live one on the end. He then ordered the hatch replaced and left those below to their perpetual gloom.

The seamen picked up one between them, swung, let go—and there were only two left. Then the second. The ill one, meanwhile, had begun to revive, even after so short a space in the open air. Her chest rose and fell visibly as the seamen caught her up to throw her.

There was a sudden tap of hasty shoes upon the deck-planks, and the merchant's daughter flew at them. "Wait, let her be! She needs but air, it's easy to see. How can you do this?" She had whirled on Pritchard, in a fine moral rage. Her cheeks, he thought, looked better for the high crimson in them. Her blue eyes sparkled. "Why, this is murder! In England or the Colonies, you would be hanged for this, sir!"

Pritchard, who half agreed with her in his own mind, was irritated that she should make him the scapegoat. "We are at sea," he reminded her coldly, "and not in England or the

Colonies”—and very much under his breath—“worse luck! The captain’s word is law upon this ship, and I am only carrying out his orders.”

She had half-flung herself upon the negro woman, meanwhile, and clung with both arms. “I will not permit you to destroy this poor soul’s life!” she cried, in the stately phrases of the period. The seamen, balked, stood by uncertainly, looking at Pritchard for further orders.

Matthews came out to discover what the disturbance was, and saved him the necessity of giving any. “Sir, I beg of you!” the rescuing angel began heatedly, from where she crouched on the deck, skirts billowing about her, “let me keep this poor creature by me. I have tonics with which to restore her. Don’t let these men do away with her.”

Matthews coughed uncomfortably, avoiding the mate’s accusing eyes. He squatted beside the prone woman, made a great show of pressing her eyes open with his thumb. “Aye, she can no doubt be brought around,” he said judiciously. “Do as the young lady says, you men.” And he helped her gallantly to her feet, as though they were pacing a minuet together.

“Thank you, sir. You are a gentleman,” she murmured, not forgetting to cast a scathing look at Pritchard. The slave was carried into the already cramped quarters she shared with her father, and as she followed with the captain, Pritchard heard her say: “That man is a monster!”

He just stood there, arms akimbo, glaring quizzically after her and shaking his head at the knack of womankind for putting the blame on the wrong man. Finally he performed his favorite rite of spitting over the side and thereby eased his soul.

Rising gently, dipping softly, the *Sea-Wolf* swam onward into the sun.

THE experiment of opening the slave-hatch for a short period twice a day and letting a little air in, was tried from then on at Pritchard's suggestion. It was a sign, perhaps, that he was a novice at this business of slaverunning, but Matthews, at first inclined to countermand it, finally gave his reluctant approval when he saw how it was keeping the death-rate down. After all, the fewer that died, the more money in his pocket. Even so, a score more, including all but two of the females, had died of suffocation and body-cramp before the end of the first week. This however was a vast improvement compared to the toll on most slavers, and Matthews had been in the trade long enough to realize that, although he did mutter sarcastically about his mate "pampering" them.

The girl's father had, as Matthews had foreseen, been removed from the fever-ridden coast too late; he died the fifth day after they sailed. And at the brief burial service that was conducted, before the body in its makeshift shroud was thrown unceremoniously over, Pritchard could not help noting how the captain's roving eye wandered to the girl's bowed head even in the act of reading the service. She bore herself well, showing no tears, only a wistful resignation. She was alone now, on a ship at sea, full of rough men, with the protection of the ill old man gone, little as it had been worth.

Pritchard knocked on her door that night, soon after the quick tropic twilight had faded, making sure that no one saw him. She opened it unhesitatingly, still unaware she had anything to fear. But at sight of the one man on board from whom she had least to fear, she drew herself up coldly. A lantern was lit upon the wall within, and by its wavering light Pritchard could make out the negress whose life she had saved, restored to health now, sitting off in a corner jabbering like a jungle monkey.

“Have you anything to tell me?” she inquired haughtily, as he stood stricken speechless with sudden embarrassment.

For answer, he thrust a small firing-piece he had brought aboard with him. “Keep this with you,” he said gruffly. “And remain within at nights.” Without asking leave, he tested the bolts on the door. “Keep it fast, and do not open at the first-comer’s knock, as you did just now. They are not all angels on this ship with you. If—if aught’s amiss, just call to me. My name’s Pritchard.”

She kept looking at him, rather than the weapon he had provided her with. Far from being alarmed, she seemed secretly amused, as though at some private joke of her own. “I know that,” she answered. “Davey Pritchard, is it not?”

He turned away self-consciously and would have stalked off, but she laid a detaining hand on his arm. For the first time since she had come aboard, he saw her smile a little. “You take great thought for my safety, Mr. Pritchard, for one who was so inhospitable when first I came on the ship.”

He could feel himself flushing under his mahogany sunburn. “It is no fit ship for a woman, I still say so!” he muttered stubbornly.

Her eyes were laughing at him openly, if not her lips. “I do believe I have misjudged you, Mr. Pritchard. I do believe your bark is worse than your bite.” She closed the door, but not too quickly for him to see that the smile had spread to her lips, too.

He moved away, scratching the back of his neck awkwardly, and feeling ten-thousand kinds of a fool.

He felt less of a one, though, when her muffled cry of “Oh, Mr. Pritchard! Oh, Davey Pritchard!” sounded in the night-silence of eight-bells. He leaped from his hammock, ran out on deck barefooted. Matthews, drunk as a lord, was shouldering the fastened door of her quarters with great heaves. It was a stout barrier, for they built their ships well in those days. Pritchard had no fear for it. He folded his

arms, and suddenly was lounging there at ease alongside the scowling captain, looking on with an acid smile.

"What's amiss?" he drawled. "You wake our passenger, sir."

Matthews stepped back at the unexpected apparition, and fell to chafing his shoulder to cover his confusion. Whatever he was physically, he was a coward morally. "I—I but wanted to speak to her, of a certain matter," he stammered.

Pritchard raised his voice. "The captain would like to speak to you, Mistress Lowrie," he called mockingly. "Can you hear from where you are? Then remain there. Put your ear close to the panel."

Matthews looked guiltily toward the forecastle once or twice, as though loath to be caught by his men in this discomfiting position. "It can wait," he growled, and shambled off.

"The captain has changed his mind, Mistress Lowrie," announced Pritchard cheerfully. And, could a man be killed by a look, he would have dropped at the baleful glare Matthews sent back at him when he turned off the deck.

There was a pause, then the slightest of whispers came through the door. "I thank you, Mr. Pritchard."

Pritchard only found courage to say it because the bolted door was safely between them. "Davey's my name," he breathed back, and looked up at the moon, with something of the expression of a calf that has the colic.

THE first week slipped uneventfully into the second, and they were well out into the South Atlantic now, without a sight of a prowling Frenchman, without a storm, to mar the even course of the voyage. Only two incidents, and those barely worth noting, occurred in all that time. Both had to do with the black woman whom Mary Lowrie had attached to her. Bangi was her name, or perhaps Bangi-Bangi. At

least when her new mistress pointed at her and asked her how she was called, she chattered “Bangi-bangi-bangi.” So it was either her name, or the name of the country from which she had been stolen.

She had recovered completely, with the resiliency of a forest-animal, and as soon as she lost her fear of the ship’s motion and the sight of the water, Mary began sending her out to fetch back her food and water. She found it more comfortable to eat unwatched in her quarters than at the board with Matthews, devoured by his greedy eyes, subject to his hypocritical gallantries that only stayed within the bounds of decorum because Pritchard was present.

Matthews, when she began sending Bangi with a platter, filled it from his own helpings. The first few times the food never reached its destination, the negress made away with it herself en route. A good caning, however, cured her of this, and she became more dependable. Then one day, as she was returning the empty platter while Matthews was still at table, the captain caught her to him. She had long untended nails, and like a flash had struck and raked him down his already pockmarked face.

Pritchard, at the yelp Matthews gave, and at sight of the five reddening streaks that appeared, lowered his head and laughed soundlessly into his plate. Matthews, beside himself, chased her out, caught her on the deck, held her fast by both wrists, and bellowed loudly to the carpenter to bring him a file. “Scratch me, will she, the jungle cat!” he barked when the implement had been brought, “Well have no more of that! File her fingers down to the quick!” Bangi, finding she was not to be put to death then and there, ceased howling and caterwauling, and watched the operation with dilated eyes. Even after the grinning seaman had pitched the file down and released her, she cowered there, eying it curiously as though it were some kind of a fetish. Matthews went inside again, swearing, to sop rum to his smarting face. Pritchard, still chuckling to himself at the

poor figure the captain always seemed to cut at passages of love, went about his duties. When next he looked that way, both the negress and the file were gone. He did not miss the latter, for he had failed to notice it in the first place. Or rather, forgot that he had.

THE very next day, passing the reeking half-open hatch during one of the airing periods, he caught sight of Bangi squatted there by its rim, chattering down like a monkey. She had never dared approach it before, for fear of being returned to it herself. As his shadow fell athwart her, she straightened with a squeak and ran back to the protection of her mistress. He bent his arm threateningly after her, then jumped down into the midst of the slaves to see what she had been up to. Those nearest the hatch were hastily wolfing scraps of food she had evidently stolen from Matthews' table.

Pritchard picked his way among the captives, examining their bound hands and the few scraps of rags they wore, to see if any weapon or instrument had been smuggled to them. He could find nothing. He didn't compel them to hoist their bodies off the planks and look under them, because there was scarcely room to do so in the jammed place, and he had no hankering to remain in the stench-filled place. He climbed back to the deck and ordered the hatch battened down. He didn't tell Matthews on the girl, because it seemed a small enough thing to get her a whipping for. There was no love lost between them anyway, let the slaves eat the scraps from his table for all he cared.

He did however speak of it to Mary Lowrie when next he saw her standing in the doorway looking out, and immediately regretted doing so. It set them at cross-purposes again, as they had been in the beginning.

"It is best you keep her away from the hatch, lest she throw them something with which to try to free themselves.

I would not tell Matthews for your sake, for she gives you company, and he would return her there at once."

She was what a later age would have called a humanitarian. "And would it be a crime if they did free themselves? What right have you and the others to carry them away from their homes into slavery?"

He took a patient breath at this typical bit of feminine logic. "If these savages were freed, ma'm, you realize what their first act would be, I trust?"

"Why," she said defiantly, "they would do what anyone would do in their place, and who could blame them? They would make off in the small boats and escape back whence they have been so unjustly taken."

His sigh was a heave this time. "No ma'm," he said severely, "they would cut all our throats, yours included. We ride the seas with a powder-mine beneath our feet, So long as no spark is put to it."

"You see evil in all men's hearts, Mr. Pritchard. You are just like all the others, and I had begun to think you different. You do not evidently believe, like Rousseau, in the true nobility of the savage."

Poor Pritchard, who had never heard of Rousseau in his life, had a feeling he was getting the worst of the argument, through no fault of his own. "Is he in the slave-running business?" he asked uncertainly. For answer she gave him a look and slammed the door in his face.

III

ON the thirteenth night after they had left Africa, in the dark of the moon, the man at the wheel suddenly screamed out just once, in the stillness. Pritchard, startled awake, leaned up in his hammock, listening. It had been the scream

of a man in his death agony, suddenly cut short. On top of it came a splash, a heavier one than the incessant heaving of the water at the ship's sides. A faint rustling as of dry leaves stirred by the wind came to his ears; it might have the stealthy tread of countless bare feet sweeping over the decks. Then at last the belated boom of a firing-piece, and a voice calling out in consternation: "God have mercy! The devils are loose!"

But by that time Pritchard was already bounding out of the forecastle, shouting a needless warning to the crew members straggling out after him, The watch had already been cut to pieces, in silence but for the helmsman. Not for nothing had they stalked Africa's jungles, these blacks. The war-cry, seeming to split the ship in half, sounded just as he reached the deck, from half-a-hundred throats at once, from everywhere, from fore and aft, from port, from starboard, from above-deck and below, where some had not yet freed themselves. They were swarming all over the doomed ship like ants; bigger than ants, like death-dealing maniac apes.

He snatched at a belaying pin, cracked at the nearest one. The skull gave a horrid gourd-like sound. The firing-piece, or another like it, went off a second time, in the narrow gangway leading aft from the quarterdeck. The red flash illumined Matthews' pitted face there for an instant, surrounded by them, and, forgetting their enmity. Pritchard made toward him, striking out right and left, tearing off clutching hands like barnacles.

He could make him out faintly in the starlight, struggling in the center of all of them there, in the narrow lane he had been trapped in, unable to fire again without reloading, for this was the eighteenth century. And unable to reload for the sheer weight of bodies that pressed upon him. Pritchard bawled: "Hold your feet! Hold your feet, man! I'm coming!" Hands caught at his throat from behind and he was pulling something after him along the deck bodily. They were

strong, they found his windpipe. He flung his pin up overhead, backhand, and they let go.

A faint whiteness before him, about the size of an egg in the starlight, was Matthews' face—the last time he was to see it. It went down in all its ugliness into final oblivion, into a pit of living black bodies. The pistol he had just fired shot out from under the squirming mass, along the deck. Pritchard stooped to snatch at it, went down himself with somebody athwart him in an ape-like leap. He rolled over on him, broke the grip, twisted, kneed him in the belly. His assailant was half-starved, his ribs stood out like those of a skinny, plucked bird. Pritchard smashed down on them with the pistol-butt, and he could hear them crack like twigs.

He found his feet, started edging away with his back to the bulwark, to extricate himself from that narrow place. It was too late to do anything for Matthews, he had been torn to pieces, but Pritchard was given a moment's breathing spell while they occupied themselves with the obsequies. He could see Bangi, the cause of all their misfortunes, for it must have been she who had unbattened the hatch from above, so that they could push their way up from below. He could see her standing over the place where Matthews had disappeared into their midst. She was anointing her face with Matthews' blood, screeching her revenge to the stars.

PRITCHARD thought of the girl then, of Mary Lowrie, alone in her quarters with just a pistol and a handful of lead—no, dead by now, murdered in her sleep, for surely that female panther had done her to death before she ever crept forth to free the others. "Oh spare her, have it not so!" he choked, and wondered at the added wrench this gave in the midst of so much other death and violence.

The band of Matthews' killers were between him and her; he could perhaps have tried to hack his way through, but that was the slower way. He thrust his chargeless gun into

his bellyband, leaped upward, caught at the deckhouse roof with both his hands, and somehow scrambled up on it. He ran past, unnoticed above their heads, to drop down again beside her door.

They were here, too, but not in any numbers. He struck down two that made at him, then turned and hammered on the panel with his gun-butt. “Mary! Mary, do you live?” And yet he knew she must, for the door was fastened on the inside.

The answer was instant. She must have been waiting there on the other side for death to come and get her. “Oh, Davey—wait, I’ll open!”

“No!” he hissed furiously. “Stay as you are! They’re all loose. The bolts will guard you, once you open you are lost. Make no sound, they’ll know not that you’re in there!”

“*She* knows!” came her frightened breath. “I woke and the door was ajar, she had watched and learned how it was opened—I quickly made it fast again—”

“She’ll not have the chance to tell them!” he vowed. “Mary, Mary Lowrie, will you do as I say? Open it not, though the Recording Angel himself summon you!”

A form leaped at him through the air, bare-handed. They grappled, fell together, the filed-off loosened remnant of the slave’s manacle clinked against the door. Even in the throes of the struggle, Pritchard knew a stabbing fear lest she come out in her fright, and undo herself. The thought made him a fiend incarnate. He caught at the kinky pate, battered it against the boards. The man fell still with the suddenness of a crumpled balloon.

He found his feet, wiping blood—not his own—from over his eye and rested his shoulder-blades against the door. For a moment he was left in peace, unseen there in the shadow of the deck-house.

“What was that?”

“Naught,” he panted. He took a step away, knowing he endangered her by lingering here. Her heart must have heard the sound of his going, for her ears could not have.

“No, wait—don’t leave me!”

“HI be back, I promise you. Wait for me within, as you are.” He turned suddenly, put both hands outspread upon the door. “And if—perhaps—I’m not, then let me tell you now. I love you.”

He swerved and ran forward again, into the narrow lane where Matthews had met his death. They had dispersed from there, in the pursuit of new quarry. What had been Matthews still lay there though, and over him, swaying like a cobra, blood-drunk, was the woman, Bangi. She knew and could tell them there was a white woman aboard, if she had not done so already.

He struck no blow at her, just caught her head in the crook of one bulging arm, the shank of her leg with the other, swayed with her to the side, and heaved her across. Thrashing, bleating, she spun and vanished in a silver tulip-cup of upthrust spray.

Three of them came running at him from the aft-end of the gangway, and for the first time that night, he turned and made off from their onset. He knew what he wanted to do, while he still could, before his own approaching death overtook him. There was a small brass cannon up by the very bow, meant only for signaling in case of distress, but loaded with grapeshot. It faced outward, true, but was mounted on a swivel. If he could only reach it, the odds might be made more to a man’s liking.

THE quarterdeck was a shambles, slippery with blood. The death cries of the crew were ebbing now, for few were alive. Torn to pieces, most of them had been, by sheer weight of numbers. The thudding of bare feet on wood, the musical clash and tinkle of splintered shackles, sounded now here,

now there, as the slave horde hunted down their prey in troops.

A voice called thinly down above the uproar, from somewhere high up the rigging: “This way! Up, men! They’re afraid to climb!” Pritchard wasted not a look, he had a job to do here below.

A man named Johnson, red-bearded, all clothing torn from him, huge muscles swelling like Vulcan’s, was fighting his way backwards step by step over at the opposite gunwale, wielding a cutlass like a rapier and holding a whole pack of them at bay.

“The gun! The signal-gun!” Pritchard bellowed at him, and pointed to show what he meant. They both turned and fled simultaneously along the opposite gunwales, converging where the ship narrowed to its prow, leaping up on the raised bulkhead that held the gun, their attackers in full cry after them. They faced about again, water on three sides, death on the fourth.

“Can you cover me a moment till I march it around?” Pritchard panted hoarsely.

Johnson swooped down low, cutting, hacking, thrusting. Pritchard hugged the snub-nosed little thing with both arms, swung it back on itself so that it swept the swarming deck behind it. There was flint there in a box, with oil-soaked waste, kept in readiness. He struck a spark and held the lighted rag above the touch-hole.

“Back, man!” he warned Johnson, and plunged the burning wick.

“My arms ache,” was the last thing Johnson said, “I’ll take mine this way!” and leaped off sideways into the sea.

Then the gun boomed out like thunder, with a sudden orange furnace-glow that instantly went out again, and a curtain of acrid vapor that veiled Pritchard where he stood alone, outlined against the stars. Through it sounded the spat of grapeshot falling far and near like hail. When it cleared the quarterdeck before him was a graveyard of

prone shapes, some still, some squirming, writhing, screaming. A few by the bulwarks, whether hit or not, suddenly climbed up on them and leaped off in sheer fright at this sudden apparition of the fire-god in their midst. There was a scuttling away of the unhurt, and the whole fore part of the ship was Pritchard's—and the dead's.

But the gun was empty now, there was nothing at hand to reload it with, nor could he get below to where the small supply of powder and shot they carried was kept. Thus it was only a matter of time, for no terror lasts forever, even with primitives.

Already Pritchard could hear them in the shadows far astern, gibbering, rallying one another, creeping slowly back upon him. He turned and shook his fist down at the sea, for Johnson had played the coward, together they might have regained command of the entire ship. And the quiet, the lack of strife throughout the ship now, told him plainly no one was left alive any more, but himself, that craven up in the halyards, and the girl imprisoned in her quarters.

A horizontal salmon bar seared the horizon—but off to starboard now, at their stern, for the wheel had been unmanned half the night and they were drifting unguided wherever the wind chose to push them. And as another and another joined it, like the rungs of a fiery ladder up the sky, the bloody night was at last at an end.

They came creeping out of the two gangways in the early light, joined across the quarterdeck in a thin unbroken line, and advanced upon him with a slowness horrible to bear. Some crouched double, some were flat on their bellies, undulating like the Indians of his own country in their warfare. Step by step, ready to turn and fly back again at necessity—as though they could have outraced powder and shot had there been any!

His eye ran over their numbers, and he saw that if all were gathered together here to set upon him, then the

murdered crew had died hard and his gun had done its work well. There were less than two-score of them left, out of a hundred that had stolen out of the hole a few hours ago. But forty-to-one were no odds to be managed, and if Johnson's arms had ached, his own were lost to feeling, he could not tell where they ended, or where they began. He wanted to lie down on his face and let them have him. Still that was no way to die. So he leaned there over the gun, bent double at his waist, staring out at them across its brass barrel, hands folded beneath his chin.

He let them come on until they were close as the first time, baleful, guttural sounds coming from their throats. Then he raised his head, parted his hands, and they stopped motionless. Then, at the first return of motion, he clapped his hand to the brass of the gun with a stinging smack.

They broke and fled, spilling back over the deck into the gangways. He sent raucous laughter, harsh, stinging curses after them. But now the spell was broken, and he was undone. No fire, no smoke, from the white man's tubular fetish; it lacked food.

Instantly they reformed, came backtracking again, with less awe this time. Pritchard, tired of waiting for death, suddenly ended the thing himself. He left the gun, leaped down off the bulkhead, and dashed raging into their midst, swinging Johnson's cutlass all about him like a scythe. They closed about him like a sort of flesh trap, one that held his weapon fast in the very wounds it made before he could extricate it. They pulled him down flat upon the deck by sheer weight of numbers, and their bodies atop him hid the sun.

The time that comes once to every man, the time for dying, was at hand.

IV

AND yet Pritchard still lived, and he could only blink in wonderment. For the morning sun was still in the sky, and the white sails of the *Sea-Wolf* still over him, and the blue slop of the sea still washed high, now on this side, now on that. He was on his feet, too, pressed back against the bulwark, a patina of red glaze like a copper statue all over his body, a dozen arms holding him fast. They were ringed about him, holding a palaver. His own cutlass pointed at his throat, ready to be plunged in.

One among them, a sculpturesque buck, was gesturing, holding forth in the jabber of the Niger jungles. To the sails he pointed, and to the wheel; to the limitless horizon, and to the sun overhead, and to Pritchard himself. Angry denials rose in the throats of the others, but still some nodded their heads in affirmation.

It was easy to make out the pantomime, as it was repeated a second, a third, a fourth time. They were free now, yes. But this great white bird must be made to carry them back to their homeland. Only the white men knew how to make it obey them. Therefore this last one must be left alive to guide it; he alone knew in which direction lay the shores of this vast lake; he alone could bring them back whence they had come. Kill him later, when he had done so; but not until then, or their native villages would never see them again.

But why he, Pritchard wondered dully; hadn't there been a man up in the crow's nest? He looked and it was empty. Fallen—or perhaps a toothless cur like Johnson, leaping over when he saw Pritchard go down and knew there was no more hope. "But had I been up there where he was," thought the Virginian scornfully, "I'd have thought I owned the world. And even here where I am, I am not dead yet—nor propose to be!"

There was Mary yet, cached in the cabin. He had an obligation to stay alive. And since might could not contend with them, strategy must do it.

The voices of dissent died down; the one among them who had taken thought for their future, had his way. Pritchard was dragged stumbling to the wheel, thrust over it. They crowded threateningly about him, pointing to the dancing needle within the boxed compass, telling him to cast his spells upon it, to make the white man's juju do as they wished; they patted the planks with the palms of their hands. Africa, back to Mother Africa!

He nodded grimly and he took the wheel, half-dead as he was. She was without food or water in there, and venture forth she dare not. And stay very long she could not. Some passing ship might come within hail; even the dungeons of French St. Nazaire would be a heaven to this. By dint of long, patient gesturing he finally managed to have them fetch him out Matthew's charts and log-book, and he kept these by him as a mystic, all-powerful juju in reserve. They had, the night before, before the holocaust occurred, reached Longitude 26' 2" W., he saw. How far out of their course they had drifted since then, he had no means of knowing. Still, due north of that position, lay the little English "factory" of Bathhurst, in Gambia. And somewhere between was the great trade route all ships took, rounding the horn of Africa to go down to the Cape.

HE brought her around, west-west-by-north, west-by-north, but the strong easterly wind that had been tailing them for days keeled her over dangerously, her masthead slanted down until it seemed her sails would dip into the sea, and half of them tumbled howling across the deck, and some went in. He had to bring her back again, and made signs to them the sails would have to be furled. They misunderstood, started chipping and hacking at the mast

with their knives and the late carpenter’s axe. He shook his head violently, to make them desist, whereupon they began sawing at the ropes, and before he could stop them the sheets had fallen like a great blanket; the white bird had folded its wings and was crippled now, at the mercy of every gust that blew.

Still to them, who knew no better, it was as though he had succeeded; these tokens of his might impressed them with superstitious terror. Some, when she had righted herself again, fell down upon the deck before him and worshipped him—or the wheel and compass, he could not be sure which. Yet when he made a move to leave the wheel, their knives flashed out and growls of warning came from their throats. He made signs to his mouth, and they brought him food and water—they had located the ship’s storeroom by now and were making the most of it—and he kept some by him for the hidden girl, letting them think it was an offering to the needle.

As the afternoon waned, they set two guards by him to see that he kept by the wheel (useless task that that now was!) and the rest commenced a great orgy out on the quarterdeck in full sight of him, gorging on the ship’s supplies, swilling the rum and brandy they had unearthed in Matthews’ quarters, nursing their wounds and gashes, dancing and chanting their freedom and victory. They rolled out a cask that had held biscuits, and used it for a war-drum, thumping it with the flats of their hands.

As the sun dipped, they even made preparations for building a fire on the deck-planks, as though they were ashore! Pritchard had to warn and threaten them, showing by signs that they would go up in flames and down to the bottom. They compromised finally by dragging out a great copper cauldron from the galley, and building a small one in the depths of that. He had them wet the planks under it with sea-water, and buttress it with staves thrust into the deck, to keep it from shifting with the ship’s motion; at that

it was a constant menace. The dim, red glow its mouth cast up illumined their faces weirdly as darkness came on and they huddled about it, shivering in the night-air. One by one, befuddled with drink and doped with the unaccustomed quantities of food, they fell asleep, until they lay sprawled all over the deck.

Pritchard, with a face like stone, stood there wearily hugging the useless wheel, as though unaware. Behind him, the head of the second of his two guards at last dropped heavily onto his chest, and both slept, huddled.

Pritchard turned slowly, stretched his numbed arms out wide, like a crossbar, to cause the blood to course through them once more. Then he stooped, picked up the food and water left to placate the needle, and moving through their huddled bodies with a seaman's dexterity, stole aft like a wraith, toward the famished, thirsty girl hidden away in the cabin.

When he appeared again out of the shadows, the food and water was gone. A knife was tied now to one leg, under his shredded trousers, a loaded pistol lashed to the other. But his hands were bare. He brooded there above them all, the only upright form on the deck.

IN THE morning when they stirred, it was he who was motionless, asleep over the wheel, in full sight of all. But more than one, waking, missed the face of his nearest neighbor, who had been stretched beside him the night before—found only a blank space of deck instead. Yet each one no doubt thought the missing one was elsewhere about the ship, and being self-centered as children or animals, their interest stopped there.

The sun waxed and waned, and the shipload of helpless humanity pitched this way and that on their wooden crate, at the caprice of the wind and glittering waves, all day long. Again, during the long watches of the night, came muffled

splashes overside from time to time, a quickly-stifled intake of breath, the flop of an arm or leg against the planks. In the morning there would again be those gaps among the sleepers, always at their outermost fringes, nearest the bulwark. A name or two was called, and its owner did not answer, and was not to be found for the rest of the day. Beyond that, they failed to inquire or understand.

Another night, another day, and then suddenly the knowledge of what it was was in their midst, kindled like a spark, leaping from one to the next like flame to tinder. Oncoming night now brought terror to them they had not known before, for who could be sure, when he lay down to sleep, that he would be among those to awaken again? Whom would the powerful juju of the needle choose to sweep up into the sky without a trace tonight? Vainly they tried to halt the sun in its setting by chants and lamentations, vainly they tried to propitiate the juju by offerings and sacrifices. Purple-black shadows of night swallowed them up none the less. They lay huddled closer to the protective fire-pot now, like spokes of a contracting wheel, squabbling and bickering for the comparative safety of the innermost places, thrusting the weaker ones to the outside to be their living shields against—they knew not what.

Set guards against the terror they could not, for none would risk staying awake alone, lest they meet the evil spirit face to face in the dark, and all could not stay awake together. They slept contorted, arms thrown over their heads to ward off the sight of the juju, or with heads and shoulders burrowed under gunny-sacks and rags, like ostriches; and the merciless blue eyes that saw them thus, might have pitied and relented—had there been less at stake. And more than one, waking to the first warning tug of his own body along the deck, the stifling pressure of a demon’s hand at his mouth or throat, would still have had

time to cry out and rouse the rest, but failed to do so out of sheer fright.

On the third day they discovered the girl's presence before the sun had gone very high. She had made some slight noise within, perhaps, as one was passing. A warning shout brought them all running. But Pritchard had expected this sooner or later. They had scarcely any knives left now to hack at it, and, although her terror must be great, she was safe if she but kept her presence of mind and made no move. There was always the juju.

Pritchard made a great shout and called them back again. Then pointing to the quivering needle that was their greatest object of fear and veneration, he made signs to show that it was the spirit of this that was dwelling behind that fastened door, and they must not disturb or anger it, or it would wreak a terrible revenge. And Bangi was no longer among them to give him the lie.

They gave her hiding-place a wide berth after this, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that she was safe enough for the present. Tomorrow would see an end to all this; but he was haggard, and his strength was going fast.

THE second night they slept less deeply. There had been less rum left to stupefy them, less food to share that day. A strangled scream sounded in their midst, just as the helmsman's scream had wakened Pritchard that other, fatal night. A head or two was raised inquiringly, fearfully; the juju must be at work in their midst again, for their numbers had been thinned once more. A motionless white form, crouched in the shadow of the bulwark, went unnoticed. The seeking heads dropped back again.

But the great black buck who had been the cause of sparing Pritchard and who was something of a leader among them now, peered craftily out between half-lidded eyes. The white form moved again at last, picked something

up that lay there still, and threw it over. A splash sounded over the side.

The negro was crawling soundlessly now on hands and feet toward the white form that stood there looking over the side with its back to him, a knife between his teeth. Slowly he crept nearer, took the knife in his hand at last, reared and swept his arm back to strike.

The new moon struck at the blade, sent a gleam up the bulwark like a feeble mirror-flash in the sun. Pritchard twisted around snake-like at the waist, caught the blow with his thick forearm just as it fell. The blade skewered through, peered out at the other end. He hissed through his locked teeth with pain, staggered, brought his legs around in line with the upper part of his body, tried to reach down to the freshly-sheathed knife at his own leg. But there was no room, no time.

The negro's hand was at his throat, forcing his head back while it strangled. His backbone slowly curved under the weight of the onslaught. The bulwark held his legs there rigid, unable to give ground. He tried desperately to squirm sideways and loop out of the vise; the African clung like bark to a tree-trunk, gave him no egress.

He was already veering over at a dangerous angle, the deck seemed to be keeling away from him. To stiffen and go with it meant a broken back. And not to—

His legs shot out from under him as gravity had its way, kicking the other's foothold loose, too. His unwounded arm caught the back of the negro's neck to him, closed like a vise, and the two of them went over together locked in a death-grip, a tangled tarantula of four arms and legs plunging to its own destruction. Their double death-yell sounded as one.

But the shock of the water broke the grip, and they came up apart. Pritchard's one arm was useless, bubbling blood where the knife had bitten, and the negro couldn't swim.

They floundered there a yard apart, while the looming black hulk of the ship slowly drifted by them.

There was a warning phosphorescence, a pale gleam caught by the starlight and the crescent moon just under the surface of the water, as an upturned silver belly made its way at them with the swiftness of an arrow. They must have been following the ship for days, and feeding well from it latterly. Churning water blotted out his late opponent's bouncing head and he went under in a creaming froth. Something rough-edged like a hacksaw knocked Pritchard against the ship's side—the la.sh of the shark's tail as it veered in to the bite. Farther off-there was another gleaming belly-flash, a triangular fin slicing the water, as a second one came on with the deadly certainty of a slingshot.

SOMETHING slimy dragged across his bobbing shoulder like a snake, and he caught at it despairingly with both hands, pulled himself along the slack length of a rope trailing overside from the ship. It tautened in a moment, so it was not loose upon the deck. His shoulders and waist came clear of the water as he climbed up on it hand over hand, forcing a grip from his wounded arm that he had not thought it could give. He found the ship's side with one leg, and thrust it out for a brake.

A flash of lightning exploded at the end of the other one, as something raked its foot, then coursed up his body to burst a second time in his brain. He was pulled out flat away from the ship for a moment, without letting go the rope—then the pull stopped and he was free to come in again. There was a coating of icy, painless shock all over his system, that he knew must thaw soon. But first he must get up that rope.

Spiraling loosely like a corpse upon a gibbet, he did it somehow, one arm nearly useless, one foot—a black jelly now, trailing after him. His head came up over the side at

last, and he clung to the slippery bulwark by the pits of his arms and his outthrust jaw, unable to summon up the little added strength that would take him over. He could feel consciousness slowly draining out of him, like something squeezed from a sponge. Pain was coming on in, in white-hot surges traveling upward from his foot, with a pause between each one, but a pause that grew less each time.

And on the deck before him was a ring of black faces, drawing in closer, closer, about those two splayed arms and pain-masked face that showed above the side. The odds had climbed too high again; a man could do so much single-handed, and then do no more.

Scarcely realizing what he did, he raised his voice and called feebly in the tense, waiting silence: “Mary. Mary, come forth or I perish!”

Impossible that she should hear the weak bleat, or realize its urgency in time. Yet without the sound of a released bolt or an opening door, a pistol suddenly cracked somewhere at the back of them, and one fell down upon his face and clawed the deck. They broke and fled away into the shadows, and he saw her standing there in the gloom, a feather of smoke dancing before her.

The pistol hit the deck and quickly she had stepped across the prone figure, had caught him by the arms, was pulling at him. He would not have thought she had that much strength, nor would she herself perhaps. Strange creatures,

women! For somehow he was rolling over at her feet upon the deck, so love must have strong arms.

There was no pause now between the pain-surges. His eyes dimming as he lay there on his back looking up at her, he had only time to breathe: “Reload it, before they close in again—

She reached for the pistol, looked down at it, uncocked it. “I’ve killed a man!” she said in a horrified whisper. “I—I’ve killed a fellow human being!”

“And I,” he wanted to say, “have killed a half-a-hundred, and the ship is ours,” but darkness swept in and her face floated away into the night.

THE beating of a tom-tom roused him in glaring noonday sunlight, and he thought at first the savages were in command again and having their war-dance. But the beating was a pounding coming up his leg, and he saw Mary Lowrie crouched tenderly beside him, laving his head from a bucket filled with salt-water. His mouth was parched, and his head seemed to dance high above the deck, like a kite. There was silence on the ship, no living things but the two of them.

“They haven’t come back?” he whispered. “Where do they lurk?”

“I drove them back before me into the hold,” she said simply. “They thought me some ghost or spirit, in my flowing dresses. I refired but once, up into the air, and motioned them in. Some I had to chase and ferret out. It was hard to close the hatch upon them unaided, yet somehow I did.” Her hands and face were streaked and tarred like any seaman’s, her gown was rent, and her nails were split. Yet he thought he had never seen anyone so beautiful before, not even in a painting.

She held fresh water to his lips, and he drank, choking.

Pain soon forced him erect again, for it would not let him lie still, and he looked down at his foot, where the shark’s teeth had raked it. It was puffed and flaming, and there was no doubt infection was beginning. The tom-tom that he heard beat therein unceasingly.

“Mary,” he said, “the carpenter’s axe, that I took from them in the night, bring it out here. And search below Matthews’ bunk, perhaps there is some brandy left.”

“But they are safely shut up below,” she said, not understanding. “They are too frightened of me to come

forth even if they could—” Nevertheless she brought the axe and found a little rum.

“Now dip it in the sea-water,” he said, “to cleanse it. Then bring goods and tear it into rags.”

Her face blanched. “What are you about?”

He looked at his foot. “There is death in this. It must come off. And you must help me.” He was offering the axe to her haft-first.

She screamed and dropped the implement. “Sever it? No, I can’t! I can’t!”

“Then I must, while I still have my reason. Else I’ll be dead by morning.” He took the rags and tied them tightly at his ankle. “Fetch me some thin piece of wood to thrust in and pull it tighter still. This is to staunch the flow. Now look away, and when you hear the axe fall discarded, empty sea-water over—it.” He tilted the bottle, drained it; struggled up on his one foot, thrust the mortified one out before him so that the gunwale caught it under the arch. But, unable to sustain the position, he toppled weakly back again upon the deck.

The axe was suddenly in her hands again and she was white-lipped. “God give me strength,” she pleaded. “Make no move, Davey—for a moment.”

He saw the blade flash down, heard its chunk into the deck-plank, but felt no lightest blow. So she had missed the mark—but the darkness rolled in again, more quickly than in the quickest tropic storm.

OH, many times he woke, and waking dreamed that she was by him laving his head with cool seawater, or pressing even cooler more refreshing lips to his, or applying brandy-soaked bandages to a boardlike stiffness that was his leg, without fire in it now or the beat of drums. But once when he awoke she was not by him, and when he whispered her name, a thunderclap answered him and pungent wisps of

powder-smoke floated past him coming from the bow where there was that signal gun. Then presently she was beside him again, gaunt, hollow-cheeked, breathing: “Oh, it was so hard to turn upon its swivel, and they are so far from us, so small a speck of white!”

Like an echo, the merest breath of sound, came a far-off clap of sound. Her head fell forward on his chest and she lay without moving.

Then it was dark, and there was a lantern coming up over the side, and another, and a third, and presently ghosts ringed them about, the ghosts of white men,

Pritchard stared up unblinkingly from where he lay, unafraid of them, knowing they would soon melt away. Then they were putting brandy to her lips and to his, and he reached weakly forth and touched one’s face, and it was warm and living.

They were propped up, and over the side nearby he could see lights that rose and fell, yellow and green and red, and an upthrust blackness that blotted out the stars. “What lights are those?” he whispered. “Are they real?”

“They are the lights of His Majesty’s frigate *Hercules*” said one pityingly, “and they are real enough, as many a Frenchman has found to his cost! What has befallen here?”

And when a gasping word or two had told the story, the lieutenant in command among them rapped his sword down on the deck and said to those about him: “Sink me, sirs! This ship is a veritable charnel-house! What an ill-starred voyage!”

Pritchard smiled up at them in feeble contradiction. “For the others perhaps, not for me. I’ve lost my foot, but what’s a foot? I found the fighting and the doing that I craved.” His hand sought hers. “I found my true love too. What more does a man ask of but a single voyage?”

SOMEBODY ON THE PHONE

“I hear it! Let it ring!” she snapped back at me. We were always snapping at each other. That’s how you could tell we were brother and sister. But this snap had teeth in it. There was something frightened, tense, about it. And her face matched it—white, drawn, straining forward.

She was right in the room with it, sitting facing it in a big chair. She didn’t make a move to go over and answer it. She just sat there listening to it, as if she’d never heard one before, as if she wanted to see how long it would keep up.

I happened to look at her hand on the arm of the chair. It was heel down, but the fingers were uptilted; they weren’t touching the chair arm. And at each ring that sounded, I saw one press down, as if she were counting them to herself. The pinkie, then the ring finger, then the middle, then the index, then the thumb. Like someone practicing scales on a piano keyboard.

On the fifth ring, the thumb count, it quit. A moment’s stop, as though the connection had been broken at the other end, and then it got under way again.

“You paralyzed?” I said. A whole layer of shaving cream was evaporating on me on account of this foolishness. But when she saw me step out to go over to the phone, she left her chair like something out of a slingshot, and backed up against it to keep from getting at it.

“No, Ken! Let it alone!” There was desperation in her voice. And then the ringing quit a second time, for good,

and that ended it for her. But not for me.

“You’re white as a ghost. Who was that? What’s going on around here? A code too, eh? Maybe you think I missed that! You count the number of rings. The other end hangs up on five, then calls right back. If the coast is clear you answer. That’s bad medicine. Maybe you think I didn’t see you at the Congo Club last Tuesday night with some guy who looked like a cardshark?”

She gave me a comet of a look—a white, startled flash.

“I didn’t butt in,” I said, “because you’ve always been very levelheaded. You’ve always known your way around. One thing sure, it wasn’t a social meeting. I watched the two of you. You weren’t there for dancing or for drinking; you were there to talk business.”

She shivered as if the room were cold, but it was July. She tried to put a bold front on it. “Go ahead, cable Dad and Mother in London—all because I don’t answer a phone call. You should be a scenario writer.”

I was shrugging into my coat. “I’ve got to make the bank before closing time. Tomorrow’s payday at the firm. I want to talk to you some more about this when I get back. Stick around. ”

“I’ll stick around,” she said. I couldn’t get rid of that for years afterward: “I’ll stick around.”

The teller handed back my check to me. “No funds, Mr. Hunter.”

I nearly went down on the marble floor. “Why, there was twenty thousand in that account on the first of last month!” The office salaries and upkeep had to come out of it, and our living expenses; Dad had given both of us access to it when he went away.

“Not only that. You’re overdrawn by another thousand. We called you about it yesterday, and Miss Hunter took the message.”

“Well, where’s my statement? Show me the canceled checks? Who’s been drawing on it?”

“We mailed that to you early in the week,” he said.

I thought: She must have intercepted it, then . . .

I went back and she was waiting for me as she’d said she would. She was dressed to go out, though. I grabbed her by the wrist and swung her all the way around.

“Who took you for a cleaning?” I said. “Who’s been shaking you down? Where’s the pearls Dad gave you for Christmas? Take off your glove—where’s your diamond solitaire? You’ve been gambling again, haven’t you?” Her head went down.

“And they found out who you were, found out we’re well-heeled, knew that a scandal would kill Dad, and have been putting the screws on you ever since. Is that it?”

Her head went down a second time.

“That was what that call was, on the phone before, that frightened you so. Wasn’t it?”

This time she spoke. “Yes, Ken, that was what that was.”

“Gimme the guy’s name,” I said.

“Oh, don’t!” she begged. “It’ll ruin all of us. Wait here a minute. I have a better way than that. Let me handle it my way. She went into her room and closed the door.

I paced back and forth. Finally I went over and rapped. “Jean,” I said, “you coming out? I want to talk to you!”

Before she could answer, the doorbell rang and a sleepy-looking cop was standing there. “Hunter? Take it easy now, take it easy,” he said for no apparent reason. “Your sister—”

I had no time to bother. “What d’you want? She’s in her room.”

“No, she isn’t,” he said. “She just fell fifteen stories down to the street. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. ”

I knew almost at once what I was going to do, even while they were still asking me the routine questions.

“We were going out together,” I said through my hands, “and she remembered she’d left the window open in her room. She went back a minute to close it. I guess she must have—”

Yes, they agreed sympathetically, she must have. And they went out and closed the door.

I'd had the gun, and the license for it, ever since that time we'd been burglarized at Great Neck, I got it out and made sure it was loaded. This was a sentence—here in my mind—that no clever lawyer could set side or whittle down to nothing. This was a sentence that smirched no names except mine. Oh, any excuse would do. I didn't like his necktie, or he'd stepped on my foot. This was a sentence from which there was no appeal. Because somebody had killed her—by calling her up on the phone. The law mightn't see it that way, but I did.

It might have seemed a funny place to go, that very night while she was broken and white and all alone with just flowers. The Congo Club, with its clatter and its rainbow spotlights. It didn't to me; it seemed the right place, the only place.

". . . where that empty table is, inside that booth there. Last Tuesday night, with a very pretty girl." I killed my drink at this point, and it was all salty. "I want to know who the man was."

For a hundred dollars anyone'll remember anything. "That was Buck Franklin," the manager said. "He's the club owner himself. Some sort of private gambling place. He comes here quite a lot. I expect them both tonight again. He reserved that same table. "

I squeezed my glass hard with one hand and got another drop out of it; the liquid would hardly go down my throat, though. Stuck in the middle. And the glass cracked and split in two pieces. "No, he won't be here tonight—with her," I said quietly. "That's why I've got to reach him. I've got a message for him—from her."

One of the hackmen that had the concession outside might know, he suggested. The third on line admitted he knew who the man was and had driven him home from here numerous times. He couldn't remember where, though. He

said the man always gave him a five-dollar tip on each haul. I gave him fifty, and then he remembered where.

He took me to the apartment.

It was him all right, the same man who had been with her at the Congo Club. He was waiting for me by the open door, after I'd been announced and sent up. "You say you've got a message for me from Miss Jean Hunter?"

"You know her then, do you?"

"Sure I know her."

"Let's close the door and keep this just between us," I suggested. He closed it.

"I've been waiting to hear from her all evening," he said aggrievedly. "I've tried to reach her at her apartment, and she's not there."

"No, she's not there," I agreed, unbuttoning my jacket so I could get at my back pocket.

"I'm a busy man," he said. " I put myself out to do her a favor, because I feel sorry for her, and then she keeps me waiting—"

"That's her ring," I interrupted. He was breathing on a diamond solitaire he'd taken out of his vest pocket, and absentmindedly rubbing it on the back of his hand.

"She gave it to me as collateral for a loan. I'm not sure it's worth what I let her have, but I always was an easy mark for a femme in trouble. I suppose she's out right now trying to raise the rest of it. I hope she does for her sake."

"Loan? Is that what they're calling it now?" I said without heat. "I think you better turn around. The back is about the right place."

He didn't. He got out two words after the first shot. Two husky breaths that didn't touch his larynx walls at all. "What—for?"

“For Jean Hunter . . . Here’s your code back again,” I said above the noise, while I kept punching the trigger in and out. “Five times, then quit, then call back again.”

He was down long before the last one, so I gave it to him on the floor. I took the ring back, but I threw the gun down beside him in exchange. There was evidently no one there with him, and the place must have been

soundproofed. No one seemed to have heard it outside in the hall when I went out there. On the way down I was going to tell the elevator operator, “I just shot that Franklin guy up there.” But then I thought, “Aw, let them come over to my place after me, if they want me!” I went home.

The door was still closed, where she’d gone in that afternoon and never come out again.

“It’s taken care of, Jean,” I said quietly, as if she were still in there. “He won’t be calling you up any—”

Just then it started to ring. *Brring!*—one. *Brring!*—two. *Brring!*—three. *Brring!*—four. *Brring*—five. Then it stopped for a minute.

Then it started in again.

MURDER AT THE AUTOMAT

Nelson pushed through the revolving-door at twenty to one in the morning, his squadmate, Sarecky, in the compartment behind him. They stepped clear and looked around. The place looked funny. Almost all the little white tables had helpings of food on them, but no one was at them eating. There was a big black crowd ganged up over in one corner, thick as bees and sending up a buzz. One or two were standing up on chairs, trying to see over the heads of the ones in front, rubbering like a flock of cranes.

The crowd burst apart, and a cop came through. “Now, stand back. Get away from this table, all of you,” he was saying. “There’s nothing to see. The man’s dead—that’s all.”

He met the two dicks halfway between the crowd and the door. “Over there in the corner,” he said unnecessarily. “Indigestion, I guess.” He went back with them.

They split the crowd wide open again, this time from the outside. In the middle of it was one of the little white tables, a dead man in a chair, an ambulance doctor, a pair of stretcherbearers, and the automat manager.

“He gone?” Nelson asked the interne.

“Yep. We got here too late.” He came closer so the mob wouldn’t overhear. “Better send him down to the morgue and have him looked at. I think he did the Dutch. There’s a white streak on his chin, and a half-eaten sandwich under his face spiked with some more of it, whatever it is. That’s why I got in touch with you fellows. Good night,” he wound

up pleasantly and elbowed his way out of the crowd, the two stretcherbearers tagging after him. The ambulance clanged dolorously outside, swept its fiery headlights around the corner, and whined off.

Nelson said to the cop: “Go over to the door and keep everyone in here, until we get the three others that were sitting at this table with him.”

The manager said: “There’s a little balcony upstairs. Couldn’t he be taken up there, instead of being left down here in full sight like this?”

“Yeah, pretty soon,” Nelson agreed, “but not just yet.”

He looked down at the table. There were four servings of food on it, one on each side. Two had barely been touched. One had been finished and only the soiled plates remained. One was hidden by the prone figure sprawled across it, one arm out, the other hanging limply down toward the floor.

“Who was sitting here?” said Nelson, pointing to one of the unconsumed portions. “Kindly step forward and identify yourself.” No one made a move. “No one,” said Nelson, raising his voice, “gets out of here until we have a chance to question the three people that were at this table with him when it happened.”

Someone started to back out of the crowd from behind. The woman who had wanted to go home so badly a minute ago, pointed accusingly. “*He was—that man there! I remember him distinctly. He bumped into me with his tray just before he sat down.*”

Sarecky went over, took him by the arm, and brought him forward again. “No one’s going to hurt you,” Nelson said, at sight of his pale face. “Only don’t make it any tougher for yourself than you have to.”

“I never even saw the guy before,” wailed the man, as if he had already been accused of murder, “I just happened to park my stuff at the first vacant chair I—” Misery liking company, he broke off short and pointed in turn. “*He was at*

the table, too! Why doncha hold him, if you're gonna hold me?"

"That's just what we're going to do," said Nelson dryly. "Over here, you," he ordered the new witness. "Now, who was eating spaghetti on his right here? As soon as we find that out, the rest of you can go home."

The crowd looked around indignantly in search of the recalcitrant witness that was the cause of detaining them all. But this time no one was definitely able to single him out. A white-uniformed busman finally edged forward and said to Nelson: "I think he musta got out of the place right after it happened. I looked over at this table a minute before it happened, and he was already through eating, picking his teeth and just holding down the chair."

"Well, he's not as smart as he thinks he is," said Nelson. "We'll catch up with him, whether he got out or didn't. The rest of you clear out of here now. And don't give fake names and addresses to the cop at the door, or you'll only be making trouble for yourselves."

The place emptied itself like magic, self-preservation being stronger than curiosity in most people. The two table-mates of the dead man, the manager, the staff, and the two dicks remained inside.

An assistant medical examiner arrived, followed by two men with the usual basket, and made a brief preliminary investigation. While this was going on, Nelson was questioning the two witnesses, the busman, and the manager. He got an illuminating composite picture.

The man was well known to the staff by sight, and was considered an eccentric. He always came in at the same time each night, just before closing time, and always helped himself to the same snack—coffee and a bologna sandwich. It hadn't varied for six months now. The remnants that the busman removed from where the man sat each time, were always the same. The manager was able to corroborate this. He, the dead man, had raised a kick one night about a week

ago, because the bologna sandwich slots had all been emptied before he came in. The manager had had to remind him that it's first come, first served, at an automat, and you can't reserve your food ahead of time. The man at the change-booth, questioned by Nelson, added to the old fellow's reputation for eccentricity. Other, well-dressed people came in and changed a half-dollar, or at the most a dollar bill. He, in his battered hat and derelict's overcoat, never failed to produce a ten and sometimes even a twenty.

"One of these misers, eh?" said Nelson. "They always end up behind the eight-ball, one way or another."

The old fellow was removed, also the partly consumed sandwich. The assistant examiner let Nelson know: "I think you've got something here, brother. I may be wrong, but that sandwich was loaded with cyanide."

Sarecky, who had gone through the man's clothes, said: "The name was Leo Avram, and here's the address. Incidentally, he had seven hundred dollars, in C's, in his right shoe and three hundred in his left. Want me to go over there and nose around?"

"Suppose I go," Nelson said. "You stay here and clean up."

"My pal," murmured the other dick dryly.

The waxed paper from the sandwich had been left lying under the chair. Nelson picked it up, wrapped it in a papernapkin, and put it in his pocket. It was only a short walk from the automat to where Avram lived, an outmoded, walk-up building, falling to pieces with neglect.

Nelson went into the hall and there was no such name listed. He thought at first Sarecky had made a mistake, or at least been misled by whatever memorandum it was he had found that purported to give the old fellow's address. He rang the bell marked *superintendent*, and went down to the basement entrance to make sure. A stout blond woman in an old sweater and carpet-slippers came out.

"Is there anyone named Avram living in this building?"

“That’s my husband—he’s the superintendent. He’s out right now, I expect him back any minute.”

Nelson couldn’t understand, himself, why he didn’t break it to her then and there. He wanted to get a line, perhaps, on the old man’s surroundings while they still remained normal. “Can I come in and wait a minute?” he said.

“Why not?” she said indifferently.

She led him down a barren, unlit basement-way, stacked with empty ashcans, into a room green-yellow with a tiny bud of gaslight. Old as the building upstairs was, it had been wired for electricity, Nelson had noted. For that matter, so was this basement down here. There was a cord hanging from the ceiling ending in an empty socket. It had been looped up out of reach. “The old bird sure was a miser,” thought Nelson. “Walking around on one grand and living like this!” He couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for the woman.

He noted to his further surprise that a pot of coffee was boiling on a one-burner gas stove over in the corner. He wondered if she knew that he treated himself away from home each night. “Any idea where he went?” he asked, sitting down in a creaking rocker.

“He goes two blocks down to the automat for a bite to eat every night at this time,” she said.

“How is it,” he asked curiously, “he’ll go out and spend money like that, when he could have coffee right here where he lives with you?”

A spark of resentment showed in her face, but a defeated resentment that had long turned to resignation. She shrugged. “For himself, nothing’s too good. He goes there because the light’s better, he says. But for me and the kids, he begrudges every penny.”

“You’ve got kids, have you?”

“They’re mine, not his,” she said dully.

Nelson had already caught sight of a half-grown girl and a little boy peeping shyly out at him from another room.

“Well,” he said, getting up, “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but your husband had an accident a little while ago at the automat, Mrs. Avram. He’s gone.”

The weary stolidity on her face changed very slowly. But it did change—to fright. “Cyanide—what’s that?” she breathed, when he’d told her.

“Did he have any enemies?”

She said with utter simplicity. “Nobody loved him. Nobody hated him that much, either.”

“Do you know of any reason he’d have to take his own life?”

“Him? Never! He held on tight to life, just like he did to his money.”

There was some truth in that, the dick had to admit. Misers seldom commit suicide.

The little girl edged into the room fearfully, holding her hands behind her. “Is—is he dead, Mom?”

The woman just nodded, dry-eyed.

“Then, can we use this now?” She was holding a fly-blown electric bulb in her hands.

Nelson felt touched, hard-boiled dick though he was. “Come down to headquarters tomorrow, Mrs. Avram. There’s some money there you can claim. G’night.” He went outside and clanged the basement-gate shut after him. The windows alongside him suddenly bloomed feebly with electricity, and the silhouette of a woman standing up on a chair was outlined against them.

“It’s a funny world,” thought the dick with a shake of his head, as he trudged up to sidewalk-level.

* * * *

It was now two in the morning. The automat was dark when Nelson returned there, so he went down to headquarters. They were questioning the branch-manager and the unseen counterman who prepared the sandwiches and filled the slots from the inside.

Nelson’s captain said: “They’ve already telephoned from the chem lab that the sandwich is loaded with cyanide crystals. On the other hand, they give the remainder of the loaf that was used, the leftover bologna from which the sandwich was prepared, the breadknife, the cutting-board, and the scraps in the garbage-receptacle—all of which we sent over there—a clean bill of health. There was clearly no slip-up or carelessness in the automat pantry. Which means that cyanide got into that sandwich on the consumer’s side of the apparatus. He committed suicide or was deliberately murdered by one of the other customers.”

“I was just up there,” Nelson said. “It wasn’t suicide. People don’t worry about keeping their light bills down when they’re going to take their own lives.”

“Good psychology,” the captain nodded. “My experience is that miserliness is simply a perverted form of self-preservation, an exaggerated clinging to life. The choice of method wouldn’t be in character, either. Cyanide’s expensive, and it wouldn’t be sold to a man of Avram’s type, just for the asking. It’s murder, then. I think it’s highly important you men bring in whoever the fourth man at that table was tonight. Do it with the least possible loss of time.”

A composite description of him, pieced together from the few scraps that could be obtained from the busman and the other two at the table, was available. He was a heavy-set, dark-cornplected man, wearing a light-tan suit. He had been the first of the four at the table, and already through eating, but had lingered on. Mannerisms—had kept looking back over his shoulder, from time to time, and picking his teeth. He had had a small black satchel, or sample-case, parked at his feet under the table. Both survivors were positive on this point. Both had stubbed their toes against it in sitting down, and both had glanced to the floor to see what it was.

Had he reached down toward it at any time, after their arrival, as if to open it or take anything out of it?

To the best of their united recollections—no.

Had Avram, *after* bringing the sandwich to the table, gotten up again and left it unguarded for a moment?

Again, no. In fact the whole thing had been over with in a flash. He had noisily unwrapped it, taken a huge bite, swallowed without chewing, heaved convulsively once or twice, and fallen prone across the tabletop.

“Then it must have happened right outside the slot—I mean the inserting of the stuff—and not at the table, at all,” Sarecky told Nelson privately. “Guess he laid it down for a minute while he was drawing his coffee.”

“Absolutely not!” Nelson contradicted. “You’re forgetting it was all wrapped up in wax-paper. How could anyone have opened, then closed it again, without attracting his attention? And if we’re going to suspect the guy with the satchel—and the cap seems to want us to—he was already *at* the table and all through eating when Avrarn came over. How could he know ahead of time which table the old guy was going to select?”

“Then how did the stuff get on it? Where did it come from?” the other dick asked helplessly.

“It’s little things like that we’re paid to find out,” Nelson reminded him dryly.

“Pretty large order, isn’t it?”

“You talk like a layman. You’ve been on the squad long enough by now to know how damnably unescapable little habits are, how impossible it is to shake them off, once formed. The public at large thinks detective work is something miraculous like pulling rabbits out of a silk-hat. They don’t realize that no adult is a free agent—that they’re tied hand and foot by tiny, harmless little habits, and held helpless. This man has a habit of taking a snack to eat at midnight in a public place. He has a habit of picking his teeth after he’s through, of lingering on at the table, of looking back over his shoulder aimlessly from time to time. Combine that with a stocky build, a dark complexion, and

you have him! What more d'ya want—a spotlight trained on him?"

* * * *

It was Sarecky, himself, in spite of his misgivings, who picked him up forty-eight hours later in another automat, sample-case and all, at nearly the same hour as the first time, and brought him in for questioning! The busman from the former place, and the two customers, called in, identified him unhesitatingly, even if he was now wearing a gray suit.

His name, he said, was Alexander Hill, and he lived at 215 Such-and-such a street.

"What business are you in?" rapped out the captain.

The man's face got livid. His Adam's apple went up and down like an elevator. He could barely articulate the words. "I'm—I'm a salesman for a wholesale drug concern," he gasped terrifiedly.

"Ah!" said two of his three questioners expressively. The sample-case, opened, was found to contain only tooth-powders, aspirins, and headache remedies.

But Nelson, rummaging through it, thought: "Oh, nuts, it's too pat. And he's too scared, too defenseless, to have really done it. Came in here just now without a bit of mental build-up prepared ahead of time. The real culprit would have been all primed, all rehearsed, for just this. Watch him go all to pieces. The innocent ones always do."

The captain's voice rose to a roar. "How is it everyone else stayed in the place that night, but you got out in such a hurry?"

"I—I don't know. It happened so close to me, I guess I—I got nervous."

That wasn't necessarily a sign of guilt, Nelson was thinking. It was his duty to take part in the questioning, so he shot out at him: "You got nervous, eh? What reason d'you have for getting nervous? How'd *you* know it wasn't

just a heart attack or malnutrition—unless you were the cause of it?"

He stumbled badly over that one. "No! No! I don't handle that stuff! I don't carry anything like that—"

"So you know what it was? How'd you know? We didn't tell you," Sarecky jumped on him.

"I—I read it in the papers next morning," he wailed.

Well, it had been in all of them, Nelson had to admit.

"You didn't reach out in front of you—toward him—for anything that night? You kept your hands to yourself?" Then, before he could get a word out, "*What about sugar?*"

The suspect went from bad to worse. "I don't use any!" he whimpered.

Sarecky had been just waiting for that. "Don't lie to us!" he yelled, and swung at him. "I watched you for ten full minutes tonight before I went over and tapped your shoulder. You emptied half the container into your cup!" His fist hit him a glancing blow on the side of the jaw, knocked him and the chair he was sitting on both off-balance. Fright was making the guy sew himself up twice as badly as before.

"Aw, we're just barking up the wrong tree," Nelson kept saying to himself. "It's just one of those fluke coincidences. A drug salesman happens to be sitting at the same table where a guy drops from cyanide poisoning!" Still, he knew that more than one guy had been strapped into the chair just on the strength of such a coincidence and nothing more. You couldn't expect a jury not to pounce on it for all it was worth.

The captain took Nelson out of it at this point, somewhat to his relief, took him aside and murmured: "Go over there and give his place a good cleaning while we're holding him here. If you can turn up any of that stuff hidden around there, that's all we need. He'll break down like a stack of cards." He glanced over at the cowering figure in the chair. "We'll have him before morning," he promised.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” thought Nelson, easing out. “And then what’ll we have? Exactly nothing.” He wasn’t the kind of a dick that would have rather had a wrong guy than no guy at all, like some of them. He wanted the right guy—or none at all. The last he saw of the captain, he was stripping off his coat for action, more as a moral threat than a physical one, and the unfortunate victim of circumstances was wailing, “I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it,” like a record with a flaw in it.

* * * *

Hill was a bachelor and lived in a small, one-room flat on the upper West Side. Nelson let himself in with the man’s own key, put on the lights, and went to work. In half an hour, he had investigated the place upside-down. There was not a grain of cyanide to be found, nor anything beyond what had already been revealed in the sample-case. This did not mean, of course, that he couldn’t have obtained some either through the firm he worked for, or some of the retail druggists whom he canvassed. Nelson found a list of the latter and took it with him to check over the following day.

Instead of returning directly to headquarters, he detoured on an impulse past the Avram house, and, seeing a light shining in the basement windows, went over and rang the bell.

The little girl came out, her brother behind her. “Mom’s not in,” she announced.

“She’s out with Uncle Nick,” the boy supplied.

His sister whirled on him. “She told us not to tell anybody that, didn’t she!”

Nelson could hear the instructions as clearly as if he’d been in the room at the time, “If that same man comes around again, don’t you tell him I’ve gone out with Uncle Nick, now!”

Children are after all very transparent. They told him most of what he wanted to know without realizing they were doing it. “He’s not really your uncle, is he?”

A gasp of surprise. “How’d you know that?”

“Your ma gonna marry him?”

They both nodded approvingly. “He’s gonna be our new Pop.”

“What was the name of your real Pop—the one before the last?”

“Edwards,” they chorused proudly.

“What happened to him?”

“He died.”

“In Dee-troit,” added the little boy.

He only asked them one more question. “Can you tell me his full name?”

“Albert J. Edwards,” they recited.

He gave them a friendly push. “All right, kids, go back to bed.”

* * * *

He went back to headquarters, sent a wire to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Detroit, on his own hook. They were still questioning Hill down to the bone, meanwhile, but he hadn’t caved in yet. “Nothing,” Nelson reported. “Only this accountsheet of where he places his orders.”

“I’m going to try framing him with a handful of bicarb of soda, or something—pretend we got the goods on him. I’ll see if that’ll open him up,” the captain promised wrathfully. “He’s not the push-over I expected. You start in at seven this morning and work your way through this list of retail druggists. Find out if he ever tried to contract them for any of that stuff.”

Meanwhile, he had Hill smuggled out the back way to an outlying precinct, to evade the statute governing the length of time a prisoner can be held before arraignment. They

didn’t have enough of a case against him yet to arraign him, but they weren’t going to let him go.

Nelson was even more surprised than the prisoner at what he caught himself doing. As they stood Hill up next to him in the corridor, for a minute, waiting for the Black Maria, he breathed over his shoulder, “Hang on tight, or you’re sunk!”

The man acted too far gone even to understand what he was driving at.

Nelson was present the next morning when Mrs. Avram showed up to claim the money, and watched her expression curiously. She had the same air of weary resignation as the night he had broken the news to her. She accepted the money from the captain, signed for it, turned apathetically away, holding it in her hand. The captain, by prearrangement, had pulled another of his little tricks—purposely withheld one of the hundred-dollar bills to see what her reaction would be.

Halfway to the door, she turned in alarm, came hurrying back. “Gentlemen, there must be a mistake! There’s—there’s a hundred-dollar bill here on top!” She shuffled through the roll hastily. “They’re all hundred-dollar bills!” she cried out aghast. “I knew he had a little money in his shoes—he slept with them under his pillow at nights—but I thought maybe, fifty, seventy dollars—”

“There was a thousand in his shoes,” said the captain, “and another thousand stitched all along the seams of his overcoat.”

She let the money go, caught the edge of the desk he was sitting behind with both hands, and slumped draggingly down it to the floor in a dead faint. They had to hustle in with a pitcher of water to revive her.

Nelson impatiently wondered what the heck was the matter with him, what more he needed to be convinced she hadn’t known what she was coming into? And yet, he said to

himself, how are you going to tell a real faint from a fake one? They close their eyes and they flop, and which is it?

* * * *

He slept three hours, and then he went down and checked at the wholesale-drug concern Hill worked for. The firm did not handle cyanide or any other poisonous substance, and the man had a very good record there. He spent the morning working his way down the list of retail druggists who had placed their orders through Hill, and again got nowhere. At noon he quit, and went back to the automat where it had happened—not to eat but to talk to the manager. He was really working on two cases simultaneously—an official one for his captain and a private one of his own. The captain would have had a fit if he'd known it.

"Will you lemme have that busman of yours, the one we had down at headquarters the other night? I want to take him out of here with me for about half an hour."

"You're the Police Department," the manager smiled acquiescently.

Nelson took him with him in his streetclothes. "You did a pretty good job of identifying Hill, the fourth man at that table," he told him. "Naturally, I don't expect you to remember every face that was in there that night. Especially with the quick turnover there is in an automat. However, here's what you do. Go down this street here to Number One-twenty-one—you can see it from here. Ring the superintendent's bell. You're looking for an apartment, see? But while you're at it, you take a good look at the woman you'll see, and then come back and tell me if you remember seeing her face in the automat that night or any other night. Don't stare now—just size her up."

It took him a little longer than Nelson had counted on. When he finally rejoined the dick around the corner, where the latter was waiting, he said: "Nope, I've never seen her

in our place, that night or any other, to my knowledge. But don't forget—I'm not on the floor every minute of the time. She could have been in and out often without my spotting her."

"But not," thought Nelson, "without Avram seeing her, if she went anywhere near him at all." She hadn't been there, then. That was practically certain. "What took you so long?" he asked him.

"Funny thing. There was a guy there in the place with her that used to work for us. He remembered me right away."

"Oh, yeah?" The dick drew up short. "Was he in there that night?"

"Naw, he quit six months ago. I haven't seen him since."

"What was he, sandwich-maker?"

"No, busman like me. He cleaned up the tables."

Just another coincidence, then. But, Nelson reminded himself, if one coincidence was strong enough to put Hill in jeopardy, why should the other be passed over as harmless? Both cases—his and the captain's—now had their coincidences. It remained to be seen which was just that—a coincidence and nothing more—and which was the McCoy.

He went back to headquarters. No wire had yet come from Detroit in answer to his, but he hadn't expected any this soon—it took time. The captain, bulldog-like, wouldn't let Hill go. They had spirited him away to still a third place, were holding him on some technicality or other that had nothing to do with the Avram case. The bicarbonate of soda trick hadn't worked, the captain told Nelson ruefully.

"Why?" the dick wanted to know. "Because he caught on just by looking at it that it wasn't cyanide—is that it? I think that's an important point, right there."

"No, he thought it was the stuff all right. But he hollered blue murder it hadn't come out of his room."

"Then if he doesn't know the difference between cyanide and bicarb of soda at sight, doesn't that prove he didn't put any on that sandwich?"

The captain gave him a look. “Are you for us or against us?” he wanted to know acidly. “You go ahead checking that list of retail druggists until you find out where he got it. And if we can’t dig up any other motive, unhealthy scientific curiosity will satisfy me. He wanted to study the effects at first hand, and picked the first stranger who came along.”

“Sure, in an automat—the most conspicuous, crowded public eating-place there is. The one place where human handling of the food is reduced to a minimum.”

He deliberately disobeyed orders, a thing he had never done before-or rather, postponed carrying them out. He went back and commenced a one-man watch over the basement-entrance of the Avram house.

* * * *

In about an hour, a squat, foreign-looking man came up the steps and walked down the street. This was undoubtedly “Uncle Nick,” Mrs. Avram’s husband-to-be, and former employee of the automat. Nelson tailed him effortlessly on the opposite side, boarded the same bus he did but a block below, and got off at the same stop. “Uncle Nick” went into a bank, and Nelson into a cigar-store across the way that had transparent telephonebooths commanding the street through the glass front.

When he came out again, Nelson didn’t bother following him any more. Instead, he went into the bank himself. “What’d that guy do—open an account just now? Lemme see the depositslip.”

He had deposited a thousand dollars cash under the name of Nicholas Krassin, half of the sum Mrs. Avram had claimed at headquarters only the day before. Nelson didn’t have to be told that this by no means indicated Krassin and she had had anything to do with the old man’s death. The money was rightfully hers as his widow, and, if she wanted to divide it with her groom-to-be, that was no criminal offense. Still, wasn’t there a stronger motive here than the

“unhealthy scientific curiosity” the captain had pinned on Hill? The fact remained that she wouldn’t have had possession of the money had Avram still been alive. It would have still been in his shoes and coat-seams where she couldn’t get at it.

Nelson checked Krassin at the address he had given at the bank, and, somewhat to his surprise, found it to be on the level, not fictitious. Either the two of them weren’t very bright, or they were innocent. He went back to headquarters at six, and the answer to his telegram to Detroit had finally come. “Exhumation order obtained as per request stop Albert J. Edwards deceased January 1936 stop death certificate gives cause fall from steel girder while at work building under construction stop-autopsy—”

Nelson read it to the end, folded it, put it in his pocket without changing his expression.

“Well, did you find out anything?” the captain wanted to know.

“No, but I’m on the way to,” Nelson assured him, but he may have been thinking of that other case of his own, and not the one they were all steamed up over. He went out again without saying where.

He got to Mrs. Avram’s at quarter to seven, and rang the bell. The little girl came out to the basement-entrance. At sight of him, she called out shrilly, but without humorous intent, “Ma, that man’s here again.”

Nelson smiled a little and walked back to the living-quarters. A sudden hush had fallen thick enough to cut with a knife. Krassin was there again, in his shirt-sleeves, having supper with Mrs. Avram and the two kids. They not only had electricity now but a midget radio as well, he noticed. You can’t arrest people for buying a midget radio. It was silent as a tomb, but he let the back of his hand brush it, surreptitiously, and the front of the dial was still warm from recent use.

“I’m not butting in, am I?” he greeted them cheerfully.

“N-no, sit down,” said Mrs. Avram nervously. “This is Mr. Krassin, a friend of the family. I don’t know your name—”

“Nelson.”

Krassin just looked at him watchfully.

The dick said: “Sorry to trouble you. I just wanted to ask you a couple questions about your husband. About what time was it he had the accident?”

“You know that better than I,” she objected. “You were the one came here and told me.”

“I don’t mean Avram, I mean Edwards, in Detroit—the riveter that fell off the girder.”

Her face went a little gray, as if the memory were painful. Krassin’s face didn’t change color, but only showed considerable surprise.

“About what time of day?” he repeated.

“Noon,” she said almost inaudibly.

“Lunch-time,” said the dick softly, as if to himself. “Most workmen carry their lunch from home in a pail—” He looked at her thoughtfully. Then he changed the subject, wrinkled up his nose appreciatively. “That coffee smells good,” he remarked.

She gave him a peculiar, strained smile. “Have a cup, Mr. Detective,” she offered. He saw her eyes meet Krassin’s briefly.

“Thanks, don’t mind if I do,” drawled Nelson.

* * * *

She got up. Then, on her way to the stove, she suddenly flared out at the two kids for no apparent reason: “What are you hanging around here for? Go in to bed. Get out of here now, I say!” She banged the door shut on them, stood before it with her back to the room for a minute. Nelson’s sharp ears caught the faint but unmistakable click of a key.

She turned back again, purred to Krassin: “Nick, go outside and take a look at the furnace, will you, while I’m pouring Mr. Nelson’s coffee? If the heat dies down, they’ll

all start complaining from upstairs right away. Give it a good shaking up."

The hairs at the back of Nelson's neck stood up a little as he watched the man get up and sidle out. But he'd asked for the cup of coffee, himself.

He couldn't see her pouring it—her back was turned toward him again as she stood over the stove. But he could hear the splash of the hot liquid, see her elbow-motions, hear the clink of the pot as she replaced it. She stayed that way a moment longer, after it had been poured, with her back to him—less than a moment, barely thirty seconds. One elbow moved slightly. Nelson's eyes were narrow slits. It was thirty seconds too long, one elbow-motion too many.

She turned, came back, set the cup down before him. "I'll let you put your own sugar in, yes?" she said almost playfully. "Some like a lot, some like a little." There was a disappearing ring of froth in the middle of the black steaming liquid.

Outside somewhere, he could hear Krassin raking up the furnace.

"Drink it while it's hot," she urged.

He lifted it slowly to his lips. As the cup went up, her eyelids went down. Not all the way, not enough to completely shut out sight, though.

He blew the steam away. "Too hot—burn my mouth. Gotta give it a minute to cool," he said. "How about you—ain't you having any? I couldn't drink alone. Ain't polite."

"I had mine," she breathed heavily, opening her eyes again. "I don't think there's any left."

"Then I'll give you half of this."

Her hospitable alarm was almost overdone. She all but jumped back in protest. "No, no! Wait, I'll look. Yes, there's more, there's plenty!"

He could have had an accident with it while her back was turned a second time, upset it over the floor. Instead, he took a kitchen-match out of his pocket, broke the head off

short with his thumbnail. He threw the head, not the stick, over on top of the warm stove in front of which she was standing. It fell to one side of her, without making any noise, and she didn't notice it. If he'd thrown stick and all, it would have clicked as it dropped and attracted her attention.

She came back and sat down opposite him. Krassin's footsteps could be heard shuffling back toward them along the cement corridor outside.

"Go ahead. Don't be bashful—drink up," she encouraged. There was something ghastly about her smile, like a death'shead grinning across the table from him.

The match-head on the stove, heated to the point of combustion, suddenly flared up with a little spitting sound and a momentary gleam. She jumped a little, and her head turned nervously to see what it was. When she looked back again, he already had his cup to his lips. She raised hers, too, watching him over the rim of it. Krassin's footfalls had stopped somewhere just outside the room door, and there wasn't another sound from him, as if he were standing there, waiting.

* * * *

At the table, the cat-and-mouse play went on a moment longer. Nelson started swallowing with a dry constriction of the throat. The woman's eyes, watching him above her cup, were greedy half-moons of delight. Suddenly, her head and shoulders went down across the table with a bang, like her husband's had at the automat that other night, and the crash of the crushed cup sounded from underneath her.

Nelson jumped up watchfully, throwing his chair over. The door shot open, and Krassin came in, with an ax in one hand and an empty burlap-bag in the other.

"I'm not quite ready for cremation yet," the dick gritted, and threw himself at him.

Krassin dropped the superfluous burlap-bag, the ax flashed up overhead. Nelson dipped his knees, down in

under it before it could fall. He caught the shaft with one hand, midway between the blade and Krassin's grip, and held the weapon teetering in mid-air. With his other fist he started imitating a hydraulic drill against his assailant's teeth. Then he lowered his barrage suddenly to solar-plexus level, sent in two bodyblows that caved his opponent in—and that about finished it.

* * * *

Out in the wilds of Corona, an hour later, in a sub-basement locker-room, Alexander Hill-or at least what was left of him—was saying: "And you'll lemme sleep if I do? And you'll get it over real quick, send me up and put me out of my misery?"

"Yeah, yeah!" said the haggard captain, flicking ink out of a fountain pen and jabbing it at him. "Why dincha do this days ago, make it easier for us all?"

"Never saw such a guy," complained Sarecky, rinsing his mouth with water over in a corner.

"What's that man signing?" exploded Nelson's voice from the stairs.

"Whaddye think he's signing?" snarled the captain. "And where you been all night, incidentally?"

"Getting poisoned by the same party that croaked Avram!" He came the rest of the way down, and Krassin walked down alongside at the end of a short steel link.

"Who's this guy?" they both wanted to know.

Nelson looked at the first prisoner, in the chair. "Take him out of here a few minutes, can't you?" he requested. "He don't have to know all our business."

"Just like in the story-books," muttered Sarecky jealously. "One-Man Nelson walks in at the last minute and cops all the glory."

A cop led Hill upstairs. Another cop brought down a small brown-paper parcel at Nelson's request. Opened, it revealed a small tin that had once contained cocoa. Nelson

turned it upside down and a few threads of whitish substance spilled lethargically out, filling the close air of the room with a faint odor of bitter almonds.

"There's your cyanide," he said. "It came off the shelf above Mrs. Avram's kitchen-stove. Her kids, who are being taken care of at headquarters until I can get back there, will tell you it's roach-powder and they were warned never to go near it. She probably got it in Detroit, way back last year."

"She did it?" said the captain. "How could she? It was on the automat-sandwich, not anything he ate at home. *She wasn't at the automat that night, she was home, you told us that yourself."*

"Yeah, she was home, but she poisoned him at the automat just the same. Look, it goes like this." He unlocked his manacle, refastened his prisoner temporarily to a plumbing-pipe in the corner. He took a paper-napkin out of his pocket, and, from within that, the carefully preserved waxpaper wrapper the death-sandwich had been done in.

Nelson said: "This has been folded over twice, once on one side, once on the other. You can see that, yourself. Every crease in it is double-barreled. Meaning what? The sandwich was taken out, doctored, and rewrapped. Only, in her hurry, Mrs. Avram slipped up and put the paper back the other way around.

"As I told Sarecky already, there's death in little habits. Avram was a miser. Bologna is the cheapest sandwich that automat sells. For six months straight, he never bought any other kind. This guy here used to work there. He knew at what time the slots were refilled for the last time. He knew that that was just when Avram always showed up. And, incidentally, the old man was no fool. He didn't go there because the light was better—he went there to keep from getting poisoned at home. Ate all his meals out.

"All right, so what did they do? They got him, anyway—like this. Krassin, here, went in, bought a bologna sandwich,

and took it home to her. She spiked it, rewrapped it, and, at eleventhirty, he took it back there in his pocket. The sandwich-slots had just been refilled for the last time. They wouldn't put any more in till next morning. There are three bologna-slots. He emptied all three, to make sure the victim wouldn't get any but the lethal sandwich. After they're taken out, the glass slides remain ajar. You can lift them and reach in without inserting a coin. He put his death-sandwich in, stayed by it so no one else would get it. The old man came in. Maybe he's near sighted and didn't recognize Krassin. Maybe he didn't know him at all—I haven't cleared that point up yet. Krassin eased out of the place. The old man is a miser. He sees he can get a sandwich for nothing, thinks something went wrong with the mechanism, maybe. He grabs it up twice as quick as anyone else would have. There you are.

"What was in his shoes is this guy's motive. As for her, that was only partly her motive. She was a congenital killer, anyway, outside of that. He would have married her, and it would have happened to him in his turn some day. She got rid of her first husband, Edwards, in Detroit that way. She got a wonderful break. He ate the poisoned lunch she'd given him way up on the crossbeams of a building under construction, and it looked like he'd lost his balance and toppled to his death. They exhumed the body and performed an autopsy at my request. This telegram says they found traces of cyanide poisoning even after all this time.

"I paid out rope to her tonight, let her know I was onto her. I told her her coffee smelled good. Then I switched cups on her. She's up there now, dead. I can't say that I wanted it that way, but it was me or her. You never would have gotten her to the chair, anyway. She was unbalanced of course, but not the kind that's easily recognizable. She'd have spent a year in an institution, been released, and gone

out and done it all over again. It grows on ‘em, gives ‘em a feeling of power over their fellow human beings.

“This louse, however, is *not* insane. He did it for exactly one thousand dollars and no cents—and he knew what he was doing from first to last. So I think he’s entitled to a chicken-and-icecream-dinner in the death-house, at the state’s expense.”

“The Sphinx,” growled Sarecky under his breath, shrugging into his coat. “Sees all, knows all, keeps all to himself.”

“Who stinks?” corrected the captain, misunderstanding. “If anyone does, it’s you and me. He brought home the bacon!”

FACE WORK

I had on my best hat and my warpaint when I dug into her bell. You've heard make-up called that a thousand times, but this is one time it rated it; it was just that: warpaint.

"Yes ma'am, who do you wish to see?"

I caught Ruby Rose Reading at breakfast time—hers, not mine. Quarter to three in the afternoon. Breakfast was a pink soda-fountain mess, a tomato-and-lettuce, both untouched, and an empty glass of Bromo Seltzer, which had evidently had first claim on her. There were a pair of swell ski slides under her eyes; she was reading Gladys Glad's beauty column to try to figure out how to get rid of them before she went out that night and got a couple more. A Negro maid had opened the door, and given me a yellowed optic.

"I see her already," I said, "so skip the Morse Code." I went in up to Ruby Rose's ten-yard line. "Wheeler's the name," I said. "Does it mean anything to you?"

"Should it?" She was dark and Salomeish. She was mean. She was bad medicine. I could see his finish right there, in her eyes. And it hadn't been any fun to dance at Texas Guinan's or Larry Fay's when I was sixteen, to keep him out of the orphan asylum or the reformatory. I hadn't spent most of my young girlhood in a tinseled G-string to have her take apart what I'd built up, just to see what made him tick.

I said, "I don't mind coming right out with it in front of your maid—if you don't."

But evidently she did. Maybe Mandy was on a few other payrolls besides her own. She hit her with the tomato-and-lettuce in the left eye as preamble to the request: “Whaddo I pay you for, anyway? Take Foo-Too around the block a couple of times!”

“I tuk him once already, and he was a good boy,” was the weather report she got on this.

“Well, take him again. Maybe you can kid him it’s tomorrow already.”

Mandy fastened something that looked like the business-end of a floor mop to a leash, went out shaking her head. “You sho didn’t enjoy yo’self last night. That Sto’k Club never do agree with you.”

As soon as the gallery was out of the way I said, “You lay off my brother!”

She lit a cigarette, nosed the smoke at me. “Well, Gracie Allen, you’ve come to the wrong place looking for your brother. And, just for the record, what am I supposed to have done to him, cured him of wiping his nose on his sleeve or something?”

“He’s been spending dough like wild, dough that doesn’t come out of his salary.”

“Then where does it come from?” she asked.

“I haven’t found out. I hope his firm never does, either.” I shifted gears, went into low—like when I used to sing “Poor Butterfly” for the customers—but money couldn’t have dragged this performance out of me, it came from the heart, without pay. “There’s a little girl on our street, oh not much to look at, thinks twelve o’clock’s the middle of the night and storks leave babies, but she’s ready to take up where I leave off, pinch pennies and squeeze nickels along with him, build him into something, get him somewhere, not spread him all over the landscape. He’s just a man, doesn’t know what’s good for him, doesn’t know his bass from his oboe. I can’t stand by and watch her chew her heart up. Give her a break, and him, and me. Pick on someone your

size, someone that can take it. Have your fun and more power to you—but not with all I've got!"

She banged her cigarette to death against a tray. "O.K., is the screen test about over? Now, will you get out of here, you ham-actress, and lemme get my massage?" She went over and got the door ready for me. Gave a traffic-cop signal over her shoulder with one thumb. "I've heard of wives pulling this act, and even mothers, and in a pitcher I saw only lately, Camilly it was called, it was the old man. Now it's a sister!" She gave the ceiling the once-over. "What'll they think of next? Send grandma around tomorrow—next week East Lynne. Come on, make it snappy!" she invited, and hitched her elbow at me. If she'd touched me, I think I'd have murdered her.

"If you feel I'm poison, why don't you put it up to your brother?" she signed off. And very low, just before she walloped the door after me: "And see how' far you get!"

She was right. I said, "Chick, you're not going to chuck your job, you're not going to Chicago with that dame, are you?"

He looked at me funny and he said, "How did you know?"

"I saw your valise all packed, when I wanted to send one of your suits to the cleaners."

"You ought to be a detective," he said, and he wasn't pally. "O.K.," he said, "now that you mention it," and he went in and he got it to show me—the back of it going out the door. But I got over there to the door before he did, and pulled a Custer's Last Stand. I skipped the verse and went into the patter chorus. And boy did I sell it, without a spot and without a muted trumpet solo either! At the El-Fay in the old days they would have all been crying into their gin and wiring home to mother.

"I'm not asking anything for myself. I'm older than you, Chick, and when a girl says that you've got her down to bedrock. I've been around plenty, and 'around' wasn't pretty. Maybe you think it was fun wrestling my way home

each morning at five, and no holds barred, just so—so. Oh, I didn't know why myself sometimes; just so you wouldn't turn out to be another corner lizard, a sharpshooter, a bum like the rest of them. Chick, you're just a punk of twenty-four, but as far as I'm concerned the sun rises and sets across your shoulders. Me and little Mary Allen, we've been rooting for you all along; what's the matter with her, Chick? Just because her face don't come out of boxes and she doesn't know the right grips, don't pass her by for something that ought to be shampooed out of your hair with gasoline."

But he didn't have an ear for music; the siren song had got to him like Ulysses. And once they hear that. "Get away from the door," he said, way down low. "I never raised a hand to you in my life, I don't want to now."

The last I saw of him he was passing the back of his hand slowly up and down his side, like he was ashamed of it; the valise was in the other one. I picked myself up from the opposite side of the foyer where he'd sent me, the place all buckling around me like seen through a sheet of water. I called out after him through the open door: "Don't go, Chick! You're heading straight for the eight-ball! Don't go to her, Chick!" The acoustics were swell. Every door in the hall opened to get an earful.

He just stood there a split-second without looking back at me, yellow light gushing out at him through the port-hole of the elevator.

He straightened his hat, which my chin against his duke had dislodged—and no more Chick.

At about four that morning I was still snivelling into the gin he'd left behind him, and talking to him across the table from me—without getting any answer—when the doorbell rang. I thought it was him for a minute, but it was two other

guys. They didn't ask if they could come in, they just went 'way around to the other side of me and then showed me a couple of tin-heeled palms. So I did the coming-in-after them; I lived there, after all.

They looked the place over like they were prospective tenants being shown an apartment. I didn't go for that; detectives belong in the books you read in bed, not in your apartment at four bells, big as life. "Three closets," I mentioned, "and you get a month's concession. I'm not keeping you gentlemen up, am I?"

One of them was kind of pash looking; I mean he'd washed his face lately, and if he'd been the last man in the world, well, all right, maybe I could have overlooked the fact he was a bloodhound on two legs. The other one had a face like one of those cobblestones they dug up off Eighth Avenue when they removed the trolley tracks.

"You're Jerry Wheeler, aren't you?" the first one told me.

"I've known that for twenty-seven years," I said. "What brought the subject up?"

Cobblestone-face said, "Chick Wheeler's sister, that right?"

"I've got a brother and I call him Chick," I consented. "Any ordinance against that?"

The younger one said, "Don't be so hard to handle. You're going to talk to us and like it." He sat down in a chair, cushioned his hands behind his dome. He said, "What time'd he leave here this evening?"

Something warned me, "don't answer that." I said, "I really couldn't say. I'm not a train-despatcher."

"He was going to Chicago with a dame named Ruby Rose Reading; you knew that, didn't you?"

I thought, "I hit the nail on the head, he did help himself to his firm's money. Wonder how much he took? Well, I guess I'll have to go back to work again at one of the hotspots; maybe I can square it for him, pay back a little each week." I kept my face steady. I said, "Now, why would

he go anywhere with anyone with a name like that? It sounds like it came off a bottle of nail-polish. Come to the point, gentlemen. What's he supposed to have done?"

"There's no supposition about what he's done. He went to the Alcazar Arms at eight-fifteen tonight and throttled Ruby Rose Reading to death, Angel Face."

And that was the first time I heard myself called that. I also heard the good-looking one remonstrate: "Aw, don't give it to her that sudden, Coley, she's a girl after all," but it came from 'way far away. I was down around their feet somewhere sniffling into the carpet.

The good-looking one picked me up and straightened me out in a chair. Cobblestone said, "Don't let her fool you, Burnsie, they all pull that collapsible concertina act when they wanna get out of answering questions." He went into the bedroom and I could hear him pulling out bureau drawers and rummaging around.

I got up on one elbow. I said, "Burns, he didn't do it! Please, he didn't do it! All right, I did know about her. He was sold on her. That's why he couldn't have done it. Don't you see, you don't kill the thing you love?"

He just kind of looked at me. "You go to bat for the thing you love too," he murmured. He said, "I've been on the squad eight years now. We never in all that time caught a guy as dead to rights as your brother. He showed up with his valise in the foyer of the Alcazar at exactly twelve minutes past eight tonight. He said to the doorman, "What time is it? Did Miss Reading send her baggage down yet? We've got to make a train." Well, she had sent her baggage down and then she'd changed her mind, she'd had it all taken back upstairs again. There's your motive right there. The doorman rang her apartment and said through the announcer, 'Mr. Wheeler's here.' And she gave a dirty laugh and sang out, 'I can hardly wait.'

"So at thirteen past eight she was still alive. He went up, and he'd no sooner got there than her apartment began to

signal the doorman frantically. No one answered his hail over the announcer, so he chased up, and he found your brother crouched over her, shaking her, and she was dead. At fifteen minutes past eight o'clock. Is that a case or is that a case?"

I said, "How do you know somebody else wasn't in that apartment and strangled her just before Chick showed up? It's got to be that!"

He said, "What d'you suppose they're paying that doorman seventy-five a month for? The only other caller she had that whole day was you yourself, at three that afternoon, five full hours before. And she'd only been dead fifteen to twenty minutes by the time the assistant medical examiner got to her."

I said, "Does Chick say he did it?"

"When you've been in this business as long as I have, you'd have their heads examined if any of them ever admitted doing anything. Oh, no-o, of course he didn't do it. He says he was crouched over her, shaking her, trying to restore her!"

I took a deep breath. I said, "Gimme a swallow of that gin. Thanks." I put the tumbler down again. I looked him right in the eye. "All right, I did it! Now how d'ye like that? I begged him not to throw his life away on her. When he walked out anyway, I beat him up to her place in a taxi, got there first, gave her one last chance to lay off him. She wouldn't take it. She was all soft and squashy and I just took a grip and pushed hard."

"And the doorman?" he said with a smile.

"His back was turned. He was out at the curb seeing some people into a cab. When I left, I took the stairs down. When Chick signaled from her apartment and the doorman left his post, I just walked out. It was a pushover."

His smile was a grin. "Well, if you killed her, you killed her." He called in to the other room, "Hey, Coley, she says she killed her!" Coley came back, flapped his hand at me

disgustedly, said, “Come on, let’s get out of here. There’s nothing doing around here.”

He opened the door, went out into the hall. I said, “Well, aren’t you going to take me with you? Aren’t you going to let him go and hold me instead?”

“Who the hell wants you?” came back through the open door.

Burns, as he got up to follow him, said offhandedly, “And what was she wearing when you killed her?” But he kept walking to the door, without waiting for the answer.

They’d had a train to make. I swallowed hard. “Well, I—I was too steamed-up to notice colors or anything, but she had on her coat and hat, ready to leave.”

He turned around at the door and looked at me. His grin was sort of sympathetic, understanding. “Sure,” he said softly. “I guess she took ‘em off, though, after she found out she was dead and wasn’t going anywhere after all. We found her in pajamas. Write us a nice long letter about it tomorrow, Angel Face. We’ll see you at the trial, no doubt.”

There was a glass cigarette-box at my elbow. I grabbed it and heaved, beserk. “You rotten, lowdown-detective, you! Going around snooping, framing innocent people to death! Get out of here! I hope I never see your face again!”

It missed his head, crashed and tinkled against the door-frame to one side of him. He didn’t cringe, I liked that about him, sore as I was. He just gave a long drawn-out whistle. “Maybe you did do it at that,” he said. “Maybe I’m underestimating you,” and he touched his hatbrim and closed the door after him.

The courtroom was so unnaturally still that the ticking of my heart sounded like a cheap alarm-clock in the silence. I kept wondering how it was they didn’t put me out for letting it make so much noise. A big blue fly was buzzing on the inside of the windowpane nearest me, trying to find its way out. The jurists came filing in like ghosts, and slowly filled the double row of chairs in the box. All you could hear

was a slight rustle of clothing as they seated themselves. I kept thinking of the Inquisition, and wondered why they didn't have black hoods over their heads.

"Will the foreman of the jury please stand?"

I spaded both my hands down past my hips and grabbed the edges of my seat. My handkerchief fell on the floor and the man next to me picked it up and handed it back to me. I tried to say "Thanks" but my jaws wouldn't unlock.

"Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?"

I told myself, "He won't be able to hear it if my heart doesn't shut up." It was going bangetty-bangetty-bang!

"We have, your honor."

"Gentlemen of the jury, what is your verdict?"

The banging stopped; my heart wasn't going at all now. Even the fly stopped buzzing. The whole works stood still.

"We find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree."

Some woman screamed out "No!" at the top of her lungs. It must have been me, they were all turning their heads to look around at me. The next thing I knew, I was outside in the corridor and a whole lot of people were standing around me. Everything looked blurred. A voice said, "Give her air, stand back." Another voice said, "His sister. She was on the stand earlier in the week." Ammonia fumes kept tickling the membranes of my nostrils. The first voice said, "Take her home. Where does she live? Anybody know where she lives?"

"I know where she lives. I'll take care of her."

Somebody put an arm around my waist and walked me to the creaky courthouse elevator, led me out to the street, got in a taxi after me. I looked, and it was that dick, Burns. I climbed up into the corner of the cab, put my feet on the seat, shuffled them at him. I said, "Get away from me, you devil! You railroaded him, you butcher!"

"Atta girl," he said gently. "Feeling better already, aren't you?" He gave the old address, where Chick and I had lived.

The cab started and I couldn't get him out of it. I felt too low even to fight any more.

"Not there," I said sullenly. "I'm holed up in a cheap furnished room now, off Second Avenue. I've hocked everything I own, down to my vaccination mark! How d'you suppose I got that lawyer Schlesinger for him? And a lot of good it did him! What a wash-out he turned out to be!"

"Don't blame him," he said. "He couldn't buck that case we turned over to the State; Darrow himself couldn't have. What he should have done was let him plead guilty to second-degree, then he wouldn't be in line for short-circuiting. That was his big mistake."

"No!" I shrilled at him. "He wanted us to do that, but neither Chick nor I would hear of it! Why should he plead guilty to anything, even if it was only housebreaking, when he's innocent? That's a guilty man's dodge, not an innocent man's. He hasn't got half-an-hour's detention rightfully coming to him! Why should he lie down and accept twenty years? He didn't lay a hand on Ruby Reading."

"Eleven million people, the mighty State of New York, say that he did."

I got out, went in the grubby entrance, between a delicatessen and a Chinese laundry. "Don't come in with me, I don't want to see any more of you!" I spat over my shoulder at him. "If I was a man I'd knock you down and beat the living hell out of you!"

He came on, though, and upstairs he closed the door behind him, pushing me out of the way to get in. He said, "You need help, Angel Face, and I'm trying to give it to you."

"Oh, biting the hand that feeds you, turning into a doublecrosser, a turncoat!"

"No," he said, "no," and sort of held out his hands as if asking me for something. "Sell me, won't you?" he almost pleaded. "Sell me that he's innocent, and I'll work my fingers raw to back you up! I didn't frame your brother. I only did my job. I was sent there by my superiors in answer

to the patrolman's call that night, questioned Chick, put him under arrest. You heard me answering their questions on the stand. Did I distort the facts any? All I told them was what I saw with my own eyes, what I found when I got to Reading's apartment. Don't hold that against me, Angel Face. Sell me, convince me that he didn't do it, and I'm with you up to the hilt."

"Why?" I said cynically. "Why this sudden yearning to undo the damage you've already done?"

He opened the door to go. "Look in the mirror sometime and find out," was all he said. "You can reach me at Centre Street, Nick Burns." He held out his hand uncertainly, probably expecting me to slap it aside.

I took it instead. "O.K., flatfoot," I sighed wearily. "No use holding it against you that you're a detective. You probably don't know any better. Before you go, gimme the address of that maid of hers, Mandy Leroy. I've got an idea she didn't tell all she knew."

"She went home at five that day. How can she help you?"

"I bet she was greased plenty to softpedal the one right name that belongs in this case. She mayn't have been there, but she knew who to expect around. She may have even tipped him off that Ruby Rose was throwing him over. It takes a woman to see through a woman."

"Better watch yourself going up there alone," he warned me. He took out a notebook. "Here it is, One Hundred Eighteenth, just off Lenox." I jotted it down. "If she was paid off like you think, how you going to restore her memory? It'll take heavy sugar." He fumbled in his pocket, looked at me like he was a little scared of me, finally took out something and shoved it out of sight on the bureau. "Try your luck with that," he said. "Use it where it'll do the most good. Try a little intimidation with it, it may work."

I grabbed it up and he ducked out in a hurry, the big coward. A hundred and fifty bucks. I ran out to the stairs after him. "Hey!" I yelled, "aren't you married or anything?"

“Naw,” he called back, “I can always get it back, anyway, if it does the trick.” And then he added, “I always did want to have something on you, Angel Face.”

I went back into my cubbyhole again. “Why, the big rummy!” I said hotly. I hadn’t cried in court when Chick got the ax, just yelled out. But now my eyes got all wet.

“Mandy doan live her no mo’e,” the colored janitor of the 118th Street tenement told me.

“Where’d she go? And don’t tell me you don’t know, because it won’t work.”

“She done move to a mighty presumptuous neighborhood, doan know how come all of a sudden. She gone to Edgecomb Avenue.”

Edgecomb Avenue is the Park Avenue of New York’s darktown. Mandy had mentioned on the stand, without being asked, that Reading had died owing her two months’ wages. Yet she moves to the colored Gold Coast right on top of it. She hadn’t been paid off—not much!

Edgecomb Avenue is nothing to be ashamed of in any man’s town. Every one of the trim modern apartment buildings had a glossy private car or two parked in front of the door. I tackled the address he’d given me, and thought they were having a housewarming at first. They were singing inside and it sounded like a revival meeting.

A fat old lady came to the door, in a black silk dress, tears streaming down her cheeks. “Ise her mother, honey,” she said softly in answer to what I told her, “and you done come at an evil hour. My lamb was run over on the street, right outside this building, only yesterday, first day we moved here! She’s in there daid now, honey. The Lawd give and the Lawd has took away again.”

I did a little thinking.

Why just her, and nobody else, when she held the key to the Reading murder? “How did it happen to her? Did they tell you?”

“Two white men in a car,” she mourned. ” ‘Peared almost like they run her down purposely. She was walking along the sidewalk, folks tell me, wasn’t even in the gutter at all. And it swung right up on the sidewalk aftah her, go ovah her, then loop out in the middle again and light away, without nevah stopping!”

I went away saying to myself, “That girl was murdered as sure as I’m born, to shut her mouth. First she was bribed, then when the trial was safely over she was put out of the way for good!”

Somebody big was behind all this. And what did I have to fight that somebody with? A borrowed hundred and fifty bucks, an offer of cooperation from a susceptible detective, and a face.

I went around to the building Ruby Rose had lived in, and struck the wrong shift. “Charlie Baker doesn’t come on until six, eh?” I told the doorman. “Where does he live? I want to talk to him.”

“He don’t come on at all any more. He quit his job, as soon as that—” he tilted his head to the ceiling, “—mess we had upstairs was over with, and he didn’t have to appear in court no more.”

“Well, where’s he working now?”

“He ain’t working at all, lady. He don’t have to any more. I understand a relative of his died in the old country, left him quite a bit, and him and his wife and his three kids have gone back to England to live.”

So he’d been paid off heavily too. It looked like I was up against Wall Street itself. No wonder everything had gone so smoothly.

No wonder even a man like Schlesinger hadn’t been able to make a dent in the case.

“But I’m not licked yet,” I said to myself, back in my room. “I’ve still got this face. It ought to be good for something. If I only knew where to push it, who to flash it on!”

Burns showed up that night, to find out how I was making out.

"Here's your hundred and fifty back," I told him bitterly. "I'm up against a stone wall every way I turn. But is it a coincidence that the minute the case is in the bag, their two chief witnesses are permanently disposed of, one by exportation, the other by hit-and-run? They're not taking any chances on anything backfiring later."

He said, "You're beginning to sell me. It smells like rain."

I sat down on the floor (there was only one chair in the dump) and took a dejected half-Nelson around my own ankles. "Look, it goes like this. Some guy did it. Some guy that was sold on her. Plenty of names were spilled by Mandy and Baker, but not the right one. The ones that were brought out didn't lead anywhere, you saw that yourself. The mechanics of the thing don't trouble me a bit, the how and why could be cleared up easy enough—even by you."

"Thanks," he said.

"It's the who that has me baffaloed. There's a gap there. I can't jump across to the other side. From there on, I could handle it beautifully. But I've got to close that gap, that who, or I might as well put in the order for Chick's headstone right now."

He took out a folded newspaper and whacked himself disgustedly across the shins with it. "Tough going, kid," he agreed.

"I'll make it," I said. "You can't keep a good girl down. The right guy is in this town. And so am I in this town. I'll connect with him yet, if I've got to use a ouija board!"

He said, "You haven't got all winter. He comes up for sentence Wednesday." He opened the door. "I'm on your side," he let me know in that quiet way of his.

He left the paper behind him on the chair. I sat down and opened it. I wasn't going to do any reading, but I wanted to think behind it. And then I saw her name. The papers had

been full of her name for weeks, but this was different; this was just a little boxed ad off at the side.

AUCTION SALE
Jewelry, personal effects and furniture
belonging to the late Ruby Rose

Reading Monarch Galleries
Saturday A.M.

I dove at the window, rammed it up, leaned halfway out. I caught him just coming out of the door.

"Burns!" I screeched at the top of my voice. "Hey, Burns! Bring that hundred and fifty back up here! I've changed my mind!"

The place was jammed to the gills with curiosity-mongers and bargain-hunters, and probably professional dealers too, although they were supposed to be excluded. There were about two dozen of those 100-watt blue-white bulbs in the ceiling that auction rooms go in for and the bleach of light was intolerable, worse than on a sunny beach at high noon.

I was down front, in the second row on the aisle; I'd got there early. I wasn't interested in her diamonds or her furs or her thissas or her thattas. I was hoping something would come up that would give me some kind of a clue, but what I expected it to be, I didn't know myself. An inscription on a cigarette case maybe. I knew how little chance there was of anything like that. The D.A.'s office had sifted through her things pretty thoroughly before Chick's trial, and what they'd turned up hadn't amounted to a row of pins. She'd been pretty cagy that way, hadn't left much around. All bills had been addressed to her personally, just like she'd paid her rent with her own personal checks, and fed the account herself. Where the funds originated in the first place was never explained. I suppose she took in washing.

They started off with minor articles first, to warm the customers up. A cocktail shaker that played a tune, a make-

up mirror with a light behind it, a ship's model, things like that. They got around to her clothes next, and the women customers started "ohing" and "ahing" and foaming at the mouth. By the looks of most of them that was probably the closest they'd ever get to real sin, bidding for its hand-me-downs.

The furniture came next, and they started to talk real money now. This out of the way, her ice came on. Brother, she'd made them say it with diamonds, and they'd all spoken above a whisper too! When the last of it went, that washed up the sale; there was nothing else left to dispose of but the little rosewood jewel case she'd kept them in. About ten by twelve by ten inches deep, with a little gilt key and lock; not worth a damn but there it was. However, if you think an auctioneer passes up anything, you don't know your auctioneers.

"What am I offered for this?" he said almost apologetically. "Lovely little trinket box, give it to your best girl or your wife or your mother, to keep her ornaments in or old love letters." He knocked the veneer with his knuckles, held it outward to show us the satin lining. Nothing in it, like in a vaudeville magician's act. "Do I hear fifty cents, just to clear the stand?"

Most of them were getting up and going already. An overdressed guy in my same row, across the aisle, spoke up. "You hear a buck."

I took a look at him, and I took a look at the box. "If you want it, I want it, too," I decided suddenly. "A guy splurged up like you don't hand a plain wooden box like that to any woman that he knows." I opened my mouth for the first time since I'd come in the place. "You hear a dollar and a quarter."

"Dollar-fifty."

"Two dollars."

"Five." The way he snapped it out, he meant business.

I'd never had such a strong hunch in my life before but now I wanted that box, had to have it, I felt it would do me some good. Maybe this overdressed monkey had given it to her, maybe Burns could trace where it had been bought . . .

"Seven-fifty."

"Ten."

"Twelve."

The auctioneer was in seventh heaven. "You're giving yourself away, brother, you're giving yourself away!" I warned my competitor silently.

We leaned forward out of our seats and sized each other up. If he was giving himself away, I suppose I was too. I could see a sort of shrewd speculation in his snaky eyes, they screwed up into slits, seeming to say, "What's your racket?" Something cold went down my back, hot as it was under all those mazdas.

"Twenty-five dollars," he said inexorably.

I thought: "I'm going to get that thing if I spend every cent of the money Burns loaned me!"

"Thirty," I said.

With that, to my surprise, he stood up, flopped his hand at it disgustedly, and walked out.

When I came out five minutes later with the box wrapped up under my arm, I saw him sitting in a young dreadnaught with another man, a few yards down the street.

"So I'm going to be followed home," I said to myself, "to find out who I am." That didn't worry me any; I'd rented my room under my old stage name of Honey Sebastian (my idea of a classy tag at sixteen) to escape the notoriety attendant on Chick's trial. I turned up the other way and hopped down into the subway, which is about the best bet when the following is to be done from a car. As far as I could make out, no one came after me.

I watched the street from a corner of the window after I got home, and no one going by stopped or looked at the house or did anything but mind his own business. And if it

had been that flashy guy on my tail, you could have heard him coming from a block away. I turned to the wrapped box and broke the string.

Burns' knock at my door at five that afternoon was a tattoo of anxious impatience. "God, you took long to get here!" I blurted out. "I phoned you three times since noon."

"Lady," he protested, "I've been busy, I was out on something else, only just got back to Headquarters ten minutes ago. Boy, you threw a fright into me."

I didn't stoop to asking him why he should be so worried something had happened to me; he might have given me the right answer. "Well," I said, "I've got him," and I passed him the rosewood jewel case.

"Got who?"

"The guy that Chick's been made a patsy for."

He opened it, looked in, looked under it. "What's this?"

"Hers. I had a hunch, and I bought it. He must have had a hunch too—only his agent—and it must have been his agent, he wouldn't show up himself—didn't follow it through, wasn't sure enough. Stick your thumb under the little lock. Not over it, down below it, and press hard on the wood." Something clicked, and the satin bottom flapped up, like it had with me.

"Fake bottom, eh?" he said.

"Don't be an echo. Read that top letter out loud. That was the last one she got, the very day it happened."

" 'You know, baby,' " Burns read. " 'I think too much of you to ever let you go. And if you ever tired of me and tried to leave me, I'd kill you first, and then you could go wherever you want. They tell me you've been seen going around a lot lately with some young punk. Now, baby, I hope for his sake, and yours too, that when I come back day after tomorrow I find it isn't so, just some more of my boys' lies. They like to rib me sometimes, see if I can take it or not.' "

"He gave her a bum steer there on purpose," I pointed out. "He came back 'tomorrow' and not 'day after,' and

caught her with the goods."

"Milt," Burns read from the bottom of the page. And then he looked at me, and didn't see me for once.

"Militis, of course," I said, "the Greek nightclub king. Milton, as he calls himself. Everyone on Broadway knows him. And yet, d'you notice how that name stayed out of the trial? Not a whisper from beginning to end! That's the missing name all right!"

"It reads that way, I know," he said undecidedly, "but there's this: She knew her traffic signals. Why would she chuck away the banana and hang on to the skin? In other words, Milton spells real dough, your brother wasn't even carfare."

"But Militis had her branded—"

"Sure, but—"

"No, I'm not talking slang now. I mean actually, physically; it's mentioned in one of these letters. The autopsy report had it too, remember? Only they mistook it for an operation scar or scald. Well, when a guy does that, anyone would have looked good to her, and Chick was probably a godsend. The branding was probably not the half of it, either. It's fairly well known that Milton likes to play rough with his women."

"All right, kid," he said, "but I've got bad news for you. This evidence isn't strong enough to have the verdict set aside and a new trial called. A clever mouthpiece could blow this whole pack of letters out the window with one breath. Ardent Greek temperament, and that kind of thing, you know. You remember how Schlesinger dragged it out of Mandy that she'd overheard more than one guy make the same kind of jealous threats. Did it do any good?"

"This is the McCoy, though. He came through, this one, Militis."

"But, baby, you're telling it to me and I convince easy, from you. You're not telling it to the Grand Jury."

I shoved the letters at him. “Just the same, you chase out, have ‘em photostated, every last one of them, and put ‘em in a cool, dry place. I’m going to dig something a little more convincing to go with them, if that’s what’s needed. What clubs does he own?”

“What clubs doesn’t he? There’s Hell’s Bells—” He stopped short, looked at me. “You stay out of there.”

“A little higher,” the manager said. “Don’t be afraid. We’ve seen it all before.”

“One word from you.” I purred, and closed the door after him.

I took another hitch in my hoisted skirt, gave him a look. “If it’s my appendix you want to size up, say so. It’s easier to uncover the other way around, from up to down. I just sing and dance. I don’t bathe for the customers.”

“I like ‘em like that,” he nodded approvingly to his yes-man. “Give her a chord, Mike,” he said to his pianist.

“The Man I Love,” I said. “I do dusties, not new ones.”

“And he’ll be big and strong, The man I love—”

“Good tonsils,” he said. “Give her a dance chorus, Mike.”

Mike said disgustedly, “Why d’ya wanna waste your time? Even if she was paralyzed from the waist down and had a voice like a frog, ain’t you got eyes? Get a load of her face, will you?”

“You’re in,” the manager said. “Thirty-five, and buy yourself some up-to-date lyrics. Come around at eight and get fitted for some duds. What’s your name?”

“Bill me as Angel Face,” I said, “and have your electrician give me an amber spot. They take the padlocks off their wallets when I come out in an amber spot.”

He shook his head, almost sorrowfully. “Hang on to that face, girlie. It ain’t gonna happen again in a long time!”

Burns was holding up my locked room door with one shoulder when I got back. “Here’s your letters back; I’ve got the photostats tucked away in a safe place. Where’d you disappear to?”

“I’ve landed a job at Hell’s Bells. I’m going to get that guy and get him good! If that’s the way I’ve got to get the evidence, that’s the way. After all, if he was sold on her, I’ll have him cutting out paper dolls before two weeks are out. What’d she have that I haven’t got? Now, stay out of there. Somebody might know your face, and you’ll only queer everything.”

“Watch yourself, will you, Angel Face? You’re playing a dangerous game. That Milton is nobody’s fool. If you need me in a hurry, you know where to reach me. I’m right at your shoulder, all the way through.”

I went in and stuck the letters back in the fake bottom of the case. I had an idea I was going to have a visitor fairly soon, and wasn’t going to tip my hand.

I stood it on the dresser-top and threw in a few pins and glass beads for luck.

The timing was eerie. The knock came inside of ten minutes. I’d known it was due, but not that quick. It was my competitor from the auction room, flashy as ever; he’d changed flowers, that was all.

“Miss Sebastian,” he said, “isn’t it? I’d like very much to buy that jewel case you got.”

“I noticed that this morning.”

He went over and squinted into it.

“That all you wanted it for, just to keep junk like that in?”

“What’d you expect to find, the Hope diamond?”

“You seemed willing to pay a good deal.”

“I lose my head easy in auction rooms. But, for that matter, you seemed to be willing to go pretty high yourself.”

“I still am,” he said. He turned it over, emptied my stuff out, tucked it under his arm, put something down on the dresser. “There’s a hundred dollars. Buy yourself a real good one.”

Through the window I watched the dread-naught drift away again. “Just a little bit too late in getting here,” I

smiled after it. “The cat’s out of the bag now and a bulldog will probably chase it.”

The silver dress fitted me like a wet compress. It was one of those things that break up homes. The manager flagged me in the passageway leading back. “Did you notice that man all by himself at a ringside table? You know who he is, don’t you?”

If I hadn’t, why had I bothered turning on all my current his way? “No,” I said, round-eyed, “who?”

“Milton. He owns the works. The reason I’m telling you is this: You’ve got a date with a bottle of champagne at his table, starting in right now. Get on in there.”

We walked on back.

“Mr. Milton, this is Angel Face,” the manager said. “She won’t give us her right name, just walked in off Fifty-second Street last Tuesday.”

“And I waited until tonight to drop around here!” he laughed. “What you paying her, Berger?” Then before the other guy could get a word out, “Triple it! And now get out of here.”

The night ticked on. He’d look at me then he’d suddenly throw up his hands as though to ward off a dazzling glare. “Turn it off, it hurts my eyes.”

I smiled a little and took out my mirror. I saw my eyes in it, and in each iris there was a little electric chair with Chick sitting strapped in it. Three weeks from now, sometime during that week. Boy, how they were rushing him! It made it a lot easier to go ahead.

I went back to what we’d been talking about—and what are any two people talking about, more or less, in a nightclub at four in the morning? “Maybe,” I said, “who can tell? Some night I might just feel like changing the scenery around me, but I couldn’t tell you about it, I’m not that kind.”

“You wouldn’t have to,” he said. He fooled with something below table-level, then passed his hand to me. I took it and

knotted my handkerchief around the latch-key he'd left in it. Burns had been right. I was a dangerous game, and bridges were blazing and collapsing behind me.

The doorman covered a yawn with a white kid glove, said, "Who shall I announce?"

"That's all been taken care of," I said, "so you can go back to your beauty sleep."

He caught on, said insinuatingly, "It's Mr. Milton, isn't it? He's out of town tonight."

"You're telling me!" I thought. I'd sent him the wire that fixed that, signed the name of the manager of his Philly club. "You've been reading my mail," I said, and closed the elevator in his face.

The key worked, and the light switch worked, and his Filipino had the night off, so the rest was up to me. The clock in his two-story living room said four-fifteen. I went to the second floor of his penthouse and started in on the bedroom. He was using Ruby Rose Reading's jewel case to hold his collar buttons in, hadn't thrown it out. I opened the fake bottom to see if he'd found what he was after, and the letters were gone, probably burned.

I located his wall safe but couldn't crack it. While I was still working at it, the phone downstairs started to ring. I jumped as though a pin had been stuck into me, and started shaking like I was still doing one of my routines at the club. He had two phones, one downstairs, one in the bedroom, which was an unlisted number. I snapped out the lights, ran downstairs, picked it up. I didn't answer, just held it.

Burns' voice said, "Angel Face?" in my ear.

"Gee, you sure frightened me!" I exhaled.

"Better get out of there. He just came back, must have tumbled to the wire. A spotter at Hell's Bells tipped me off he was just there asking for you."

“I can’t, now,” I wailed. “I woke his damn doorman up getting in just now, and I’m in that silver dress I do my number in! He’ll tell him I was here. I’ll have to play it dumb.”

“D’ja get anything?”

“Nothing, only that jewel case! I couldn’t get the safe open but he’s probably burned everything connecting him to her long ago.”

“Please get out of there, kid,” he pleaded. “You don’t know that guy. He’s going to pin you down on the mat if he finds you there.”

“I’m staying,” I said. “I’ve got to break him down tonight. It’s my last chance. Chick eats chicken and ice-cream tomorrow night at six. Oh, Burns, pray for me, will you?”

“I’m going to do more than that,” he growled. “I’m going to give a wrong-number call there in half an hour. It’s four-thirty now. Five that’ll be. If you’re doing all right, I’ll lie low. If not, I’m not going to wait, I’ll break in with some of the guys, and we’ll use the little we have, the photostats of the letters, and the jewel case. I think Schlesinger can at least get Chick a reprieve on them, if not a new trial. If we can’t get Milton, we can’t get him, that’s all.”

“We’ve got to get him,” I said, “and we’re going to! He’s even been close to breaking down and admitting it to me, at times, when we’re alone together. Then at the last minute he gets leery. I’m convinced in my own mind he’s guilty. So help me, if I lose Chick tomorrow night, I’m going to shoot Milton with my own hands!”

“Remember, half an hour. If everything’s under control, cough. If you can get anywhere near the phone, cough! If I don’t hear you cough, I’m pulling the place.”

I hung up, ran up the stairs tearing at the silver cloth. I jerked open a closet door, found the cobwebby negligee he’d always told me was waiting for me there whenever I felt like breaking it in. I chased downstairs again in it, more like Godiva than anyone else, grabbed up a cigarette,

flopped back full length on the handiest divan and did a Cleopatra—just as the outside door opened and he and two other guys came in.

Milton had a face full of storm clouds—until he saw me. Then it cleared and the sun came up in it. “Finally!” he crooned. “Finally you wanted a change of scenery! And just tonight somebody had to play a practical joke on me, start me on a fool’s errand to Philly! Have you been here long?”

I couldn’t answer right away because I was still trying to get my breath back after the quick-change act I’d just pulled. I managed a vampish smile.

He turned to the two guys. “Get out, you two. Can’t you see I have company?”

I’d recognized the one who’d contacted me for the jewel case, and knew what was coming. I figured I could handle it. “Why, that’s the dame I told you about, Milt,” he blurted out, “that walked off with that little box the other day!”

“Oh, hello,” I sang out innocently. “I didn’t know that you knew Mr. Milton.”

Milton flared, “You, Rocco! Don’t call my lady friends dames!” and slapped him backhand across the mouth. “Now scar-ram! You think we need four for bridge?”

“All right, boss, all right,” he said soothingly. But he went over to a framed “still” of me, that Milton had brought home from Hell’s Bells, and stood thoughtfully in front of it for a minute. Then he and the other guy left. It was only after the elevator light had flashed out that I looked over and saw the frame was empty.

“Hey!” I complained. “That Rocco swiped my picture, right under your nose!”

He thought he saw a bowl of cream in front of him; nothing could get his back up. “Who can blame him? You’re so lovely to look at.”

He spent some time working on the theory that I’d finally found him irresistible. After what seemed years of that, I sidestepped him neatly, got off the divan just in time.

He got good and peeved finally.

"Are you giving me the runaround? What did you come here for anyway?"

"Because she's doublecrossing you!" a voice said from the foyer. "Because she came here to frame you, chief, and I know it!"

The other two had come back. Rocco pulled my picture out of his pocket. "I traced that dummy wire you got, sending you to Philly. The clerk at the telegraph office identified her as the sender, from this picture. Ask her why she wanted to get you out of town, and then come up here and case your layout! Ask her why she was willing to pay thirty bucks for a little wood box, when she was living in a seven-buck furnished room! Ask her who she is! You weren't at the Reading trial, were you? Well, I was! You're riding for a fall, chief, by having her around you. She's a stoolie!"

He turned on me. "Who are you? What does he mean?"

What was the good of answering? It was five to five on the clock. I needed Burns bad.

The other one snarled, "She's the patsy's sister. Chick Wheeler's sister. I saw her on the stand with my own eyes."

Milton's face screwed up into a sort of despairing agony; I'd never seen anything like it before. He whimpered, "And you're so beautiful to have to be killed!"

I hugged the negligee around me tight and looked down at the floor. "Then don't have me killed," I said softly. It was two to five, now.

He said with comic sadness, "I got to if you're that guy's sister."

"I say I'm nobody's sister, just Angel Face that dances at your club. I say I only came here 'cause I like soft carpets."

"Why did you send that fake telegram to get me out of town?"

He had me there. I thought fast. "If I'm a stoolie I get killed, right? But what happens if I'm the other kind of a

double-crosser, a two-timer, do I still get killed?”

“No,” he said, “because you were still a freelance; your option hadn’t been taken up yet.”

“That’s the answer, then. I was going to use your place to meet my steady, that’s why I sent the queer wire.”

Rocco’s voice was as cracked as a megaphone after a football rally.

“She’s Wheeler’s sister, chief. Don’t let her ki—”

“Shut up!” Milton said.

Rocco just smiled a wise smile, shrugged, lit a cigarette. “You’ll find out.”

The phone rang. “Get that,” Milton ordered. “That’s her guy now. Keep him on the wire.” He turned and went running up the stairs to the floor above, where the other phone was.

Rocco took out a gun, fanned it vaguely in my direction, sauntered over.

“Don’t try nothing, now, while that line’s open. You may be fooling Milton, you’re not fooling us any. He was always a sucker for a twist.”

Rocco’s buddy said, “Hello?”

Rocco, still holding the gun on me, took a lopsided drag on his cigarette with his left hand and blew smoke vertically. Some of it caught in his throat, and he started to cough like a seal. You could hear it all over the place.

I could feel all the blood draining out of my face.

The third guy was purring, “No, you tell me what number you want first, then I’ll tell you what number this is. That’s the way it’s done, pal.” He turned a blank face. “Hung up on me!”

Rocco was still hacking away. I felt sick all over. Sold out by my own signal that everything was under control!

There was a sound like dry leaves on the stairs and Milton came whisking down again. “Some guy wanted an all-night delicatess—” the spokesman started to say.

Milton cut his hand at him viciously. “That was Centre Street, police headquarters. I had it traced! Put some clothes on her. She’s going to her funeral!”

They forced me back into the silver sheath between them. Milton came over with a flagon of brandy and dashed it all over me from head to foot. “If she lets out a peep, she’s fighting drunk. Won’t be the first stewed dame carried outa here!”

They had to hold me up between them, my heels just clear of the ground, to get me to move at all. Rocco had his gun buried in the silver folds of my dress. The other had a big handkerchief spread out in his hand held under my face, as though I were nauseated—in reality to squelch any scream.

Milton came behind us. “You shouldn’t mix your drinks,” he was saying, “and especially you shouldn’t help yourself to people’s private stock without permission.”

But the doorman was asleep again on his bench, like when I’d come in the first time. This time he didn’t wake up. His eyelids just flickered a little as the four of us went by.

They saw to it that I got in the car first, like a lady should. The ride was one of those things you take to your grave with you. My whole past life came before me, in slow motion. I didn’t mind dying so terribly much, but I hated to go without being able to do anything for Chick. But it was the way the cards had fallen, that was all.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” I said to myself, “than growing into an old lady and no one looks at your face any more.” I took out my mirror and I powdered my nose, and then I threw the compact away. I’d show them a lady could die like a gentleman!

The house was on the Sound. Milton evidently lived in it quite a bit, by the looks of it. His Filipino let us in.

“Build a fire, Juan, it’s chilly,” he grinned. And to me, “Sit down, Angel Face, and let me look at you before you go.” The other two threw me into a corner of a big sofa, and I

just stayed that way, limp like a rag doll. He just stared and stared. “Gosh, you’re swell!” he said.

Rocco said, “What’re we waiting for? It’s broad daylight already.”

Milton was idly holding something into the fire, a long poker of some kind. “She’s going,” he said, “but she’s going as my property. Show the other angels this, when you get up there, so they’ll know who you belong to.” He came over to me with the end of the thing glowing dull red. It was flattened into some kind of an ornamental design or cipher. “Knock her out,” he said, “I’m not that much of a brute.”

Something exploded off the side of my head, and I lost my senses. Then he was wiping my mouth with a handkerchief soaked in whiskey, and my side burned, just above the hip, where they’d found that mark on Ruby Rose Reading.

“All right, Rocco,” Milton said.

Rocco took out his gun again, but he shoved it at the third guy hilt first. The third one held it level at me, took the safety off. His face was sort of green and wet with sweat. I looked him straight in the eyes. The gun went down like a drooping lily. “I can’t, boss, she’s too beautiful!” he groaned. “She’s got the face of an angel. How can you shoot anything like that?”

Milton pulled it away from him. “She double-crossed me just like Reading did. Any dame that double-crosses me gets what I gave Reading.”

A voice said softly, “That’s all I wanted to know.”

The gun went off, and I wondered why I didn’t feel anything. Then I saw that the smoke was coming from the doorway and not from Milton’s gun at all. He went down at my feet, like he wanted to apologize for what he’d done to me, but he didn’t say anything and he didn’t get up any more. There was blood running down the part of his hair in back.

Burns was in the room with more guys than I’d ever seen outside of a police parade. One of them was the doorman

from Milton’s place, or at least the dick that Burns had substituted for him to keep an eye on me while I was up there. Burns told me about that later and about how they followed Milt’s little party but hadn’t been able to get in in time to keep me from getting branded. Rocco and the other guy went down into hamburger under a battery of heavy fists.

I sat there holding my side and sucking in my breath. “It was a swell trick-finish,” I panted to Burns, “but what’d you drill him for? Now we’ll never get the proof that’ll save Chick.”

He was at the phone asking to be put through to Schlesinger in the city. “We’ve got it already, Angel Face,” he said ruefully—“It’s right on you, where you’re holding your side. Just where it was on Reading. We all heard what he said before he nose-dived anyway. I only wish I hadn’t shot him,” he glowered, “then I’d have the pleasure of doing it all over again, more slowly.”

I KNEW HER WHEN—

At six-fifteen an alarm clock sounded vigorously in Mrs. Delaney's dark silent bedroom. Mrs. Delaney's own voice answered it. "All right, creature, I heard ye the first time." The alarm clock nevertheless continued to signal raucously. "Shh, that's enough now!" Mrs. Delaney commanded it. It was several moments, however, before the light flashed on and revealed Mrs. Delaney in person. She had miraculously attired herself in the dark, for the light like the clock was at quite some distance from the bed, and every minute counted. The alarm by now was running down anyway. It had sunk to a metallic growling. Mrs. Delaney interrupted the tying of an apron about her slim figure to reach out and silence it with a click of her thumb. "Y'd go on all day if I didn't stop ye," she commented. With this remark all conversation between herself and the clock was over until the following day.

She now passed into the adjoining room and proceeded to do a number of things at once yet far from noiselessly. A coffee-pot that had evidently been filled the night before began to simmer over a blue gas-flame, two eggs started to hiss in the preliminary stages of frying, and a knife, fork, spoon, cup and saucer, one of each, appeared in tinkling, crashing succession on the white enameled table-top. When this much had been accomplished, Mrs. Delaney paused her first pause of the day to brush the back of her hand before

her forehead and remove the slight moisture that her efforts had accumulated thereon.

She next returned to the threshold of her own room and called sonorously through it:

“Jerry! Be getting a move on.” A door opened and her young and good-looking husband appeared, attired in trousers and shirt and blinking his eyes. “That’s the bye,” Mrs. Delaney remarked encouragingly, and returned to her duties.

When he joined her presently, he was buttoning a dark blue coat over the trousers. A coat with brass buttons in two rows down the front. A coat that was more than a coat. A coat that was a badge of distinction, a symbol of authority and competency that set him apart from the common herd, that empowered him to tell people that South Ferry trains did not go to Brooklyn and to stand aside please, don’t shove, and watch your step. The coat that proclaimed this, and the visored cap he had brought in with him and thrown on the seat of a chair, the cap that bore on a metal disc the numerals 01629, were to Mrs. Delaney objects of justifiable pride.

She loved them. They were to her what a silver tea-service would have been to other women, or an invitation to a ball, or the mention of one’s name in the society column. With the thought of them in mind she could tilt her chin in air and say to Mrs. Ross across the fire-escape, “Oh, haven’t you heard? My husband works for the Interborough,” and say to Marco, the greengrocer on the next corner, with an air of conscious superiority and patronage, “Twenty cents for a pound of string-beans? The life of me! What’ll you be asking next?”

She flounced around her husband, giving the sacrosanct coat a tug of the hem in back to straighten it, smoothing down each shoulder with a little sliding caress.

“It needs pressing,” she said sadly. “I’ll have the iron out when ye come back tonight.”

“Inspection don’t come again until March,” he reminded her, miraculously speaking through his coffee-cup. Jerry Delaney’s ideas on the subject may have erred on the side of indifference; he had been lukewarm as regarded his occupation and the prestige attendant on it for many months now, even going so far as to remark upon his return in the evening: “Whew! I’m glad that’s over for today.” A point of view which Mrs. Delaney failed utterly to share. It wasn’t much, no; but just think if he had been on the night-shift, or on one of those surface cars that stopped at every other corner. “Then ye’d have something to kick about.”

Young Mr. Delaney groped for a metaphor with which to answer this. A come-back was the designation he applied mentally. “All I do is get a look at the sun at New Lots Avenue; then I gotta go all the way back to Van Cortlandt before I see it again.” Which was geographically inaccurate; the sun was visible from Dyckman Street on. When there was a sun.

“Sure!” countered Mrs. Delaney with affectionate raillery. “And if ye were on the night-shift, it would be the moon you were missing.”

He was whistling as he left her and went down the long dim stairs, the visor of his cap jauntily over his eyes. He had stopped being Jerry Delaney now and was simply 01629. It was only beginning to grow light when he emerged onto the street, but it was doing it slowly and beautifully, as though it had purposely waited until he appeared to show him what he was missing every day of his life. But he gave no heed to the pink that had started to creep down the upper stories of the tenements nor the attenuated white of his breath as it escaped in little steam-drifts with every step he took. At 125th and Broadway he climbed the subway stairs, climbed not descended, for it bridged the street at this point above the level of the rooftops. One of the incalculable advantages of his occupation as Mrs. Delaney saw it at once became

evident, for scorning the turnstiles, he simply loosed a chain that barred his way and passed through unhampered.

At the end of the line, more prosaically known as 242nd Street, he got up, stretched himself, thrust the delightful tabloid into his pocket, and stepped off the train. He removed a small pass-book from his rear pocket, made his presence known to the gentleman who made up and detailed off, out of his own unaided creative ability and good judgment, mind you, the personnel of the various southbound trains, and this rite—“shenanigans” Jerry termed it—attended to, joined a group of his mates sprawled about on benches until the necessary ten minutes preceding his assumption of duty had elapsed. At precisely seven-twenty he stepped into the waiting line of cars that would soon be a vehicle and placed himself exactly over the coupling-irons of the second and third cars from the end, one foot on either platform like an Atlas astride his own little world. A small group of passengers entered and dispersed themselves over the seats, seats made doubly welcome by the knowledge that after the first station or two they would be unobtainable. The signal was given and Jerry bore manfully down on the pneumatic lever. Six doors in all, three to the left of him and three to the right, slid sibilantly closed. He plucked at a cord overhead to relay the knowledge to the next guard in line, two cars away. When it had reached the motorman, the train began to move. The day had begun.

The last seat in any of the cars went immediately after the third station had been reached. That was simply a preliminary to what was to follow. Long before the train sought subterranean darkness at Dyckman Street, the aisles were crowded with rhythmically swaying bodies. At Ninety-sixth Street the overflow from the locals—Jerry’s train now took on the dignity and questionable alacrity of an express—was waiting to get on. Most of them did, too. No individual passenger on the train was now free from

contact at some point with the body of another. Which is putting it mild. Jerry himself, wedged solidly on the brink of the two cars between a prickly pony-coat and a caracul one that smelt of recent mothballs, received the benefit of their shouted remarks with great, not to say painful, distinctness. His eyes took on a fixed blank stare as he learned all the details of “What sort of a time ja have with Al las’ night?”

At Seventy-second Street it had become a sheer physical impossibility for any additional people to enter the train at any point. But there was nothing to prevent them from trying. The few unfortunates obliged to get off here had to bore their way writhingly toward the direction in which they last remembered having seen the doors, with agonized supplications of “Getting off! Getting off!”

Forty-second Street brought a measure of relief. They streamed out through the doors. The pony-skin coat had gone with cyclonic adieux. The caracul one was powdering its nose and getting Jerry’s coat-sleeve all white. At Pennsylvania the great garment industry called to its devotees. Fourteenth Street helped too. But the real improvement came with the last Manhattan stations, Fulton and Wall. The aisles were cleared, seats shyly appeared here and there. It was over until tomorrow.

His ears hummed a little as the train plunged him below the waters of the East River for the first time that day. Beyond there it was all velvet; the tide was going the other way. Once more he sprawled comfortably on the seat nearest the door, lost to the world. The amount of reading he accomplished in the course of the day’s routine would have provided a liberal education in itself. Especially topics that had not the slightest bearing upon himself and his surroundings, such as storms at sea, airplane mishaps, and the birth of three-legged roosters at Wichita, Kansas. Mechanically, he rose at last and reversed the stenciled slats in the end-windows of the car announcing its

destination, stepped out as it reached there with a sigh, and went upstairs for a breath of air and a look around.

Returning Manhattanward, the cars filled slowly. There were matrons bent on shopping (and the Roxy), and those whose occupations called for no such stated regularity of hours, such as radio repairmen, piano tuners, picture-house ushers, employees of the Consolidated Gas Company starting out to read meters, a Western Union messenger, and a prosperous professional beggar or two on their way to their morning beats. They chose the midtown street-corners, being wise, where the dimes were thickest and where they would practice standing on one foot and then the other for the balance of the day. The majority of these vanished at Times Square. Into Jerry's car in their stead came a gentleman with a beard, two chattering Puerto Rican damsels, a somnolent Negro bellboy in a dark green uniform, a rounded gentleman in plus fours with a bag of golf-sticks bound for the public links at Van Cortlandt, a fatigued youth who had ladled orangeade all night, and a very pretty girl carrying a suitcase.

She selected the seat next to the door as though her stay was to be a short one. Several times she made a false move to get up. Jerry sensed an impending inquiry and sighed resignedly. At length, as the train proceeded uninterruptedly on its way, she made up her mind, did get up, and presented herself before him, suitcase still in hand.

"When do we get to Forty-second Street?" she said. She had to shout to make herself heard.

He had expected something not particularly brilliant, none of these requests for information were, but this was the worst he had heard in months.

"What's the matter, you asleep?" he said gruffly. "We just passed it."

"But that was Times Square," she said innocently. "I got on there."

His sense of the fitness of things rose in rebellion at this. “Are you trying to kid me?” he demanded pugnaciously. Was nothing sacred in the eyes of these people, not even the uniform of a guard? But her eyes were so startled at the tone he had used, and at the same time so limpidly ingenuous, that he decided after a moment that she was more to be pitied than censured. She was a greenhorn; and not just a pale green one, but one of the deepest dye. “Where d’ye want to go?” he said with impersonal brusqueness.

“Here,” she said. “I have it right here.” She extracted an envelope from her handbag and held it before him. On the back of it was penciled a name. Also an address. A Forty-second Street address. “This gentleman’s going to put me in a show,” she explained happily. Jerry studied her gravely, without comment. Just where, he was wondering, had he heard this story before? “When he was staying at my Uncle Ed’s hotel up at Patchouli last summer,” she informed him, “he told me any time I was in New York to look him up and he’d put me in a show. So here I am!” This last with a triumphant toss of the head.

“Well,” said Jerry, who found boredom had strangely departed from him during the last few minutes, “as long as you’re going into a show, you’d better change at Seventy-second for a downtown train.” He said it almost regretfully.

She thanked him and took back the envelope. They arrived. The doors slid open and she turned to go. Then catastrophe! A lady who would have been the pride and joy of any side-show was waiting to get on. She did, too, sweeping everything before her. She was rotund, monumental; when she died, she would have to be lowered out of the window like a piano. She filled the doorway from side to side; not a crevice remained. Not even a moth could have made its way out. The future stage performer was obliterated, satchel and all. When the living mountain had gone by, she reappeared in its wake, gasping for breath.

She had been turned completely around, so that she faced the other way, away from the door. Meanwhile the door had closed upon her once more, doubly imprisoning her. Had she stood still and simply let him reopen it for her once more, all would have been well. But involuntarily, she took a step toward him, to call his attention to the fact that she was still on the train (he was leaning far out in the space between the two cars, craning his neck and wondering where she had gone to so quickly), and as she did so, the sound of rending silk came to all ears. She paused horror-stricken, with dreadful surmise written on her face. Surmise turned to certainty as she turned to look. The rear end of her dress had been guillotined by the door. What was left now resembled an apron in reverse, revealing the seams of two silk stockings up to where the stockings ended, and after that an inch or two of unblemished skin, quickly followed, in the nick of time, by some intimate apparel trimmed with lace. She gave a bleat of inexpressible woe and shrank back, with her back to the wall of the vestibule.

The train meanwhile was under way again, and Jerry descended from his perch and stepped back inside the car. His eyes opened in astonishment as he saw her still there. Pleasant, gratified astonishment. He even went so far as to beam at her, probably the first guard to beam at a passenger in the twenty-five-odd years the line had been in operation.

“Oh, you changed your mind, did you?” he said.

She pointed despairingly to the detached fragment of dress-goods that had remained caught in the door.

Jerry whistled. “Well, you can’t go to the show that way,” he said.

“I can’t even get off the train now,” she wailed, and her eyes shone wetly under the electric lights.

His official manner had become a thing of the past. He indicated the grip.

“Haven’t you got anything in there you could put around you?”

“Only some pictures of me when I was in the school show up home. I—I came away in a hurry.”

“Can’t you even pin it until you get home?” he queried commiseratingly.

“But my home’s upstate in Patchouli,” she explained wanly. “I just got off the train a little while ago and started straight for the show.”

“Oh, devil take the show!” he exclaimed with strange irritability. “You should never have left Pa—what is it, now?”

“Patchouli,” she said helpfully, with a little sob.

“Now, don’t be crying,” he commanded, and lifted his cap to facilitate the scratching of the back of his head. At length a gem of thought seemed to result from this friction. “You could go around to the little lady,” he remarked, “and see what she can do for you. She’s a great one with the needle,” he added proudly.

“What little lady?”

“My little lady, who did you think?” He leaned toward her confidentially. “Tell her Jerry sent you and show her what’s happened to you and tell her he says will she please baste it up for you so they won’t be arresting you walking on the streets.” Then, reluctantly, he began unbuttoning the brass buttons of his jacket. “You get out at 125th,” he said. “Delaney is the name; it’s four flights up in the rear—you can’t miss it.” The coat was off now, and but for the visored cap he would have been no better than any mere passenger on the train. The heart of “the little lady” would have been wrung at the sight of him stripped of his glory and insignia. “Put this over you till you get there,” he said, and passed it to her. “And be sure you leave it behind you at the flat or I’ll be out of a job in the morning.”

She hurriedly thrust an arm into each of the ample armholes and buttoned it around her. “Oh, thanks again and again,” she said gratefully. “I don’t know what I

would've done if it hadn't been for you, Mr.—Mr. Delaney." The result was somewhat as though a blue-serge tent had suddenly deepened and enveloped her. The bottom of the coat came below her knees, hiding all traces of her own mutilated costume, and her hands were lost somewhere above the cuffs, not a fingertip visible.

Jerry himself had not been appreciably improved by the exchange either. He now consisted largely of dangling arms in shirtsleeves, girdled with crocheted blue garters. He scowled defiantly at the curious stare a newsboy passing from car to car flashed him. 125th Street bore down upon them. He turned to the muffled figure beside him.

"This is yours," he said, and carefully gave her the house-number, then with most un-Walter-Raleigh-like pessimism added: "I'm taking a chance on you. But I guess the coat's safe enough with anyone who would believe the first traveling salesman who told her he could get her in a show."

"I'll take good care of the coat, Mr. Delaney," she promised. She thrust forth one enveloping cuff and pumped his hand grotesquely. "I—I'll see you later," she said, picked up her grip, and scurried off the train. At the turnstile, oblivious of the attention her outfit was attracting, she turned and waved her appreciation to him.

"Don't forget the number, four flights up. Go straight there!" he bawled after her as he manipulated the doors shut. The rest of his ride was spent in a rosy haze. Little unseen cupids rode with him perched on the roofs of the subway cars.

It was not without misgivings that, several round-trips later, he presented himself before the agent at 242nd Street, passbook in hand. That individual, fortunately a personal acquaintance of his and one who had more than once in the past partaken of Mrs. Delaney's corned beef and cabbage, took in the shirtsleeves and crocheted armbands with wholehearted and not unfriendly curiosity.

“Warm, Delaney?” he was moved to ask. “Where’s your coat?”

Jerry smiled inscrutably. “I’ve hung it up on the top of the car to dry.”

His overlord nudged him in the ribs. “So at last ye’ll own up to being all wet, will ye?”

Young Lochinvar returning home from the wars, or wherever it was he returned from, had nothing on the youthful Mr. Delaney as he stalked up 125th Street a short while later, whistling ebulliently. If it occurred to people that it was still rather early in the year to be without a coat, they wisely kept their thoughts to themselves. “He’s lost his job,” commented a lady on a fire-escape to a lady shelling peas at the window below. “It don’t seem to bother him none,” replied the latter.

His ascent of the four murky flights of stairs completed, he stopped abruptly at the rather intimate sight that presented itself when he had flung open the door unannounced. Mrs. Delaney, ensconced in her favorite rocker, was busily rocking and stitching at a garment lying across her lap. Opposite, legs tucked up under her, sat the late wearer of his uniform jacket, wearing it no longer. She now boasted his Rosemary’s bathrobe instead, which fitted her rather better.

“Go in and watch the sausages, Jerry,” Rosemary commanded, “until I get through with Peggy’s dress. Peggy’s staying to supper.”

He whistled with the ardor of a whole cageful of birds as he turned the sausages over and over with a fork—So her name was Peggy and she was staying to supper, was she?

She helped Rosemary with the dishes afterward, as any well-bred guest should, and then the three of them sat talking in the homey little living-room. Or rather she did most of the talking; Jerry and Rosemary just sat and listened. All her dreams, all her plans.

“I want to get somewhere, be somebody. I want to be a big star and have my name up in lights. Peggy Parker, for all the world to see. Oh, I know it won’t be easy. I know there are disappointments and heartaches ahead, but I’ll buck them all and I’ll get there, you’ll see. I was born unknown but I’m not going to die that way, and that’s about all anyone can do for themselves in this life.”

It was like a breath from another world; what did they know about those things, the two of them? The little blue-eyed, red-haired Irish housewife whose interests were the price of string beans and the blue uniform jacket; the handsome dark-haired boy she’d married, whose half-articulate grumblings at his lot would soon be beaten down by habit? Yet it was thrilling to listen to, like something said on a movie-screen. Although the words might be strange, the language of youth needed no translation. The animation, the gestures, the bright determination in her eyes, the confidence that had not yet met its first setback.

Then finally she said, “My goodness! It’s after ten already, and I’m sitting here jabbering away. I’ll have to get out and find myself a room—”

Rosemary said quite firmly: “See if ye can rig up that old cot in here, Jerry, so it won’t fold up under her. I’m keeping her here this night. ’Tis no town for a girl to be walking around looking for lodgings by herself.”

While she was inside hunting up sheets and a pillowcase, Peggy confided above the noise of the hammer-blows with which he was whacking the cot into shape: “I think your wife’s the sweetest thing I ever knew. And up home they always said New Yorkers were inhospitable!”

“And is she the only one in the family you’ve a word of thanks for?” he probed, with typical Celtic humor.

She smiled shyly without answering, but an unseen warning spark seemed to crackle in the air between them.

The last thing Rosemary did, after she and Jerry had gone to their room, was tiptoe out again with one of her own

nightdresses folded over her arm for the use of her guest. The poor always make the most generous hosts.

In the morning, before he left for work, Jerry drew Rosemary out of earshot into the hall. “She’s going to come back here this afternoon and cry her eyes out when she goes down to that place and finds it was all a lot of blarney. Do what ye can for her. Tell her—tell her it don’t amount to so much; she can be happy without being in a show.”

Rosemary Delaney gave a keen searching look at the wall before her as though she had just seen something there. As a matter of fact, it was perfectly blank. But maybe she had seen handwriting on it. She didn’t answer him.

Peggy wasn’t there when he got back that evening.

“Maybe she isn’t coming,” said the preoccupied Rosemary presently. “Should we go ahead and eat?”

“She left her bag,” he pointed out. “Maybe she’s ashamed to come and tell us. Maybe she’s walking the streets this very minute, not knowing which way to turn. It hits them hard when they’ve got the acting-bug that bad.”

“Acting—or love—they do hit hard, now,” said Rosemary, addressing the platter of steaming cabbage she was carrying in. A rattle of light, hurried footsteps echoed on the stairs outside. There was the briefest tap on the door, then it pushed inward. Jerry stood up hastily. Rosemary braced one slim shoulder for possible weeping upon. In came Peggy. She was breathless with something she had to tell and had been saving all the way uptown with no one to tell it to.

“I went there—” she gasped, and could go no further. She opened her small mouth to inhale all the air possible, seated herself on the edge of a chair and leaned magnetically toward them. “I went there where the envelope said and—oh, Mrs. Delaney, how could he lie to me like that?—it was nothing but an old park in back of the library.” Young Delaney’s demeanor had become noticeably commiserating; willingness to console shone in his eyes. “So then,” the

object of his sympathy went on, “I asked a policeman where the show was rehearsing, and he was very nice and considerate to me. He told me that the only reason they don’t have them out in Bryant Park is because traffic would probably be all tied up and a lot of people trampled to death. And he told me that nowadays they were having them in a theater further up, on Forty-fifth Street, so that the lives and limbs of passersby wouldn’t be in any danger, and so that the old ladies that sell tangerines wouldn’t have to go out of business. Then I threw away the envelope that man had given me and I went to the place where it really was,” she concluded simply. She stood up and removed her hat as though there were nothing further to talk about. “I’ll help you set the table, Mrs. Delaney,” she said. “I’m sorry I was so late.”

The look on Jerry’s face was now a definitely grim one. And how bravely, he marveled to himself, she was taking the dis-appointment. Not a tear, not a whimper. She certainly had—er—stamina.

“But why don’t ye go on?” persisted Rosemary, dealing out plates with mathematical precision. “What happened after that?”

Peggy opened her eyes as though surprised at such a question. What else was there to tell, her attitude seemed to imply. “Nothing,” she said. “They told me to come tomorrow for rehearsal and then I came straight up here.”

There was a squeak from Jerry’s chair as though he had risen above it involuntarily and then come down again.

“Oh, they took you, did they?” Rosemary said.

Peggy looked slightly amazed, as though it had never entered her mind that anyone could doubt this for a moment.

“But I told you they would,” she remonstrated. “He fooled me; I had the wrong address at first, that was all. I’m only in the chorus but by next season maybe—That corned beef smells good,” she added wistfully.

Midway through the meal there was a stentorian bellow from somewhere below-stairs that easily penetrated the thin flat-door. “Mrs. De-laay-ney! Oh, Mrs. De-laaay-ney! Sure your sister from Flatbush is on the phaon!”

“Janitor’s wife,” explained Rosemary, jumping up hastily. “I’ll have to run down a minute.” Her hurried tread descended the four flights to where the only phone in the house was located, the janitor’s apartment, over which all the tenants in the building received their calls. The janitor and his wife didn’t resent this; they even encouraged it; it gave them a very swell opportunity to know everyone else’s business—and then some.

They went ahead eating. “Fifty a week,” she said. “Of course we don’t get paid till after we’ve been rehearsing three weeks, but I’d go into it for nothing if they only knew. It’s the beginning, the start, the springboard.” Her eyes were shining at him like two stars across that tenement meal-table. “Oh, and I looked at all the others; I’ve got something that none of them have! I can’t miss, can’t go wrong! I knew it, felt it in my bones, as I stood there on that stage-apron, holding my skirts up over my knees for the stage-manager to see how I’d look in costume. He was going to turn me down, I could tell that; I’m so green yet, it’s written all over me, I guess. And I’d admitted I had no previous experience of course. He was already starting to motion me over to the left where the unacceptables were grouped and then he looked into my eyes. He seemed to see something there. He just kept looking into my eyes. Then he motioned me over to the right instead, and before I left he came up to me and said such a funny thing. He said: ‘I have a hunch this show we’re doing will be only remembered for one thing, some day. Because a kid like you, half-hidden in the back row of the chorus, was in it, got her professional start in it.’ Wasn’t that a strange thing to say?”

Rosemary came back, breathing from the climb. “It’s Tom again. Oh, the good-for-nothing that he is! Sure he got

drunk again, she says, and fell in the gutter! Oh, the shame of it! That me sister should be married to anything like that!”

Jerry didn’t look unduly alarmed. Tom was an old story in the Delaney family circle. “So he’s in jail again?”

“No, this time he’s in the hospital. A milk-wagon went over him lying there and it’s a broken arm he’s got.” She was putting on her hat. “I’ve got to go over there and be with her a while; she’s taking on that bad!”

“We’ll do the dishes for you,” Peggy offered.

Then later on, passing them to him, one by one, to be wiped, in the stuffy little cupboard of a kitchenette, she said: “You know, Jerry, I think you brought me luck. I’m superstitious that way. Ever since I tore my dress yesterday afternoon in your car, everything’s gone right for me. Whatever happens, whatever comes later, I’ll never forget you. After all, you were the first person I met when I got to New York. I may forget your name and I may even forget your face—but I’ll never forget you.”

The dish he was holding shattered on the floor like a firecracker.

“You’ve got that devilish way about you; you’ll go far,” he said huskily. “But oh, before you go too far, out of my reach, here are my arms around you now!”

It happened as suddenly as that. Without either of them meaning, intending it to happen. One minute he was holding the dishcloth, standing beside her, the next they were locked in one another’s arms. For that moment they forgot everything except the amazing fact that they were in love and that love was sweet. There was no Rosemary, no time, no honor, only young love and passion. It passed like a breath.

Then they separated again. She didn’t thrust him from her; they released one another automatically. They weren’t confused, embarrassed. They both seemed to realize it was an impossibility. Two paths had crossed for a moment, the

paths of two who could have loved one another, not for long maybe but for a while. But they were two divergent paths, two utterly divergent paths, on different planes, pointing straight away from one another. Polar antitheses.

Somehow, to him, this didn't seem to have anything to do with Rosemary. Neither sneakiness nor treachery nor disloyalty. It was such a different thing. If it had been some girl of their own kind, living their kind of life, some girl who lived above them or below them or next door—but this was like a man falling in love with a star over his head in the night sky.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, but without really meaning it.

She put it into words for him. "No, don't say that! Don't spoil it. I'm glad you did it. It's like a seal upon the whole thing." She touched him friendlily on the arm as she went by. She said: "I'm going now—out to my future. One of the girls in the line-up offered to let me share her room with her until I start getting paid."

"I've driven you out," he said remorsefully.

"Driven?" she contradicted gently. "Why, what's pulling me is a magnet stronger than any love that ever flamed!" She picked up the little bag she'd been carrying in the subway when he first saw her. "Thank Rosemary for me," she said. He went out to the landing after her and saw her start down those grimy stairs. A golden glow, a radiance, almost seemed to come from her, lighting her way. As she turned the corner of the staircase, their eyes met for the last time. But she didn't see him any longer; the dazzle of what lay ahead was too bright.

He was sitting there alone by the window when Rosemary came in. She looked and saw the broken dish lying on the floor where it had fallen. She seemed to understand. They said the little things that they would say all their lives. After a while she came over and stood behind his chair and her hand strayed fondly in his hair. He reached up and pressed

his own upon it with clumsy fondness. They both stared down into the street.

Someone has to buy the string beans. Someone has to open the doors of subway-cars.

That was all long years ago. There's a theater marquee on Forty-eighth Street now that has in big bright lights PEGGY PARKER, and underneath in smaller letters the name of some play. The play doesn't matter; the PEGGY PARKER does. It does!

Each season it gets bigger, brighter. Underground the trains still run. And all those funny little hats the wedged-in figures wear are copied from the one Peggy Parker wears.

"What kinnova time d'ja have last night with Eddie?"

"Swell time. He took me to see Peggy Parker, second row inna balcony."

"Gee, I'm crazy about her, aren't you?"

And 01629, squeezed between them, just smiles a little and seems to hear a voice in his ear again: "I may forget your name and I may even forget your face, but I'll never forget you."

He says to himself: "They can't take that away from me. Who else in all these seven millions can say as much?"

WALTZ

She was sitting there in white, cool and crisp and purelooking, with ten young men around her, waiting for the next number to begin. She knew what it was going to be because only a short while ago she had requested the orchestra leader to play it. The Blue Danube. She knew whom it was going to be with too.

As the opening bars were struck, a preamble started all around her. She laughed and kept shaking her head and saying, “Reserved, reserved. The next one, maybe.” But the joke was, there wasn’t going to be any next one. She knew that and they didn’t.

When she saw him coming for her all the way across the enormous room, she stood up expectantly. There seemed to be a star twinkling behind both of her eyes. The strains of Strauss’ lovely lilting music found an echo in her heart. The disappointed men put on long faces and drifted back to the stag line that stretched unbroken across one entire side of the ballroom, ruler-straight, like a regiment on dress parade: black shoulders, white shirtfronts, pink faces. Under the sparkling crystal chandeliers, figures in blue and yellow and pink were slowly beginning to turn all over the room, like tops, each with its black-garbed complement.

The girl in white and the man she’d been waiting for met, stood poised for a moment, started off with a slow spin, their forms reflected upside down on the glass floor. Her voice was eager, confidential:

“This is the first chance I’ve had to say a word to you alone all evening, they’ve been watching me so. Especially mother . . . You’ve got your car outside, of course? . . . Right after this dance? Yes, that’s as good a time as any. They’ll be going upstairs then. They’ll let the party go ahead under its own momentum. She’s starting to yawn already.

“Yes, I’m all set. I sneaked up and finished my packing while the last dance was going on. Imagine me doing my own packing! I wasn’t taking any chances on the maid giving me away to the family. I even carried my bags down the back stairs myself. They’re hidden in a little closet off the servants’ entrance. Just as soon as this piece is over, you slip out the front way, bring your car around to the back, and I’ll meet you there. We’ll be miles away before we’re even missed . . .”

“I still can’t believe it, it’s all been so sudden The family’ll probably throw fits, when they find out I’ve only known you ten days. . . They think you have to know a person years before you can trust them. And even then, you’re supposed to play safe and not trust them anyway, half the time. Anyone you know less than six months, to them, is an utter stranger. I guess it’s our money that made them that way . . .”

“Well, suppose they do think it’s that? Let them. We know better, don’t we, Wes? . . . Oh, shall I? I never thought of that. I never stop to think of money. Well, about how much shall I bring along? There’s a lot of it lying scattered around in my bureau drawer upstairs. I just throw it in and then forget about it ye never bothered counting. Maybe a thousand or two. Will that be enough? I mean, I haven’t the faintest idea what things cost, gasoline and hotels and things like that. I’ve never had to pay for anything myself . . . Oh, don’t apologize, Wes—I understand perfectly. Of course, just until you can cash a check tomorrow or the next day. What difference does money make anyway when two people are as much in love as we are? If you don’t think

two thousand will be enough, I could go to Father maybe and ask him . . . No, I guess you're right, I'd better not. He might think it was a strange time, right in the middle of the party like this, and start asking all kinds of questions . . ."

"My jewels? Why, of course, I'm bringing them. They're in one of the valises right now . . . Yes, I suppose they are worth a lot . . . No, I haven't the faintest idea; seventy-five, a hundred thousand, somewhere around there, don't you think? . . . A lot? Why, I thought every girl had about that amount of jewelry. I mean, except servant girls and people like that. Don't they? Everyone I know has at least that much . . .

"Oh, here we're wasting this whole lovely music talking about money and jewels and uninteresting things like that! It's the last time I'll ever dance in my own home, with people around me that I've known all my life, who have sheltered and protected me. By morning we'll be hundreds of miles away, without leaving a trace. No one'll know where I am, what's become of me. They'll never see me again. Isn't that romantic, dropping from sight in the middle of a big party right under your own roof?

"Regret it? Feel sorry? No, how can I, when I think what I do of you? No, these other men don't mean a thing to me. I grew up with most of them. I know every one of those twenty-five men on that stag line, and there's not one of them I—. . . Well, yes, there are twenty-six, but that third one from the end doesn't count. He's only a detective. .

"Oops, you went out of step there. My fault I guess, I'm so excited tonight . . ."

"No, I don't mean that kind of a hired detective, that you just have around to see that no valuables are stolen during a big party like this. This one's some special kind of a

detective, who's hunting somebody. Imagine looking for somebody here! Isn't that rich?

"There we go again; it must be these high heels of mine . . . I didn't really bother listening. I just happened to overhear Father bawling him out as I was passing the door; that was all . . . Father nearly had a fit. He wanted to have him thrown out bodily, from what I could gather. But you know how nervous Mother is. As soon as she heard about it, she insisted that Father let him stay—just in case . . ."

"No, not a thief. He gave it a funny word. Wait'lI I see if I can remember. Oh yes—con-congenital murderer! That was it. What's a congenital murderer anyway, Wes? . . . Darling, have we been dancing too hard? Your forehead's all wet . . . Now isn't that preposterous? I don't believe a word of it. I think he's just trying to sound important and frighten us. Well anyway, Mother talked Father into letting him hang around, as long as he minded his business and didn't spoil the looks of the party. She made him give his word that he wouldn't start any rough stuff inside the house here—that he'd wait until the person—if there is such a person—left, and he'd get him outside . . .

"Oh no, he's not alone. I think he's brought a whole battery of others with him. They're probably spread out lurking outside around the house somewhere. Something asinine like that. Father put his foot down. He said one inside the house was all he'd stand for—the rest would have to stay out. I guess they're all out there right now, thick as bees . . ."

"There we go again. My, but I'm clumsy tonight!

"No, of course not, Wes; why should they interfere with us? They wouldn't dare! They'll just stop this man, when and if they see him coming out . . . He might be here at that. When you throw a large party like this and invite dozens and dozens of people, almost anyone can slip in unannounced. Like you did yourself, that night I first met you at Sylvia's party, ten nights ago. Only of course you did

it just for the fun of it. I asked her who you were afterwards, and she said she didn't know herself . . . You know, if I weren't so excited about what we're going to do, I'd have myself a perfectly swell time trying to figure out just who it could be . . . Isn't it thrilling? Somebody here at this party is a congenital murderer! Somebody right out on this floor dancing like we are this very minute! I wouldn't want to be in his partner's shoes . . . Let's see now, Tommy Turner, over there with that girl in yellow, has always had a perfectly vile temper. Why he half killed a man once just for —but Tommy and I have been playmates since we were seven. He wouldn't have the time to go around murdering people. He's always too busy playing polo . . . Or maybe it's that Argentine sheik that's been rushing Kay Landon so all season. I always did think he had kind of a murderous face . . .

"Don't stare at him like that, Wes—the detective, I mean. He'll know I told you something, and he asked us not to. I know you're highly interested, but you haven't taken your eyes off him once the past five minutes. No, he's not looking at us. Why should he be? . . . Well, if he is, it's because you've been looking at him so hard. You're like all the men. You seem to think a detective is wonderful. Personally I find them very stupid and uninteresting. This one talks out of the side of his mouth. I wish you could hear—

"Wes, you're breathing so hard. I must be difficult to lead . . .

"So they know what he looks like? I'm not sure. They do and they don't. I mean, what they're counting on is a certain scar across the back of his hand. That seems to be one of the few definite facts they know about him. They're positive he has it. I suppose they'll make every man that leaves here tonight hold up his hand before his face or something

before they let him through. Which just goes to show you how very stupid they are. As though there couldn't be two people with a scar—. . . What am I laughing at? Why, there are! I just remembered you yourself have one. You know, that scald you got trying to unscrew the overheated cap of your radiator. Don't you remember my asking you about it at Sylvia's that night, when you still had tape around it? Incidentally, how is it getting—. . . Wes, don't pull your hand away like that! You nearly tore my arm out of my socket! . . . Silly, are you afraid they'll mistake you for this murderer? As though you could be a congenital murderer! Why, I'd know one in a minute. At least I think I would. Of course I never saw one, but they're sort of pale and hollow-eyed and suspicious looking, aren't they? . . . Wes, what a peculiar smile you just gave me! . . . Darling, is it too warm for you in here? You've gotten so white . . .

"Oh, let's forget this stupid detective and his murderer! How'd we ever start talking about him anyway? . . . There, Father and Mother are saying good night. They'll be starting upstairs in a minute. Now just as soon as this waltz is over, I'll make a beeline out of here before that bunch of stags jumps on my neck again. I'll get the money I told you about, throw something over this dress, and meet you by the rear entrance . . . Father's private library? Why the library? Well all right, anything you say. You wait for me in there then. Keep the door closed so no one'll see you . . . What? Why yes, I think Father does keep some kind of a gun in the table drawer in there. I remember seeing it once or twice, but how on earth did you know about it? . . . I still can't understand why you want me to follow you in there. The library is in the exact center of the whole house. There's only one door to it and no windows. And we'll be cut off, walled up, in there; it'll be terribly hard for us to get out again without being seen . . . Well, you know best, Wes. It'd be terribly unlucky for me to start arguing with my future husband the very first night . . .

“The waltz is ending. Lead me over toward the stairs, so I can make a quick getaway . . . That stupid detective keeps watching so; he must have intended asking me for the next dance. Well, he’ll have another guess! I bet he dances like a Mack truck . . . One minute more . . .

“There, it’s over! Wasn’t that a lovely waltz? I’ll never forget it as long as I live. Maybe that won’t be as long as I think it will—I’ll leave you for just this minute, and then I’ll never leave you again. Till death do us part.”

The two shots came so close together they sounded like one; they shattered the after-the-waltz stillness. A girl or two blea ted fearfully. Then with a patter like rain on the polished dancing floor the crowd began herding toward a single point, converging on the partly open library door, where a man was standing. There was a wisp of smoke just over his head. Then it blew away.

Beyond him a man’s face was visible, chin on the long, narrow table. Then that too disappeared, like the smoke, and a dull sound came from the carpeted floor.

The detective was saying, to those behind him in the doorway: “Search me, I headed over for this private liberry to bum another of the old man’s cigars—they’re the finest I ever smoked. I open the door and he’s standing there perfectly still on the other side on that table, with the drawer open and his hand in it. He don’t say anything, just looks at me like I’m a ghost. So I reach out my paw to help myself from the big humidor standing there between us. With that, he jerks up this gun, misses my ear by an eighth of an inch, turns it to his own dome, and gives it the works!”

Voices cried excitedly, “He must be that murderer you wanted!” The story had evidently already gotten around in some way.

“How could he be?” the detective shrugged. “We got him over an hour ago—nabbed him outside the house as he was on his way in with some swell-looking dame that was next on his list. He’s been safely in custody ever since ten o’clock, and the guys I had watching the place all went with him. Why did I come back and hang around like that afterwards? Well I’ll tell you frankly, the punch and the sanwidges and the cigars were the best I ever tried, and does anybody feel like complaining?”

I’M DANGEROUS TONIGHT

This is the story of a dress that was haunted by the Devil himself. It bore the label of Paris’ smartest modiste but its fabric was woven in Satan's own workshop—where the furies spin and spin. . . .

Prelude

THE thing, whatever it was—and no one was ever sure afterwards whether it was a dream or a fit or what—happened at that peculiar hour before dawn when human vitality is at its lowest ebb. The Blue Hour they sometimes call it, *l’heure bleue*—the ribbon of darkness between the false dawn and the true, always blacker than all the rest of the night has been before it. Criminals break down and confess at that hour; suicides nerve themselves for their attempts; mists swirl in the sky; and—according to the old books of the monks and the hermits—strange, unholy shapes brood over the sleeping rooftops.

At any rate, it was at this hour that her screams shattered the stillness of that top-floor apartment overlooking the Parc Monceau. Curdling, razor-edged screams that slashed through the thick bedroom door. The three others who shared the apartment with Maldonado—her maid, her

secretary, her cook—sat bolt upright in their beds. They came out into the hall one by one. The peasant cook crossed herself again and again. The maid whimpered and seemed ready to add her own screams to those that were sounding in that bedroom at the end of the hall. The secretary, brisk, business-like, modern, and just a little metallic, wasted no time; she cried out, “Somebody’s murdering *madame!*” and rushed for the bedroom door.

She pounded, pushed at it; it wouldn’t open. But then they all knew that Maldonado habitually slept with her door locked. Still, the only way to reach her was through this door. The screams continued, a little less violently now than at first.

“Madame Maldonado!” the secretary cried frantically. “Open! Let us in! What is the matter?”

The only answer was a continuation of those long, shuddering moans of terror. “Come here and help me!” the secretary ordered the cringing cook. “You’re strong. Throw your weight against the door. See if you can break it down!”

The husky Breton woman, strong as an ox, threw her shoulder against it again and again. The perpendicular bolt that held it was forced out of its groove in the sill, the two halves shot apart. Something streaked by between the legs of the three frightened women—Maldonado’s Persian cat, a projectile of psychic terror, its fur standing like a porcupine’s quills; its green eyes lambent, its ears flat—hissing, spitting.

The secretary was the first to enter. She was an intelligent young woman of the modern breed, remember. She believed only what her eyes saw, what her ears heard, what her nostrils smelled. She reached out quickly, snapped the light switch. The screams died with the darkness, and became instead a hoarse panting for breath. Eve Maldonado, greatest of all Paris designers, lay crouched across the bed like a terrified animal. There was no sign of a struggle anywhere in the big room. It held no intruder in

it, no weapon, no trace of blood or violence. Maldonado was very much alive, un-bruised and unhurt, but her face was the color of clay, and her whole body trembled uncontrollably. She couldn't speak for a long time.

Her overtaxed vocal cords refused to respond.

But there were things in the room that should not have been there—a thin diaphanous haze of smoke, as from a cigarette, suspended motionless halfway between floor and ceiling. The bowl beside the bed was crammed with cigarette-ends, but none of those butts in it were smoldering any longer, and both windows overlooking the Parc were wide open. The fresh before-dawn breeze blowing through them should have dissipated that haze long ago. Yet it was plainly visible in the electric light, as though it had been caused by something heavier than burnt paper and tobacco. There was a faintly noticeable odor also, an unpleasant one. A little like burnt feathers, a little like chemicals, a little like—sulphur or coal gas. Hard to identify, vague, distinctly out of place there in that dainty bedroom.

"*Madame!* What was it? What has happened?" the secretary asked anxiously. The other two were peering in from the doorway.

A steel gleam on the night-stand beside the bed caught her eye. She put out her hand and quickly hid the needle before the other two had seen it. "Madame," she whispered reproachfully, "you promised me—!" Maldonado had been in a severe automobile accident a year before. To relieve the pain she had suffered as an after-effect it had been necessary for awhile to—

THE young woman went over and hid the needle swiftly in a drawer. Coming back, something on the floor touched her foot. She stooped to pick up some kind of triangular cape or cloak. It was black on one side, a bright flame-red on the other. At first glance it seemed to be brocaded satin, but it

wasn’t. It glistened. It was almost like the skin of a snake. An odor of musk arose from it.

Maldonado affected exotic negligeés like this one; she must have dropped it in the throes of her nightmare just now. But then as the secretary prepared to fling it back across the foot of the bed, she saw that there was already one there, an embroidered Chinese thing. At the same instant the designer caught sight of what she was holding; it seemed to renew all her terror. She screamed once more, shrank away from it. Her voice returned for the first time.

“That’s it! That’s *it!*” She shuddered, pointing. “Don’t bring it near me! Take it away. Take it away, I’m afraid of it.”

“But it’s yours, *madame,* isn’t it?”

“No!” the woman groaned, warding it off with both hands and averting her head. “Oh, don’t—*please* take it away.”

“But it must be yours. How else did it get here? You must have brought it home with you from the atelier. You’ve forgotten, that’s all.”

Maldonado, beside herself, was holding her head between her two hands. “We have nothing like that at the shop,” she panted. “I *saw* how it got in here! I *saw* how it came into this room!”

The secretary, holding the thing up by one hand, felt a sudden inexplicable surge of hatred well up in her. A hatred that was almost murderous. She thought, “I’d like to kill her!” And the craving was literal, not just a momentary resentment expressed by a commonplace catch-phrase. She could feel herself being *drawn* to commit some overt act against the whimpering woman on the bed. Crushing her skull with something, grasping her throat between her hands and throttling her . . .

It must have shown in her face. Maldonado, staring at her, suddenly showed a new kind of fear, a lesser fear than before—the fear of one human for another. She drew back beyond the secretary’s reach.

The secretary let the thing she was holding fall to the floor. The impulse died with it. She passed the back of her hand dazedly before her eyes. What had made her feel that way just now? Was Maldonado's hysteria catching—one of those mass-psychoses to which women, in particular, are sometimes susceptible? This woman before her was her employer, her benefactress, had always treated her well. She admired her, respected her—and yet suddenly she had found herself contemplating killing her. Not only contemplating it, but contemplating it with delight, almost with an insatiable longing. Perhaps, she thought, it was the reaction from the severe nervous shock Maldonado's screams had caused them all just now. But even so, to take so horrible a form—

Something was affecting the other two, too; she could see that. Some sort of tension. The maid, who was a frivolous little soul, kept edging toward the door, as if she didn't like it in here, without knowing why. The Breton cook had her underlip thrust out belligerently and the flesh around her eyes had hardened in hostility, but against whom, or what was causing it, there was no way of telling.

Maldonado said, "Get them out of here. I've got to talk to you." The secretary motioned and they went.

The maid returned for a moment, dropped the fugitive cat just over the threshold, then closed the door on it. The animal, perfectly docile in her arms until then, instantly began to act strangely. Its fur went up and its ears back, it crouched in wary retreat from the inanimate piece of goods on the floor, then finding that its escape was cut off, sidled around it in a wide circle and slunk under the bed. No amount of coaxing could get it out again. Two frightened green eyes in the shadows and a recurrent hissing were all that marked its presence.

MALDONADO'S face was ghastly. "That," she said, pointing below the bed where the cat lurked, "and that"—pointing to what lay on the floor—"prove it was no dream. Do dreams leave marks behind them?"

"What was no dream?" The secretary was cool, patient. She had humored Maldonado before.

"What I saw—in here." She caught at her throat, as though still unable to breathe properly. "Get me some cognac. I can speak to *you* about it. I couldn't in front of them. They'd only say I was crazy—" She drank, put the thimble-glass down. A trace of color returned to her face. "There was someone in this room with me!" she said. "I was lying here wide awake. I distinctly remember looking at my watch, on the stand here next to me, just before it happened. I can even recall the time. It was 4:35. Does one look at the time in one's sleep?"

"One could dream one had," the secretary suggested.

"That was no dream! A second later, as I put the watch down, there was a soft step on the balcony there outside my window, and someone came through it into the room—"

"But it's seven floors above the street, there's no possible way for anyone to get on it! It's completely cut off!" The secretary moved her hands. "It didn't occur to me to scream at first, for that very reason. It seemed impossible that anyone *could* come in from there—"

"It is," said the secretary levelly. "You've been working too hard."

"It was no burglar. It seemed to be someone in an opera-cloak. It made no hostile move toward me, kept its back toward me until it had gone all the way around here, to the foot of the bed, where you found that—thing. Then it turned to look at me—" She shuddered spasmodically again, and quickly poured out a few more drops of cognac.

"And?" the secretary prompted.

Maldonado shaded her eyes with her hand, as though unable to bear the thought even now. “I saw its face—the conventional face that we all have seen in pictures and at plays. Illuminated from below with the most awful red light. Unspeakably evil. Little goat-horns coming out of here, at the side of the skull—”

The secretary flicked her thumb toward the bureau drawer where she’d hidden the needle. “You’d used—that, just before this?”

The secretary’s glance was piercing.

“Well, yes. But the cat didn’t. And how do you explain what—you picked up from the floor? Whatever it was, it was all wrapped in that thing. It took it off, kept swirling it around there in the middle of the room—a little bit like matadors do in a bullfight. I distinctly felt the *breeze* from it in my face, coming from that way, toward the windows, not away from them! And then he, it—whatever the thing was—spoke. I heard it very clearly. There were no sounds from the street at all. He said, ‘Why don’t you create a dress like this, Maldonado, and dedicate it to me? Something that will turn whoever wears it into my servant. Here, I’ll leave it with you.’ That was when I at last found my voice and began to scream. I thought I’d go insane. And even through all my screaming I could hear Rajah over there in the corner with his back up, spitting madly—”

The secretary was getting a little impatient with this preposterous rigamarole. Maldonado was supposed to be one of the brainiest women in Paris, and here she was driveling the most appalling nonsense about seeing a demon in her room. Either the sedatives she was using were breaking down her mind, or she was overworked, subject to hallucinations. “And did this visitor leave the same way, through the window?” the secretary asked ironically.

“I don’t know. I was too frightened to look.”

The secretary tapped her teeth with her thumbnail. “I think we’d better tell Dr. Renard that that”—she indicated the drawer—“is beginning to get a hold on you. He’d better discontinue it. Suppose you take another swallow of cognac and try to get some sleep—”

She brushed the fallen cloak aside with the point of her toe, then stopped, holding it that way. Again that sudden urge, that blind hatred, swept her. She wanted to swing the cognac-decanter high over her head, to brain Maldonado with it, to watch the blood pour out of her shattered head.

She withdrew her foot, staggered a little. Her mind cleared.

Maldonado said: “Take that thing out of here! Don’t leave it in here with me! How do we know what it is?”

“No,” the secretary said weakly, “Don’t ask me to touch it any more. I’m almost frightened myself now. I’m going back to my room, I feel—strange.” She pulled the door open, went out without looking back.

The cat, seeing an avenue of escape, made a belated dash from under the bed, but the door was already closed when the animal reached it again. The cat stood up on its hind paws, scratching and mewing pathetically. Maldonado slipped off the bed and went to get it. “Come here, come here,” she coaxed. “You seem very anxious to leave me—” She picked it up and started back with it in her arms, stroking it. As she did so she trod unwittingly on the cloak, lying there coiled on the floor like a snake waiting to strike.

HER face altered; her eyebrows went up saturninely, the edges of her fine white teeth showed through her parted lips; in an instant all tenderness was gone, she was like a different person altogether.

“Well, leave me then, if you want to so badly!” she said, as the cat began to struggle in her arms. Her eyes dilated, gazing down at it. “Leave me for good!” She threw the animal brutally on the bed, then with a feline swiftness that more than matched its own, she thrust one of the heavy pillows over it, bore down with her whole weight, bands turned inward so that the fingers pointed toward one another. Her elbows slowly flexed, stiffened, flexed, stiffened, transmitting the weight of her suspended body to the pillow—and to what lay trapped below it.

The little plumed tail that was all that protruded, spiraled madly, almost like the spoke of a wheel, then abruptly stopped. Maldonado’s foot, unnoticed, was still caught in a fold of the cloak, had dragged it across the floor after her.

Hours later, the secretary returned to tell her she was giving up her job. She was putting on her gloves and her packed valise stood outside in the hall. The little maid had fled already, without the formality of giving notice. The pious cook was at Mass, trying to find an answer to her problem: whether to turn her back on the perfectly good wages she was earning, or to risk remaining in a place where inexplicable things took place in the dead of the night. As for the secretary herself, all she knew was that twice she had been tempted to murder within the space of moments. There was some unclean mystery here that she could not fathom. She was modern and sensible enough to realize that the only thing to do, for her own sake, was remove herself beyond its reach. Before temptation became commission.

What had precipitated her decision was a phone call she had made to the workshop in an effort to trace the cape that was the only tangible evidence of the mystery. Their answer, after an exhaustive check-up had been made, only bore out Maldonado’s words: there had never been

anything answering its description in the stockroom, not even a two-by-four sample. An account was kept of every button, every ribbon. So whatever it was, how it had got into Maldonado's room, it hadn't come from the shop.

The secretary saw at a glance that a change had come over Maldonado, since she had left her several hours before. A shrewd, exultant look had replaced the abysmal terror on her face. Whatever unseen struggle had taken place in here in the interval, had been won by the forces of evil. Maldonado was sitting at her desk, busy with pencil and sketch-pad doing a rough draft. She had the cape draped around one shoulder.

"Three times I took this thing to the window, to throw it out into the street," she admitted, "and I couldn't let go of it. It seemed to cling magnetically to my hands. The idea wouldn't let me alone, it kept me hypnotized, until finally I had to get it down on paper—"

A cry of alarm broke from the secretary. "What happened to Rajah?" She had just seen the lifeless bedraggled tail hanging down below the pillow. "Take that off him, he'll suffocate!"

Maldonado paid no attention. "He has already suffocated." She held up the sketch. "Look, that's just the way—what I saw last night—carried it. Call the car. I'm going to get to work on it at once. There's money in it, it'll be worth a fortune—" But her eyes, over the top of the sketch, had come to rest on the secretary's slim young throat. There was a sharp-pointed ivory paper cutter lying on the desk. As she held the drawing up with one hand, the other started to inch uncontrollably toward it, like a crawling five-legged white beetle.

Inching, crawling—

The secretary, warned by some sixth sense, gave a muffled cry, turned and bolted down the long hallway. The street-door of the apartment slammed after her.

Maldonado smiled a little, readjusted the cape over her shoulder, went on talking to herself as though nothing had happened while she studied the finished sketch. “I’ll advertise it as—let’s see—‘*I’m Dangerous Tonight—a dress to bring out the devil in you!*’ ”

And so a deadly thing was born.

Chapter I
American in Paris

SHE was standing on a small raised turntable, about two feet off the floor, which could be revolved in either direction by means of a small lever, on the same general principle as a mobile barber's chair. She had been standing on it since early afternoon, with short rest periods every half-hour or so; it Was eleven at night now.

They were all around her, working away like ants, some on their knees, some standing up. The floor was littered with red and black scraps, like confetti. She had eyes for only one thing in the whole workroom: a pair of sharp shears lying on a table across the way from her. She kept looking at them longingly, moistening her lips from time to time. When they were closed, like they were now, they came to a sharp point, like a poniard, And when they were open, the inner edge of each blade was like a razor. She was digging her fingernails into her own sides, to keep from jumping down to the floor, picking them up, and cutting and slashing everyone within reach with them. She'd been doing that, in her brain, for hours; she was all black-and-blue from the pinch and bite of her own nails. Once, the seamstress kneeling at her feet had saved her. She'd already had one foot off the stand, on her way over to them, and the latter had stuck a pin in her to make her hold still. The pain had counteracted the desperate urge she kept feeling. It did no good to try to look at anything else; her eyes returned to the shears each time.

The funny part of it was, when she was at rest, off the stand in just her underthings, and had every opportunity of seizing them and doing what she wanted to, she didn't

seem to want to. It was only when she was up there with the dress on her that the urge swept over her. She couldn't understand why her thoughts should take this homicidal turn. She supposed it was because she was due to meet Belden at the Bal Tabarin at midnight, and just tonight they'd picked to work overtime, to finish the thing, keeping her here long after she should have been out of the place.

Meeting him wasn't like meeting anyone else; he was living on borrowed time; he couldn't stick around any one place too long waiting for anyone. He was wanted for murder in the States, and there was an American detective over here now, looking for him; he had to lie low, keep moving around fast, with this Government man always just a step behind him, creeping up slowly but surely. Twice now, in the past two weeks, he'd just missed Belden by the skin of his teeth. And Belden couldn't get out of town until the fake passports his friend Battista was making for him were ready. He'd have them by the end of this week, and then he was going to head for the Balkans—and take her with him, of course. Until then, he was caught in a squirrel cage.

He was a swell guy; suppose he did run dope from France into the States? *She* was for him. She'd rather part with her right arm than see him arrested and taken back to die.

He'd killed one of their Department of Justice agents, and they'd never rest until they'd evened things up. They sat you in a chair over there, he'd told her, and shocked you to death with electricity. It sounded awful, a million times worse than the swift and merciful guillotine.

She was crazy about him, steadfast with that utter loyalty only a woman in love can know. She'd have gone through fire and water to be with him, anytime, anywhere. She was ready to be a fugitive with him for the rest of her life —"Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people"—and when a Parisienne is ready to leave Paris behind forever, that's something. She hadn't seen him in five days now; he had to keep moving—but last night he'd

got word to her along the underworld grapevine: “The Bal an Diable, Wednesday at twelve.” And here it was after eleven, and she wasn’t even out of the shop yet! Wouldn’t that look great, to keep him waiting, endanger him like that?

SHE couldn’t hold out any longer. Pinching herself didn’t do any good, her sides were numb now. Her eyes fastened on the shears; she started to edge toward the edge of the stand, her hand slowly stroking her side. One good jump, a grab, a quick turn—and she’d have them. “I’ll take Maldonado first,” she decided, as she reached the edge of the platform. “The sewing-woman’s so fat, she can’t get out of the room as fast—” Her knees started to dip under her, bracing for the flying jump.

The designer spoke. “All right, Mimi, take it off. It’s finished.”

The sewing woman pulled; the dress fell to the floor at the mannequins feet, and she suddenly stopped eyeing the scissors, wavered there off-balance, got limply to the floor. Now she could get at them easily—and she didn’t try, seemed to have forgotten.

She staggered into the little curtained alcove to put on her street clothes.

“It’s been a hard job,” Maldonado said, “You all get a bonus.” She went downstairs to her car. They started putting the lights out. The rest of the staff, the piece workers, had gone home hours ago. The sewing woman stayed behind a moment to stitch in the little silk label: *I’m Dangerous Tonight, by Maldonado.* Without that label it was just a dress. With it, it was a dress worth twenty thousand francs (and if the buyer was an American, twenty-five thousand).

Mimi Brissard looked at the junk she wore to work. Stockings full of holes, sloppy old coat. And it was too late

now to go back to her own place and dress decently for him. She'd never make it; she lived way out at Bilancourt. She'd look fine, showing up in these rags to meet a swell guy like Belden! Even if he was a fugitive, even if the Bal au Diable was an underworld hangout, he'd be ashamed to be seen with her. He might even change his mind about taking her.

The sewing-woman had finished the label, hung the dress up. "Coming, Mimi?"

"Go ahead," the girl called through the curtain, "I'll lock up." She'd been with them for five years, they trusted her. There was no money or anything kept up here anyway, just clothes and designs.

"Don't forget the lights." The old woman trudged wearily down the curved stone staircase to the street.

The girl stuck her head out around the curtain, eyed the dress. "I bet he'd be proud of me if I dared wear that! I could bring it back before we open up tomorrow, and they'd never even know." She went over to it, took the hanger down. The dress swept against her. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Her indecision evaporated. "Let anyone try to stop me, and see what they get!" she whispered half audibly. A minute later she had slipped the red dress over her lithe young body and was strutting—there is no other word for it—before the mirror. She hadn't heard the step on the stairs, maybe because the watchman wore felt-soled shoes to make his rounds. He must have come up to see what was taking her so long.

"Eh? Wait, where do you think you're going in that? That's the firm's property." The old man was standing there in the doorway, looking in at here.

She whirled, and the tiny arrow-headed train, that was like a devil's tail, spun around after her. The shears were still lying there on the table, midway between them.

"Where do you think I'm going? I'll tell you where *you're* going—right now! To the devil, and you're not coming back!"

There was no excuse for it. The rebuke had been paternal, half humorous. He was a good-natured, inoffensive old man, half crippled with rheumatism. He was certainly no match for her young and furious strength. And the lust to kill—this dynamic murder-voltage charging her—that gave her the force and determination of two able-bodied men.

Her hand gave a catlike pounce, and the shears clashed; the blades opened, then closed spasmodically, like a hungry mouth, as her fingers gripped the handle. They came up off the table point-foremost.

He saw in her eyes what was coming. “Wait, *mademoiselle!* Don’t! Why—?”

She couldn’t have told him even if she wanted to. There was a murderous frenzy in her heart. She closed in on him as he tried to retreat, facing her because he was too horrified to turn his back. There was a spasm of motion from her hand, too quick for the eye to follow, and the point of the shears suddenly sank into his chest.

He gave a cough, found the wall with his back, leaned against it. His head went down and his old black alpaca cap fell off. He could still talk. “Have pity! I’ve never harmed you! I’m an old man! My Solange needs me—”

The shears found his throat this time. He fell down on top of them and was silent.

Something dark like mucilage glistened where he lay.

She had jumped back—not in remorse, but to keep the bottom of her skirt clear of his blood.

Tensed, curved forward from the waist up, peering narrowly at him like something out of a jungle that kills not for food but for love of killing, she executed strange gestures, as though her arms were those of a puppet worked by strings by some master-puppeteer. Stretched them full-length up over her head, palm to palm, as if in some unholy incantation. Then let them fall again and caressed her own sides, as though inordinately pleased.

At last she moved around him, retrieved the ring of keys that he carried beneath his blouse. She would need them to come back into the building later on. She found the light-switch, plunged the room—and what it contained—into darkness. She closed the door, and moved down the circular stone-stairs with a rustling sound, such as a snake might make on a bed of dry leaves.

Chapter II
First Night of a Gown

BAL *bal* was not on the list of synthetic Apache dens that guides show visitors to Paris. It was too genuine for that; sightseers would have been disappointed, as the real thing always makes a poorer show than the fake. It did not pay those who frequented it to advertise themselves or be conspicuous. Nothing ever seemed to be going on there. People would come in, slump down in a chair; no one would pay any attention to them; they would sometimes sit for hours, seemingly lost in dreams; then as suddenly be gone again, as unnoticed as they had come.

There was an accordion fastened to the wall, and a man who had lost an arm in the trenches would occasionally come in, sit down by it, and play softly sentimental ballads with his one hand only, pulling in in and out of the wall.

The *bal* consisted of simply a long, dingy, dimly lighted, smoke-filled semi-basement room; no one ever spoke above a low murmur. If the police never bothered anyone, possibly it was because that was the smartest thing to do. The *bal* often came in handy as a convenient starting-point for a search for any wanted criminal at any given time; it was a focal point for the Paris underworld.

When Mimi, in her red-and-black dress, came down the short flight of stone steps from the street-level, Belden wasn't there. At one table was a soiled glass in a china-saucer stamped: *1Fr50.* As she passed by she glanced into it; in the dregs of vermouth-and-cassis floated a cigarette end. That was Belden's unmistakable trademark; that was where he'd been sitting. He never drank anything without leaving a cigarette in the glass or cup.

She sat down one table away. She knew all the faces by sight, but she gave no sign of recognition, nor was any given to her. No . . . There *was* one face there she didn't know. Out in the middle of the room, only its lower half visible under a snapdown hat-brim. It didn't have the characteristic French pallor. The chin was squarer than Gallic chins are apt to be. There was a broadness of shoulder there, also, unknown on the Continent.

The man had a stale beer before him. But that was all right; no one came in here to eat or drink. He was staring at the red-and-white checks of the tablecloth, playing checkers on the squares with little sou-pieces. He looked at nothing, but he saw everything; it was written all over him. The atmosphere was tense, too. Without seeming to, all the others were watching him cautiously; they scented danger. His presence was a threat . . .

Petion, the proprietor, found something to do that brought him past her table. Carefully he removed the neglected glass and saucer from the one ahead.

"Where's Belden?"

Petion didn't seem to hear. The corner of his mouth moved in Apache argot. "Get out of here fast, you little fool. That bird over there is the one that's after him. The American *flic.* Luckily Belden saw him arrive. We got him out the back way. He's up at your place, waiting for you. His own room is too hot." Petion couldn't seem to get the grimy cloth at Belden's table straight enough to please him.

The man in the middle of the room jumped a five-sou piece with a ten-sou piece. You could almost *feel* the eyes peering through the felt of the shadowing brim.

"Now, watch out how you move—you may draw him after you without knowing it and put him onto Belden."

There was a fruit-knife on the table. She glanced at it, then her eyes strayed to Petion's fat neck, creased above his collar. He caught the pantomime, gave her a surprised

look, as much as to say, “What’s got into *you?* He been feeding you some of his product?”

He straightened the empty chair and said aloud: “Well, what are you hanging around for? I tell you the dog is a United States Government agent.”

“All right, clear away,” she breathed impatiently, “I can handle this.”

SHE got up and started slowly toward the stairs to the street. Death by electrocution, the thing she’d always dreaded so, ever since Belden had first told her what he had coming to him. Death by electricty—much worse than death at the point of a pair of shears or a table knife. She veered suddenly, as uncontrollably as though pulled by a magnet, turned off toward that table in the middle of the room, went directly over to it. She was smiling and her eyes were shining.

There was a small, nervous stir that rustled all over the room. One man shifted his chair. Another set his glass of *vin blanc* into a saucer, too noisily. A woman laughed, low in her throat.

He didn’t seem to see her, not even when her fingertips were resting on the edge of the table.

“*Soir, m’sieu*.”

He said in English: “Wrong table, *petite*. *Pas libre ce soir*.”

She’d learned some English from Belden. So now she pulled a second chair out, sat down, helped herself to one of his cigarettes. Her hand trembled a little, but not from nervousness. In the dim recesses of the room whispers were coursing along the walls: “She’s giving him the come-on, trying to get him somewhere where Belden can finish him. That’s the kind of girl to have!”

“She’ll trip herself up. Those fish are no fools.”

She began to speak quietly, her eyelids lowered. “I am Mimi Brissard, and I live at Bilancourt, number 5 rue Poteaux top floor front.”

The line of his mouth hardened a little. “Move on. I told you I’m not int—”

“I am Belden’s girl,” she continued as though she hadn’t heard him, “and he is up there right now, waiting for me. Now, are you interested?”

He pushed his hat back with a thumb and looked at her for the first time. There was no admiration in his eyes, not any gratitude, only the half-concealed contempt the police always have for an informer. “Why are you welshing on him?” he said warily.

She couldn’t answer, any more than she could have answered the old watchman when he had asked her why she was stabbing him to death. She fingered the dress idly, as thou she sensed something, but it eluded her.

“You better go back and tell him it won’t work,” he said drily. “He’s not getting me like he got Jimmy Fisher in New York, he’s not dealing with a green kid now. I’m getting him—and without the help of any chippy either!”

“Then I have to prove that this is no decoy? Did you see that vermouth-glass with the cigarette in it over there? That was he. This goes with it.” She palmed a scrap of paper at him: *Bal au Diable 24h*. “I was to meet him here. You spoiled it. He’s up there now. He’s armed and he’ll shoot to kill, rather than go back—”

“What did you think I expected him to do, scatter petals at my feet?”

“Without me you haven’t got one chance in ten of taking him alive. But through me, you can do it. And you want him alive, don’t you?”

“Yep,” he said curtly. “The man he killed—Jimmy Fisher—was my brother . . .”

She squirmed eagerly inside the glistening cocoon that sheathed her. But a change had come over him meanwhile.

Her nearness, her presence at the table, seemed to be affecting him on some way. He had come alive, menacingly, hostilely, and he was … dangerous, too. His jaw line set pugnaciously, a baleful light flickered in his gray eyes, his upper lip curled back from his teeth. His hand roamed down his coat toward the flap of his back-pocket. “I never wanted to kill anyone so much in my life,” he growled throatily, “as I do you right now!” He started tugging at something, at the small of his back.

She looked down, saw that a flounce of her dress was brushing against his knee. She moved her chair slightly back, and the contact broke.

His hand came up on the table again, empty. His face slowly slipped back into its mask of impassivity. He was breathing a little heavily, that was all, and there was a line of moisture along the crease in his forehead.

“So he’s at Bilancourt, 5 rue Poteaux,” he said finally. “Thanks. You’re a fine sweetheart. Some other dame, I suppose.”

“No,” she said simply. “I loved him very much only an hour ago, at eleven o’clock. I must have changed since then, that’s all. I don’t know why. Now I’d like to think of him being electrocuted and cursing my name as he dies . . . Follow me there and watch which window lights up. Keep watching. My window-shade’s out of order. Tonight it will be especially so. I’ll have trouble with it. When you see it go up, then come down again, you’ll know he’s ready for the taking.”

“Okay, Delilah,” he murmured. “When I first hit Paris I thought there was no one lower than Belden. He shot an unarmed kid of twenty-five—in the back, without giving him a chance. But now I see there’s someone lower still—and that’s his woman. He, at least, wouldn’t turn you in; I’ll give him that much. But let me warn you. If you think you’re leading me into a trap, if I have to do any shooting, you get

the first slug out of this gun! That's how you stand with me, little lady."

She smiled derisively, stood up. She didn't bother to reply to his contempt. "Don't leave right after me, they're all watching you here. I'll wait for you under the first streetlight around the corner. She added dreamily: "I couldn't think of anything I wanted to do more than this. That's why I'm doing it."

She went slowly up the stone steps to the street-door, her pointed train wriggling after her from side to side. She turned her head and flashed a smile over her shoulder. Then she went out and the darkness swallowed her.

Frank Fisher rinsed his mouth with beer and emptied it out on the floor.

Chapter III
Mademoiselle Judas

THE room was dark and empty when she stepped into it from the hall outside. The dim light shining behind her outlined her; her silhouette was diabolic, long and sinuous and wavering. Two ridges of hair above her ears looked almost like horns. Something clicked warningly somewhere in the room, but that was all. She closed the door.

"Chéri?" she whispered. "I'm going to put up the light. It's all right. *C'est Mimi*."

A bulb went on, and its rays, striking out like yellow rain, touched off a gleam between two curtains pulled tightly together across a doorless closet. The gleam was black in the middle, holed through. It elongated into a stubby automatic; and a hand, an arm, a shoulder, a man, came slowly out after it toward her.

Steve Belden was misleadingly unogre-like, for a man who had poisoned thousands of human lives with heroin. In repose his face was almost pleasant looking, and his eyes had that directness of gaze that usually betokens honesty.

The girl glanced quizzically at the gun as he continued to point it at her. "Well, put it way, Chéri," she protested ironically. "Haven't you seen me some place before?"

He sheathed it under his arm, scowled. "What took you so long? D'you know he nearly jumped me, waiting for you at the *bal* just now? Petion got me out the back way by pretending to shake out a table cloth, holding it up at arms's length for a screen. For a minute we were both in the same room, he and I! I hope you haven't steered him over here after you without knowing it."

“He wasn’t there any more. Must have looked in merely, then gone away again.”

“What’s the idea of that dress? I nearly took a shot at you when you opened the door just now.”

“It’s what they kept me overtime working on tonight. I left it on to save time. I’ll sneak it back first thing in the morning—”

“You’ll have to have some reach, if you do. Battista finally came through with the passports. We’re taking the Athens Express at daybreak. Matter of fact I could have made the night-train to the Balkans, if it hadn’t been for you. I waited over so I could take you with me—”

“So four hours more in Paris does the trick?” she said, looking at him shrewdly.

He frowned.

“Yeah, and then we’re all set. Fisher’s extradition-writ’s no good in Greece, and Panyiotis pulls enough weight there to fix it so we both disappear for good. If I’ve outsmarted him for three weeks now, I can outlast him the few hours there are left. What’d you say?”

She’s said, “If—” in a low voice. “When did you get any sleep?”

“Night before last.”

“Well, take off your coat, lie down here, rest up a while. I’ll keep watch. I’ll wake you in time for the train. Here, let me have that, I’ll keep it trained on the door.”

“What do *you* know about these things?” he grinned, but he passed the gun over to her, stretched himself out. “Put out the light,” he said sleepily. He began to relax, the long-sustained tension started to go out of his nerves; he could trust her. She was the only one . . .

THE gun was not pointed at the door, but at him—at the top of his head from behind, through the bars of the bed. Her face was a grimace of delight. Then slowly she brought

the gun down again. A bullet in the brain—You didn't feel anything, didn't know anything. But electrocution—what anguish, what terror preceded it! Electrocution was a much better way.

A sharp click from the gun roused him, after he had already begun to doze off. He stiffened, looked at her over his shoulder. "What was that?"

"Just making sure it's loaded." She kicked something along the floor with the tip of her foot, something metallically round. It rolled under the bed.

His eyes closed again. He turned his head toward the wall. His breathing thickened.

A warning *whirr* of the shade-roller roused him a second time. He raised half upright on his elbow. His free hand clawed instinctively at his empty shoulder-holster.

She was reaching for the cord, pulling the shade all the way down again to the bottom.

"What're you doing?" he rasped. "Get away from that window! I told you to put the light out, didn't I?"

"It slipped. It needs fixing," she murmured. "It's all right, there's no one down there. Here goes the light—"

The last thing he said, as he lay back again, was: "And take that damn dress off too, while you're about it. Every time I lamp it on you, it throws a shock into me all over again. I think I'm seeing things—"

She said nothing.

He drowsed off again. Then in the dark, only seconds later, she was leaning over him, shaking him awake. Her breath was a sob that threatened to become a scream. The whiteness of her form was dimly visible. She must have discarded the dress while he slept.

"Steve. *Mon* Steve!" she was moaning, "Get up!" She pulled him frenziedly erect with both arms. "*Sauves-toi!* Out! *File—vite!* Maybe you can still make it by way of the roof—"

He was on his feet, clear of the bed, in an instant. “What’s up? What’s up?”

“I’ve sold you out!” the groan seemed to come from way down at the floor, as though she was all hollow inside. “I tipped him off at the *bal.* I signaled him with the shade just now—”

The light flashed on.

“Oh, don’t stand there looking at me. Quick, get out this door, he has four flights to climb—”

He was usually very quick, but not this time. He stood there eyeing her as though he couldn’t believe what he heard. Then at last, he grasped what she had told him. He pulled the gun from her unresisting hand, turned it the other way around, jabbed it at her heart. It clicked repeatedly, almost like a typewriter.

“I—the bullets—” she shuddered. “Under the bed—Oh, get, Steve—save yourself now—”

A warped floorboard groaned somewhere outside the room.

“Too late!”

Belden had dropped down on one knee, was reaching out desperately toward the bullets. There was no pounding at the door; a shot exploded into it, and splinters of wood flew out on the inside. The china knob fell off and lay there like an egg. The door itself ricocheted back off the flat of someone’s shoe.

“All right, don’t move, Belden. You’re through.”

Fisher came in slowly, changed gun-hands with a sort of acrobatic twist, and brought out handcuffs.

“Pull your finger joint out of that trigger hole,” he added.

The automatic turned over, fell upside down on the floor.

Fisher didn’t speak again until the manacles had closed. Then he said, “Got a hat or anything you want to take with you?” He seemed to see Mimi for the first time. He nodded, said curtly: “Nice work, *Mademoiselle Judas*.”

She stood shivering. The dress lay on the floor behind her, but she made no move to reach out for it.

Belden took his capture calmly enough. He didn't say a word to Mimi Brissard; didn't even look at her. "It's a pleasure," he said bitterly, as Fisher motioned him forward, "if only because it means getting out of a town where there are—things like this." He spat on the floor at her feet as he went by.

Fisher hung back a minute to look her almost detachedly, up and down. He pocketed his gun, took out a wallet with his free hand, removed some lettucelike franc-notes. "What was it—money?" he said. "You haven't asked for any, but I suppose that's it. Here, go out and buy yourself a heart."

The wadded bills struck her lightly in the center of the forehead, and fluttered down her to the floor. One caught upon her breast, just over her heart, and remained poised there, like a sort of badge.

She stood there with her eyes closed, perfectly motionless, as though she were asleep standing up, while the man she'd loved and his captor began their long descent side by side down the four flights of stairs that led to the street.

When they came out of the house a moment later, they had to force their way through the crowd of people standing there blocking the entrance.

Fisher thought for a moment that it was his own shot at the lock upstairs in the house that had attracted them. But they were all turned the other way, with their backs to the building. Out in the middle of the narrow cobbled street two or three of them were bending anxiously over something Some broken white thing lying perfectly still at their feet. One of the men was hurriedly opening and separating the leaves of a newspaper—but not to read it.

Mimi Brissard had atoned, in the only way she had left.

Chapter IV
The Lady from Dubuque

DO I dare?" Mrs. Hiram Travis said aloud, to no one in particular, in her stateroom on the *Gascony* the night before it reached New York. Or if to anyone at all, to the slim, slinky red-and-black garment that the stewardess had laid out for her across the bed under the mistaken impression that she would wish to wear it. A stewardess who, although she had assured Mrs. Travis she was not susceptible in the least to seasickness, had come out of the cabin looking very pale and shaken after having taken the dress down from its hanger. Mrs. Travis had noticed the woman glaring daggers at her, as if in some way *she* were to blame. But this being Mrs. Travis' first trip abroad, or anywhere at all except Sioux City, she was not well versed in the ways of stewardesses, any more than in those of French couturieres.

In fact she hadn't really known what that Maldonado woman was talking about at all; they had had to make signs to each other. *She* had wanted just a plain simple little dress to wear to the meetings of her Thursday Club back home in Dubuque, and then the next morning *this* had shown up at the hotel all wrapped up in crinkly paper. She hadn't wanted Hiram to think she was a fool, so she'd pretended it was the one she'd ordered, and good-natured as always, he'd paid for it without a word. Now here she was stuck with it! And the worst part of it was, if she didn't wear it tonight, then she'd never have another chance to. Because she really didn't have the nerve to wear it in Dubuque. Folks would be scandalized. And all the *francs* it had cost!

“Do I dare?” she said again, and edged a little closer.

One only had to look at Mrs. Hiram Travis to understand the reason for her qualms. She and the dress didn’t match up at all. They came from different worlds. She was a youngish forty, but she made not the least attempt to look any younger than that. She was very plain, with her chin jutting a little too much, her eyes undistinguished, and her mouth too flat. Her hair was a brown-red. She had never used rouge and she had never used powder. The last time she’d smoked a cigarette was behind her grandmother’s barn at the age of fourteen. She’d never drunk anything stronger than elderberry wine in her life, until a week ago in Paris, just for the look of things, she’d tried a little white wine with her meals. She made swell pies, but now that Hi had made so much money in the lawnmower business, he wouldn’t let her do her own cooking any more. He’d even retired, taken out a half-a-million dollar life-insurance policy, and they’d made this trip to Paris to see the sights. Even there the latest they’d stayed up was one night when they had a lot of postcards to write and didn’t get to bed until nearly eleven-thirty. About the most daring thing she’d done in her whole life was to swipe a fancy salad fork from a hotel for a souvenir. It was also the closest she’d ever come to a criminal act. That ought to give you the picture.

She was mortally afraid of about eight million things, including firearms, strange men, and the water they were traveling on right now.

“Golly,” she clucked, “I bet I’ll feel like a fool in it. It’s so—kind of vampish. What’ll Hi say?” She reached out and rested her hand on the dress, which lay there like a coiled snake ready to strike . . .

She drew her hand back suddenly. But she couldn’t help reaching out again to touch the dress with a movement that was almost a caress.

Instantly her mind filled with the strangest thoughts—odd recollections of instants in her past that she would have

said she had completely forgotten. The first time she'd ever seen her father wring a chicken's neck. The day that Hiram —' way back in high school—cut his arm on a broken window. A vein, he'd cut. He'd bled … a lot; and she'd felt weak and sick and terrified. The automobile smash-up they'd seen that time on the State highway on the way back from Fair … that woman lying all twisted and crumpled on the road, with her head skewed way around like it shoudn't be—couldn't be if the woman lived.

It was funny . . . When those things had taken place, she'd felt terrible. Now—remembering them—she found herself going over every detail in her mind, almost—lovingly.

In a magazine she had once seen a picture of Salomé kneeling on the ground holding on a great tray the head of Baptist John. The woman's body was arched forward; there was a look of utter, half-delirious absorption on her face as her lips quested for the dead, partly open mouth. And quite suddenly, with a little shock of revelation, Sarah Travis knew what Salomé had felt.

The dress slipped from her fingers. She hurried to put it on . . .

GEORGES, The *Gascony's* chief bartender, said: "Perhaps *monsieur* would desire another. That's a bad col' you catch."

The watery-eyed red-nosed little man perched before him had a strip of flannel wound around his throat neatly pinned in back with two small safety-pins. He glanced furtively around over his shoulder, the length of the glittering cocktail lounge. "Mebbe you're right," he said. "But the missus is due up in a minute, I don't want her to catch me at it, she'll lace it into me, sure enough!"

Sarah, of course, wouldn't dream of approaching the bar; when she came they'd sit decorously at a little table over in

the corner, he with a beer, she with a cup of Oolong tea, just to act stylish.

Hiram Travis blew his long-suffering nose into a handkerchief the size of a young tablecloth. Then he turned his attention to the live canary dangling over the bar in a bamboo cage, as part of the decorations. He coaxed a few notes out by whistling softly. Then he happened to look in the mirror before him—and he recoiled a little, his eyes bugged; and part of his drink spilled out of his glass.

She was standing next to him, right there at the bar itself, before he'd even had time to turn. An odor of musk enveloped him. The canary over their heads executed a few pinwheel flurries.

His jaw just hung open. "Well, fer—!" was all he could say. It wasn't so much the dress she was wearing, it was that her whole personality seemed to have subtly changed. Her face had a hard, set look about it. Her manner was almost poised. She wasn't fluttering with her hands the way she usually did in a room full of people, and he missed the nervous, hesitant smile on her lips. He couldn't begin to say what it was, but there was something about her that made him a little afraid of her. He even edged an inch or two away from her. Even Georges looked at her with a new professional respect not unmixed with fear.

"*Madame?*" he said.

She said, "I feel like a drink tonight," she said, and laughed a little, huskily. "What are those things—cocktails—? Like that woman over there has."

The bartender winced a little. "That, *madame,* is a double Martini. Perhaps something less—"

"No. That's what I want. And a cigarette, too. I want to try one."

Beside her, her husband could only splutter, and he stopped even that when she half turned to flash him a smile—the

instinctive, brilliant smile of a woman who knows what feeble creatures men can be. You couldn't learn to smile like that. It was something a woman either knew the minute she was born, or never knew at all.

Georges recognized that smile.

"I can't believe it's you," Hiram Travis said, stupefied.

Again that smile. "It must be this dress," she said. "It does something to me. You have to live up to a gown like this, you know . . ." There was a brief warning in her eyes. She picked up her cocktail, sipped at it, coughed a little, and then went on drinking it slowly. "About the dress," she said, "I put my hand on it and for a moment I couldn't take it away again, it seemed to *stick* to it like glue! Next thing I knew I was in it."

As the bartender struck a match to light her cigarette, she put her hand on his wrist to steady it. Travis saw him jump, draw back. He held his wrist, blew on it, looked at her reproachfully. Travis said: "Why, you scratched him, Sarah."

"Did I? And as she turned and looked at him, he saw her hand twitch a little, and drew still further away from her. "What—what's got into you?" he faltered.

There was some kind of tension spreading all around the horseshoe-shaped bar, emanating from her. All the cordiality, the sociability, was leaving it. Cheery conversations even at the far ends of it faltered and died, and the speakers looked around them as though wondering what was putting them so on edge. A heavy leaden pall of restless silence descended, as when a cloud goes over the sun. One or two people even turned and moved away reluctantly, as though they hadn't intended to but didn't like it at the bar any more. The gaunt-faced woman in red and black was the center of all eyes, but the looks sent her were not the admiring looks of men for a well-dressed woman; they were the blinking petrified looks a blacksnake would get in a poultry yard. Even the barman felt it. He dropped and smashed a glass, a thing he hadn't done since he'd

been working on the ship. Even the canary felt it, and stood shivering pitifully on its perch, emitting an occasional cheep as though for help.

SARAH TRAVIS looked up, and saw it. She took a loop of her dress, draped it around her finger, thrust it between the bars. There was a spasm of frantic movement inside, too quick for the eye to follow, a blurred pinwheel of yellow. Then the canary lay lifeless at the bottom of the cage, claws stiffly up-thrust. Its heart had stopped from fright.

It wasn't what she had done—they could all see that contact hadn't killed it—it was the look on her face that was so shocking. No pity, no regret, but an expression of savage satisfaction, a sense of power to deal out life-and-death just now discovered. Some sort of unholy excitement seemed to be crackling inside her; they could all but see phosphorescent flashes of it in her eyes.

This time they began to move away in numbers, with outthrust lower lips of repugnance and dislike turned her way. Drinks were left half-finished, or were taken with them to be imbibed elsewhere. She became the focal-point for a red wave of converged hate that, had she been a man, would surely have resulted in some overt act. There were sulky whispers of "Who is that?" as they moved away. The bartender, as he detached and lowered the cage, looked daggers at her, cursed between his teeth in French.

There was only one solitary drinker left now at the bar, out of all the amiable crowd that had ringed it when she first arrived. He kept studying her inscrutably with an expressionless face; seemingly unallergic to the tension that had driven everyone else away.

There's that detective again," she remarked with cold hostility. "Wonder he doesn't catch cold without that poor devil being chained to him. "Wonder where he's left him?"

“Locked up below, probably, while he’s up getting a bracer,” Travis answered mechanically. His chief interest was still his own problem: what had happened to his wife in the ten brief minutes from the time he’d left her preparing to dress in their stateroom until the time she’s joined him up here? “I suppose they asked him not to bring him up with him manacled like that, for the sake of appearances. Why are you so sorry for his prisoner all of a sudden, and so set against him? Only last night you were saying what an awful type man the other fellow was and how glad you were he’d been caught.”

“Last night isn’t tonight,” she said shortly. “People change, Hiram.” She still had the edge of her dress wrapped around her hand, as when she’d destroyed the canary. “I don’t suppose you ever will, though.” Her voice was low, thoughtful. She looked at her husband curiously, then deliberately reached out toward him with that hand and rested it against him.

Travis didn’t go into a spasm and fall lifeless as the bird had. He displayed a sudden causeless resentment toward her, snapped, “Take your hand away, don’t be pawing me!” and moved further away.

She glanced disappointedly down at her hand as though it had played a dirty trick on her, slowly unwound the strip of material, let it fall. She stared broodingly into the mirror for awhile, tendrils of smoke coming up out of her parted lips.

She said, “Hi, is that half-million-dollar insurance policy you took out before we left in effect yet or still pending?” and narrowed her eyes at her image in the glass.

“It’s in effect,” he assured her. “I paid the first premium on it the day before we left Dubuque. I’m carrying the biggest insurance of any individual in Ioway—”

She didn’t seem particularly interested in hearing the rest. She changed the subject abruptly—or seemed to. “Which one of the bags have you got that gun in that you

brought with you for protection? You know, in case we got robbed in Europe."

The sequence of questions was so glaringly, so unmistakably meaningful, that he did what almost anyone else would have done under the circumstances, ascribed it to mere coincidence and ignored it. Two separate disconnected chains of thought, crowding upon one another, had made her ask first one, then the other, that was all. It just would have *sounded* bad to a stranger, to that professional crime-detector over there for instance, but of course *he* knew better. After all he'd been married to her for eighteen years.

"In the cowhide bag under the bed in the stateroom," he answered calmly. "Why? Every time you got a peek at it until now you squeaked, 'Throw it away, Hi! I can't stand to look at them things!'"

She touched her hand to her throat briefly and moistened her lips.

Travis noticed something, and said: "What's the matter, you seasick? Your face is all livid, kind of, and you're breathing so fast—I coulda told you not to monkey round with liquor when you're not used to it."

"It isn't either, Hiram. I'm all right. Leave me be." Then, with a peculiar ghastly smile lighting up her face, she said, "I'm going down below a minute to get something I need. I'll be back."

"Want me to come with you?"

"No," she said, still smiling, "I'd rather have you wait for me here, and then come out on the deck with me for a little stroll when I come back. That upper boat-deck . . ."

The little undulating serpentine train of her dress followed her across the cocktail lounge and out. Hiram Travis watched her go, wondering what had happened to change her so. Georges watched her go, wondering what what had gone wrong at his bar tonight. Frank Fisher watched her go, wondering who it was she kept reminding

him of. He had thought of Belden's sweetheart in Paris at once, but discarded her, because the two women didn't resemble one another in the least.

FIFTEEN was the number of her stateroom, and she knew that well, yet she had stopped one door short of it, opposite seventeen, and stood listening. The sound was so faint as to be almost indistinguishable, a faint rasping, little more than the buzz of an angry fly caught in the stateroom and trying to find a way out. Certainly it was nothing to attract the attention of anyone going by, as it had hers. It was as though her heart and senses were turned in to evil tonight, and the faintest whisper of evil could reach her.

She edged closer, into the little open foyer at right-angles to the passageway, in which the door was set. None of the stateroom-doors on the *Gascony* opened directly out into the public corridors. There was a food-tray lying outside the door, covered with a napkin, ready to be taken away. She edged it silently aside with the point of her foot, stood up closer to the door. The intermittently buzzing fly on the other side of it was more audible now. *Zing-zing, zing-zing, zing-zing.* It would break off short every so often, then resume.

Mrs. Hiram Travis, who had been afraid of strange men and who had shuddered at the mere thought of criminals until twenty minutes ago, smiled knowingly, reached out and began to turn the glass doorknob. It made no sound in her grasp, but the motion must have been visible on the other side. The grating sound stopped dead, something clinked metallically, and then there was a breathless, waiting silence.

The faceted knob had turned as far as it would go in her hand, but the door wouldn't give. A man's voice called out: "Come on, jailer, quit playing hide-and-seek! Whaddya think you're going to catch me doing, hog-tied like I am?"

She tried the knob again, more forcefully. The voice said: “Who’s there?” a little fearfully this time.

“Where’s the key?” she whispered.

“Who are you?” was the answering whisper.

“You don’t know me. I’d like to get in and talk to you—”

“What’s the angle?”

“There’s something you can do—for me. I want to help you.”

“*He’s* got the key, he took it up with him. Watch yourself, he’ll be back any minute—” But there was a hopeful note in the voice now. “He’s got both keys, the one to the door and the one to these bracelets. I’m cuffed to the head of the bed and that’s screwed into the floor—”

“I left him up at the bar,” she said, “If I could get near enough to him maybe I could get hold of the keys.”

There was a tense little silence while the man behind the door seemed to be thinking things over.

“Wait a minute,” the voice said, “I’ve got something here that’ll help you. Been carrying it around in the fake sole of my shoe. Stand close under that open transom, I’ll see if I can make it from here—”

Presently a little white, folded paper packet flew out, hit the wall opposite, landed at her feet.

She stooped swiftly to pick it up, scarcely conscious of the unaccustomed grace of her movement.

“Get it? Slip it into his drink, It’s the only chance you’ve got. Now listen, the cuff-key is in his watch-pocket, under his belt; the door key’s in his breast-pocket. He turned his gun over to the purser when we came aboard, said he wasn’t taking any chances of my getting hold of it while he was asleep. I don’t know who you are or what the lay is, but you’re my only bet. We dock tomorrow. Think you can do it?”

“I can do anything—tonight,” Mrs. Hiram Travis of Dubuque answered as she moved away from the door.

FISHER looked at her a full half-minute while she stood beside him holding her cigarette poised. “Certainly,” he said at last, “but you won’t find the matches I carry any different from the ones your husband and the bartender both offered you just now—and which you refused.” He struck one, held it for her.

“You see everything, don’t you?”

“That’s my business.” He turned back to the bar again, as though to show the interruption was over.

She didn’t move. “May I drink with you?”

He stiffened his finger at the Frenchman. “Find out what the lady is having.” Then turned to go. “If you’ll excuse me —”

“*With* you, not *on* you,” she protested.

“This isn’t a pleasure trip,” he told her briefly. “I’m on business. My business is downstairs, not up here. I’ve stayed away from it too long already. Sorry.”

“Oh, but a minute more won’t matter—” She had thrust out her arm deftly, fencing him in. She was in the guise of a lady, and to be unnecessarily offensive to one went counter to a training he had received far earlier than that of the Department. It was ingrained in the blood. She had him at a disadvantage. He gave in grudgingly, but he gave in.

She signaled her husband to join them, and he came waddling up, blowing his nose and obviously beginning to feel his liquor. Tonight was one night Sarah didn’t seem to give a rap how much he drank, and it was creeping up on him.

Georges set down three Martinis in a row. Mrs. Travis let a little empty crumpled white paper fall at her feet.

“Y’know,” Travis was saying. “About this fella you’re bringin’ back with you—”

“Sorry,” said Fisher, crisply but pleasantly, “I’m not at liberty to discuss that.”

Mrs. Travis raised Fisher's drink to her lips with her left hand, moved hers toward him with her right. Georges was busy rinsing his shaker.

"Last Spring one of you fellas showed up in Dubuque, I remember. He was lookin' for some bank-robber. Came around to the office one day—" Travis went into a long, boring harangue. Presently he broke off, looked at Fisher, and turned a startled face to his wife.

"Hey, he's fallen asleep!"

"I don't blame him much," she said, and brushed the lapel of Fisher's coat lightly, then the tab of his vest. "Spilled his drink all over himself," she murmured in explanation. She took her hand away clenched, metal gleaming between the finger-cracks. "Take him outside on the desk with you, Hi," she said. "Sit him in a chair, see if the air'll clear his head. Don't let anyone see him like this in here . . ."

"You're right," said Travis, with the owl-like earnestness of the partially-intoxicated.

"The boat-deck. No one goes up there at night. I'll join you—presently." She turned and walked away.

SHE dangled the handcuff-key up and down in the palm of her hand, standing back just beyond his reach. He was nearly tearing his arm out of its socket, straining across the bed to get at it.

There was something oddly sinister about her, standing there grinning devilishly at him like that, something that made Steve Belden almost afraid. This ugly dame was really bad . . .

"Well, come on, use that key! What'd you do, just lift it to come down here and rib with me it? That knockout-powder ain't going to last all night. It's going to pass off in a few minutes and—"

"First listen to what I have to say. I'm not doing this because I'm sorry for you."

“All right, let’s have it! Anything you say. You’re holding the aces.”

She began to smile and it was a terrible thing to see. Poisonous … the pure distillation of evil … like a gargoyle-mask.

“Listen,” she began. “My husband—there is a half-a-million dollar insurance policy on his life—and I’m the sole beneficiary. I’m sick of him—he’s a hick—never will be anything but a hick. I’ve got to be rid of him—got to. And I want that money. I’ve earned it. I’ll never get another chance as good as now, on this boat. I don’t want that half-a-million when I’m sixty and no good any more. I want it now, while I’m young enough to enjoy it. But even if there wasn’t any insurance at all, I’d still want to do it. I hate the way he talks and the way he walks and the way he eats his shredded-wheat and the way he always is getting colds and talking like a trained seal! I hate everybody there is in the world tonight, but him most.” And she gave the handcuff key one final fillip, caught it again, blew her breath on it—just beyond his manacled reach.

He rubbed his strained shoulder, scowled at her. “What do you have to have me for?” he asked. “Not that it means anything to me to put the skids to a guy, even a guy that I’ve never set eyes on before; but for a dame that can get Fisher’s stateroom and bracelet-keys out of his pocket right under his eyes—why do you have to have help on a simple little stunt like that?”

“I’ll tell you why,” she said. “You see, mister, I had him with me when I came aboard, and so I have to have him with me when I go ashore tomorrow. That’s why I need you. You’re going to be—Hiram, bundled up in his clothes, with your neck bandaged, and a great big handkerchief in front of your face. You won’t have to speak. I’ll do all the talking. If I just report that he disappeared at sea, I’ll never be able to prove that he’s dead, I’ll never get the half-a-million . . .”

“But suppose I do go ashore with you, how you gonna prove it then?”

“I’ll—I’ll find something—I don’t know just yet. Maybe a—a body from the morgue—or something.” She gave him a peculiar searching look.

Steve Belden was no fool. That look made him think that maybe he was slated to play the part of the “remains” in question, when the time came. But he was in no position to bargain. The important thing was to get these cuffs open and get off the ship. And he’d need her help for that. Then later—

“And do I get a cut of the five hundred grand?”

She laughed mirthlessly. “Why, no,” she said. “I don’t think so. I’m saving your life, you see, and I think it’s enough. Your life—for his . . .”

“All right,” he said. “No harm in asking. Now get busy with that key.”

A quick twist of her wrist, a click, and the manacle dangled empty from the bed-rail. The murderer of Frank Fisher’s brother was free again. His first words, as he chafed his wrist and stamped back and forth like a bear on a rampage, were not of gratitude—the underworld knows no gratitude—but low growls of revenge.

“A week in that filthy pig-pen of a French prison! Four days in this coop, chained up like an animal. Chained to him while I ate, chained to him while I slept, chained to him even while I shaved. *He’s* never getting off this ship alive—!”

“Of course he isn’t,” the woman agreed. “How can we let him? The whole idea would be spoiled if he does. That’ll be your job. I’m attending to—Hiram myself.”

Belden waved his fists in the air. “If I only had a gun!”

“There’s one in my cabin, in a cowhide suitcase under the bed—” Then as he turned toward the door: “Wait a minute. You can’t do that. You’ll bring the whole ship down on us, the moment you show your face, and there’ll be a general

alarm raised. Now if you go into my cabin next door, you can hide in the bath. I'll go up and find a way of bringing him down there with me—after I—Somehow your—Mr. Fisher—we have to get him in there before he comes back here and finds you gone. Now wait a minute, we can fix this bed in case he takes a quick look in here first."

She pushed pillows together under the covers, made a long log-like mound. "Give me your coat," she said. "You'll be wearing Hiram's clothes, anyway." She extended the empty sleeve out from the coverings, locked the open manacle around its cuff. "You went to bed fully-dressed, waiting for him to come down and tuck you in!"

"Hurry up," he kept saying. "We ain't got all night! We must be near Ambrose Lightship already."

"No. We mustn't rush," the lady from Dubuque, who had been afraid of strangers and weapons and violence, said quietly. "Follow me, and I'll get the gun out for you and rig you up in Hiram's things." She eased the door open, advanced to the mouth of the foyer, and glanced up and down the long passageway. "Come on."

She joined him a moment later, unlocked her door for him. She crouched down, pulled out the valise, found the gun and held it up. "You'll have to use this through pillows," she said, "or you'll make a noise." She was handling the weapon almost caressingly. It pointed at his chest for a moment, and her eyes grew misty.

Belden jumped aside out of range, pulled the gun angrily away from her. "What's the matter with you anyway?" he barked. "You kill-crazy? I thought it was Fisher and your husband you were out to get!"

"Yes," she said sullenly. That was the greater treachery, so it had first claim on her. "But I told you, I hate everyone in the world tonight. Everyone—you hear?"

"Yeah? Well, we need each other, and until we're out of this squeeze, let's hang together. Now go on up there and

get that dick down here. I'll be just behind the bathroom door there, waiting for him."

She grabbed up a long gauzy handkerchief and sidled out of the room. Behind her Belden wiped his beaded brow. He'd never run into a woman like her before and—hard-bitten as he was—he never wanted to again.

Chapter V
Collusion

TRAVIS looked up from a deck-chair at the shadowy figure looming before him on the unlighted deck. “That you, Sarah? What took you so long? I don’t think it’s so good for my cold, staying up here in the wind so long.”

“This is going to cure your cold,” her voice promised him raspingly.

He motioned to the inert form in the chair beside him. “Hasn’t opened his eyes since he came up here. Sure must be dead for sleep. Guess he ain’t been getting much rest, chained to that fella down there—” He tittered inanely. “Wonder what they did when they wanted to turn over in bed?”

She bent over Fisher, shook him slightly, ever so slightly, one hand above his breast-pocket, the other at the tab of his vest. Then she straighted again. “I didn’t know they ever slept like that—did you?”

She turned toward the rail, went and stood beside it, outlined dimly against the stars. The wind fluttered her gown about her. She held the long gauzy handkerchief in one hand like a pennant. “What a lovely night,” she said. “Come here and look at the water.”

There was no one on this unroofed boat-deck, but the two of them—and Fisher.

“I can see it from here,” her husband answered. “ ‘Twouldn’t be good for my cold to lean way out into the wind like that.” He blinked fearfully into the gloom. “You look just like—some kind of a bogey-man standing there like that, with the wind making great big bat-wings grow behind

your back. If I didn't know it was you, I'd be scared out of ten years' growth—"

She opened her fingers and the handkerchief fluttered downward like a ghostly streamer. A wisp of cloud passed over the new moon just then.

"Hiram," she called in a silvery voice, like the sirens on the rock to Ulysses, "I've lost my handkerchief. Come quickly, it's caught around the bottom of the railing. Hurry, before it blows loose—!"

Hiram Travis heard the voice of the woman he had been married to for eighteen years, asking him a common favor, and the obscured moon and the simulated bat-wings and the chill foreboding at the base of his skull became just the play-things of an overwrought imagination. He got up awkwardly from the deck-chair, waddled across to the rail beside her, peered down. His eyes were watery from his cold and blurred from unaccustomed liquor.

"You sure it's still there?" he said uncertainly. "Thought I saw it go all the way down."

"Of course it's still there, can't you see it? Bend over, you can see it from here—" Then as he prepared to squat on the inside of the guardrail and peer through it from there, she quickly forestalled him with a guiding hand at the nape of his neck. "No, lean over from above and look down on the outside, that's the only way you can see it. I'll hold you."

On the deckchair behind them the unconscious Fisher stirred a little, mumbled in his drugged sleep. He seemed to be on the point of awakening. But the stupor was too strong for him. He sighed heavily, became inert once more.

"Blamed if I can see a dratted thing!" Travis was piping. He was folded almost double over the rail, like a clothespin, with his wife's hand at his shoulder. He made vague groping motions with one hand, downward into space; the other was clasped about the rail.

"You're nearly touching it. It's just an inch away from your fingertips—"

“Get one of the stewards, Sarah, I’m liable to go over myself first thing I know, doing this—”

It was the last thing he said in this world. The last thing she said to him was: “We don’t need a steward—*for this,* darling.”

She crouched down suddenly beside him, took her hand away from his shoulder. She gripped his bony ankles with both hands, thrust viciously upward, broke their contact with the deck, straightening as she did so. He did a complete somersault across the guard-rail; the arm that had gripped it was turned completely around in its socket, torn free. That was the last thing she saw of him—that momentary appeal of splayed white hand vanishing into the blackness. His screech was smothered in the sighing of the wind.

She thrust out her arms wide, in strange ritual of triumph, as Mimi Brissard had in Paris. She was a black, ominous death-cross against the starlight for a moment. Then she turned slowly, her eyes two green phosphorescent pools, toward where the helpless secret service man lay.

FISHER blinked and opened his eyes. He was still groggy from the dreams he had been having. Dreams in which long, skinny black imps out of hell had pushed people over the side of an immense precipice down into a bottomless abyss below. He’d been chained down, unable to help them, though they screamed to him for assistance. Over and over it had happened. It had been the worst form of torture, the most ghastly nightmare he had ever had. Then toward the end the imps had concentrated on him himself. They had tugged and pulled, trying to get him to the edge of the precipice, and he had held back, dug his heels in, but inch by inch they had been overcoming him . . .

He saw that he was partly off the chair he had been sleeping on. One leg, one arm and shoulder, hung down

over the side, as though somebody had actually been tugging at him But the lady from Dubuque, the harmless, inoffensive, eccentric middlewestern lady from Dubuque was the only person around, stretched out there in the chair beside his. His mouth lasted like cotton wool, and everything looked warped, like an image in a corrugated mirror. He fell down on his knees when he tried to get off the chair.

Instantly she was all solicitude, helping him get to his feet. She said, “Well, whatever happened to you? My husband and I have been taking turns watching over you. We didn’t like to call any of the stewards, because—well, because of your position. People talk so on these ships—”

He could feel the drug-dilated pupils of his eyes slowly contract until they were normal again. The lines of the things he looked at resumed their straightness. But even then, the “kicks” wouldn’t go away altogether; he had a regular hang-over from them. There was cement on his eyelids and it took all the strength he could muster to keep them open. He said surlily: “Where is he? I remember vaguely coming up here with him, leaning on him the whole way—”

She said, “He went below just a few minutes ago, to fix you up a bromo-seltzer. It’s just what you need, it’ll clear your head marvelously. Come on down with me a minute, and let him give it to you.”

He could feel a sense of resentment toward her stir through him, as when you rub a cat’s fur the wrong way. Yet she wasn’t doing or saying anything to antagonize him. “Why don’t you stay out of my business?” he blurted out uncontrollably, “What is this? I never saw you before until tonight—” And then as though the word *business* had reminded him of something, he stabbed his hand toward his watch-pocket, then upward to his breast-pocket.

“Did you lose something?” she asked innocently.

“No,” he scowled, “and it’s no thanks to myself I didn’t, either! I ought to be shot!”

She bared her teeth momentarily at that, as though she found the phrase privately amusing, for some reason of her own.

He stood up abruptly, stalked toward the faintly outlined white staircase leading to the deck below. She came hurrying after him. “Will you help me down the stairs please? They’re hard for me to manage on these high heels —”

Grudgingly, he cupped his hand to the point of her elbow, guided her down the incline after him. Yet at the contact his antagonism rose to such a pitch it was all he could do to keep from throwing her bodily down past him, to break her neck or back. He took his hand away, jumped clear, to keep from giving in to the impulse, and a moment later she had gained the safety of the lower deck.

HE didn’t wait. The muscular lethargy that had gripped him was slowly wearing off. Suddenly it broke altogether, and he was normal again. By that time he was hurrying along the inner passageway toward his stateroom, to see to his prisoner. Behind him, like something in a bad dream that couldn’t be shaken off, came the rustle and the slither of Mrs. Travis’ dress as she followed him.

He unlocked the door, threw it open, turned on the light switch. Belden lay there sound asleep. The covers up over his head, one arm stiffly held in place by the manacle. Fisher let out a deep breath of relief.

Before he could get in and close the door after him, the rustle and the slither had come to a stop directly behind him. He turned his head impatiently. This woman was worse than a burr.

She said, “We’re right next door. Won’t you stop in a moment and let Mr. Travis give you the bromo-seltzer

before you retire? He came down, specially to mix it for you."

"That's good of him," he said shortly, "but I could get one from the steward just as well." An odor of musk enveloped him, at her nearness. Again his early training intervened in her favor, wouldn't let him slam the door in her face and end her importunities once and for all.

She suddenly reached past him and gently closed the door. "*He's* all right," she purred. "He'll keep a moment longer. He's not running away." She took him by the hand, began to lead him gently but persistently down toward the next foyer.

The contact, as on the stalls just now, again inflamed with nearly uncontrollable and entirely murderous anger. His hands on her throat . . . He pulled his hand away, face whitening with the effort to overcome it. "I can walk—"

She threw open her own door, called out loudly: "Hiram, here's Mr. Fisher for that bromo. Did you mix it yet?"

The stateroom was empty. A cowhide valise had been pulled partly out from under the bed, allowed to remain there with its lid up.

"He's in the bathroom, I guess," she said. She moved unobtrusively around behind Fisher and closed the stateroom door.

A frog-croak from the direction of the bathroom answered, "I'm mixing it now." Fisher glanced over that way. A blurred reflection created a flurry of movement across the mirror-panel set in the bathdoor, which was turned outward into the room.

She distracted his attention by standing in front of him, turning him around toward her, smiling that same saturnine smile that had been on her lips so often tonight.

He gave her a searching look, wary, mistrustful. "There's something about you—" The back of his hand went out and flicked her shoulder. "Where'd you get that dress? All night long it's kept reminding me of—"

“Paris,” she said. “It’s a Maldonado . . .” The blur on the mirror-panel had become a shadow that lengthened as it crept out over the floor into the room. “See, I’ll show you,” She turned an edge of the shoulder over, revealed a little silk tab with lettering on it. “Can you read what it says?”

He bent his head, peered intently, off-guard.

I’m Dangerous Tonight

HER arms suddenly flashed around him like white whips, in a death-embrace, pinning his own close to his sides. “Now, Belden, *now!*” he heard her cry.

The lurking shadow in the background sprang forward, closed in. The white oblong of a pillow struck Fisher between the shoulders, as though this were no more than a friendly pillow-fight. Then through it came a muffled detonation.

Fisher straightened suddenly, stood there motionless. The woman unclasped her arms, and he collapsed to the floor, lay there at her feet, eyes still open.

From over him came Belden’s voice: “Go tell your brother you weren’t so hot yourself!”

“Close his eyes,” she said, “you’ve only stunned him!” as though she were talking about some insect.

The pillow fell across him again, and Travis’ revolver and Belden’s fist plunged into the soft middle of it. There were two more shots. Little goose-feathers flew up and settled again. When Belden kicked the scorched pillow aside, Fisher’s eyes were closed.

“They don’t come any deader than that!” he said.

She was crouched beside the door, listening.

She straightened up finally, murmured triumphantly: “We did it! It could have been champagne-corks, or punctured party-balloons. Half of them are drunk tonight, anyway!” Her lip curled.

“Let’s get going,” Belden answered impatiently. “We must be passing the Narrows already. We dock in a couple hours; we want to clear off before they find this guy—”

“All right, get in there and put on Hi’s things, while I’m changing out here. Better put on two coats one over the other, he had more of a bulge than you. Turn your collar up around your face and hold a big handkerchief under your nose, you’ve got a bad cold. I’ll pin one of those cloths around your neck like he had. I’ve got the passports and everything we need.”

Belden disappeared into the bath with an armful of Travis’ clothing. She stood before the mirror, started to tug at the dress, bring it down off her shoulders. It looped at her waist, fell down to the floor with a slight hiss. She stepped clear of the mystic ring it had formed about her feet, and as she did so the contact between it and her body broke for the first time since ten the night before.

She staggered against the wall, as though some sort of galvanic shock had pushed her. Her mouth opened like a suffocating fish out of water, slowly closed again. She was as limp and as inert as the bullet-riddled man bleeding away on the floor.

Her hands went dazedly up to her hair, roamed distractedly through it, dragging it down about her shoulders. She was just Sarah Travis again, and the long bad dream was over. But darkness didn’t give way to light, darkness gave way to perpetual twilight. Something snapped.

She had one more lucid moment. Her eyes found the opened closet door, where some of Travis’ things could still be seen hanging on the rack. “Hi,” she breathed soundlessly, “My husband.” Then she began to shake all over. The shaking became low laughter, that at first sounded like sobbing.

Belden came out, in Travis’ camel-hair coat, cap pulled down over his eyes. “Are you nearly—? What’s the matter,

what’re you giggling about?”

The laughter rose, became full-bodied, a terrible thing in continuous crescendo.

“I’m getting out of here, if I gotta swim for it!” He could make it, he told himself; they were far enough up the Bay now. And he knew just where to go to lie low, until he could get word to—

The door closed behind him, muffling her paeans of soulless mirth, that throbbed there in that place of death.

When the ship’s doctor was summoned, shortly after the *Gascony* had docked and lay motionless alongside one of the new piers at the foot of the West Fifties, he found her crouched on her knees like a Geisha, back to the wall, one arm extended, pointing crazily to the motionless form lying outstretched on the floor. The rise and fall of her ceaseless wrenching laughter was unbearable.

The doctor shook his head. “Bring a straitjacket,” he said tersely, “she’s hopelessly insane.”

“Is he gone?” they asked, as he examined Fisher.

“Just a matter of minutes,” was the answer. He’s punctured like a sieve. Better call an ambulance. Let him do his dying ashore.”

Chapter VI
The Chain Snaps

FISHER'S nurse at the Mount of Olives Hospital, Miss Wellington, was a pleasant young person with sleek auburn hair and a small rosette of freckles on each polished cheekbone. She wore rimless hexagonal glasses that softened, instead of hardened her eyes. She came down the gleaming, sterilized corridor in equally gleaming, sterilized white, carrying a tray containing a glass of milk, a cup of cocoa, and a geranium. Every convalescents breakfast-tray in the hospital always had one flower on it. Miss Wellington remembered, however, that it had had a queer effect on the patient in Room Ten. He had growled he was not dead yet, the last time she had brought one in, and heaved it out of the open window with so much energy that his scars had reopened and begun to bleed again.

Miss Wellington wisely removed it from the tray hid it in her uniform-pocket, and replaced it with two smuggled cigarettes. Fisher was a favorite of hers; she disliked tractable, submissive patients, and she was something of a philosopher anyway. A hundred years from now it would be all the same, whether the poor devil smoked or didn't.

She freed one hand to turn the knob and was about to enter Ten, when an alarmed, "Hold it! Just a minute!" was shouted at her from inside. Miss Wellington, undeterred, calmly barged right in.

"Oh, so that's it," she remarked, setting the tray down. "And where do you think you're going, young man?"

Fisher was hanging onto the foot of the bed with one hand, to keep his balance, and belting his trousers around

his middle with the other. He had on one shoe, one sock, and his hat.

"Listen," he said, "I got a job to do, a report to make, and you can have my bed back. You can keep the slugs you took out of me, too; I'm generous that way."

"You get back there where you belong," she frowned with assumed severity. "D'you realize that they could put a new roof on this entire wing of the building, just with the lead that was taken out of you? And there was enough left over to weatherstrip the windows, at that! You don't deserve hospitalization, any of you young huskies, the way you crowd your luck—"

He sat down shakily on the edge of the bed. His knees had gone rubbery. "I certainly don't," he agreed. "Any guy that falls down on his job—what good is he, tell me that? They should have left me where they found me, bleeding to death on the *Gascony*. That's all I had coming to me. That's all I'm worth."

"That's right, cry into your soup," she said. She struck a match, held it for him. "Here, smoke this—on an empty stomach; you've broken every other rule of the place, you may as well go the whole hog."

"You don't know what it means. The men I work with—not to be able to look any of them in the face—to have to go around tagged a failure for the rest of my life. That's all anybody has, Wellington, his pride in his job—"

She sighed. "I guess we'll have to let you go. It's better than having you die on our hands. If we try to keep you here you'll probably pine away. And I'm getting worn to a shadow pushing you back in bed every morning at eight, regularly. I'll get MacKenzie in, have him look you over. Put out that cigarette."

MacKenzie looked him over, said: "I'd strongly advise you to give it a week more—if I thought it would do any good. But if you're going to be rebellious and mentally depressed about it, it might do you more harm in the long run. There's

really no reason for keeping you here any longer, only try to stay off your feet as much as you can—which I know you won't do anyway."

"Sure, and stay out of drafts," Fisher smiled bitterly, "and live to be a hundred. What for?" He put on his coat and tie. "Where's my gun?"

"You'll have to sign for that downstairs, on your way out."

At the door he turned and looked around the room, as though he was just seeing it for the first time. "Who paid for all this?"

"Somebody named Trilling."

Fisher nodded glumly. "He's my boss. Why did he bother?"

MacKenzie and the nurse exchanged a look.

Fisher picked up his hat and walked out, head down, staring at the floor. Along the corridor outside he had to steady' himself with one arm against the wall, but he kept going until he'd stumbled into the elevator.

Miss Wellington touched the outside corner of an eye with her finger, stroked downward. "We didn't do that boy any good," she murmured. "The bullets were in his soul. Wonder what it'll take to get 'em out?"

AT the local FBI headquarters half an hour later Fisher's face was ashen, but not entirely from the effort it had cost him to get there. He stood facing Trilling across the desk, a proffered chair rejected in the background.

"I haven't come to make excuses," he said quietly "the facts speak for themselves. He got away. I hashed up the job. I let you down. I begged, I pleaded with you to give me the assignment. I not only put you to considerable expense with nothing to show for it; but through me Belden even got back into the country, which he never could have done by himself."

He laid it down before him on the desk. Jealously close to him, though, as if afraid to have it taken from him. “You want this—back?” he said huskily. There was almost a prayer in his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Trilling said, and drew it the rest of the way across the desk. It fell into an open drawer, dropped from sight. “I don’t, but Washington does, and I take my instructions from them. They seem to want results. What damned you was, not that he got away, but some story about a woman being involved—”

Fisher just stood there, his eyes on the desk where the badge had last been visible. His Adam’s apple had gone up just once, and stayed high. After awhile, when he could speak again, he said: “Yes, I wonder what that story is, myself. I wonder if I’ll ever know.”

Trilling had turned his head away from the look on Fisher’s face. He was on his way to the door now, his former superior knew. The voice came from further away. “There’s no use standing here,” it said. “I never did like a guy that crawled, myself. I guess you know what this means to me, though.”

Trilling said, “I ought to. I’m in the same outfit. I’m you—a couple of notches higher up, that’s all. Let’s not consider this irrevocable, let’s just call it temporary. Maybe it will be straightened out in a few months. And again I say, this isn’t me. This is word from Washington.” He fumbled embarrassedly with a wallet inside his coat-pocket. “Fisher, come here a minute—” he said.

But the door had opened already. He heard Fisher say, to no one in particular: “That was my whole life. This is my finish now.” The frosted-glass panel ebbed shut almost soundlessly, and his blurred shadow faded slowly away on the outside of it.

Trilling resignedly let the wallet drop back in his pocket. Then he caught sight of a wire-wastebasket standing on the floor beside his swivel-chair. He delivered a resounding kick

at it that sent it into a loop, with the inexplicable remark: “Damn women!”

THE honkytonk bartender, who doubled as bouncer, waiter, and cashier, was in no mood to compromise. Mercy was not in him. He came out around the open end of the long counter, waddled threatening across the floor in a sullen, red-faced fury and began to shake the inanimate figure lying across the table with its head bedded on its arms. “Hey, you! Do your sleeping in the gutter!”

If you gave these bums an inch; they took a yard. And this one was a particularly glaring example of the *genus* bar-fly. He was in here all the time like this, inhaling smoke and then doing a sunset across the table. He’d been in here since four this afternoon. The boss and he, who were partners in the joint—the bartender called it jernt—would have been the last ones to claim they were running a Rainbow Room, but at least they were trying to give the place a *little* class, keep it above the level of a Bowery smoke-house; they even paid a guy to pound the piano and a canary to warble three times a week. And then bums like this had to show up and give the place a bad look!

He shook the recumbent figure again, more roughly than the first time. Shook him so violently that the whole reedy table under him rattled and threatened to collapse. “Come on, clear out, I said! Pay me for what you had and get outa here!”

The figure raised an unshaven face from between its arms, looked at him, said something.

The bartender raised his voice to a bellow, perhaps to bolster his courage. There had been a spark of something in that look. Just a spark, no more, but it had been there. “Oh, so you haven’t got any money! So you think you can come in

here, do your drinking on the cuff, and get away with it! Well, I'll show you what we do to bums that try that!"

He gripped the figure by his coat collar, took a half-turn in it, brought him erect and held him that way, half-strangled. Then, treacherously, he began to pump short jabs into the man's unguarded face, the muscles of his great beefy arm tightening and pulling like knotted ropes. Blood came, but the man couldn't fall; he was held tight by the nape of the neck. Heads in a long row down the bar turned to watch in idle amusement, not a hand was lifted to help him.

Then something happened. The bartender was suddenly floundering back against the opposite wall, the line of his jaw white at first, then turning a bruised red. He held it, steadied himself against the wall, spat out pieces of tooth-enamel. The figure across the way—the width of the narrow room separated them now—was holding onto an edge of the table for support, acting as though he'd fall down in another minute. He was holding, not his face where the barman had pummeled him, but his chest as if something hurt him there.

The bartender shrieked, "You will, will ya? Sock me, will ya? *Now* ya gonna get it! *Now* I'll cut ya to *pieces!*" He reached behind the bar, caught up an empty bottle from one of the lower shelves. Liquor dispensaries are supposed to break their bottles once they're emptied. This was the kind of place that didn't.

He gripped the bottle by the neck, cracked the bottom of it against the bar so that it fell off, advanced murderously upon his victim with the jagged sharp-toothed remainder in his hand for a weapon. And even yet, no one in the place made a move to interfere. He was only a bum; what difference did it make what happened to him?

The bum made no move to try to bolt for the door and get out of the place. Perhaps he sensed an outstretched leg would trip him if he tried it. Perhaps he was unequal to the

effort. Perhaps he didn't care. He even smiled a little, adding fuel to the blazing fire of the bartenders cowardly rage. "Matter, can't you use your hands?"

The bartender poised the vicious implement, to thrust it full in his face, grind it around, maim and maybe kill him.

And then suddenly a girl stood in between them, as though she had dropped from the ceiling. No one had seen where she had come from. A beautiful girl, shabbily dressed. Cheap little blouse and threadbare skirt; golden hair like an angel's, cascading out from under a round woollen cap such as boys wear for skating. She set down the little black dressing-case she'd brought out of the back room with her, caught the bartender's thick wrist in her slim fingers, pushed it back.

"Put that down, Mike!" she said in a cold, angry voice. "Let this man alone!"

THE bartender, towering over her five-feet-four of determination, shouted wrathfully: "What do you know about it? He's a bum, and he's going to get what's coming to him! You stick to your canarying and I'll handle the front room herel"

Her voice was like a whip. "He's not a bum. You're the bum. So much of a bum that you can't tell the difference any more! *I* still can, thank heavens, and I'm going to get out of here for good before I lose the ability to distinguish!"

The bartender retreated a step or two, put the shattered bottle shame-facedly behind his back. A sallow-complected, chunky man, with his hair all greasy ringlets, was standing at the entrance to the inner room. The girl turned her head toward him briefly. "Find someone else to do your canarying, Angelo. I'm not showing up Wednesday." She faced the bartender again. "How much does he owe you?"

The latter had had all the ground cut away around him, "Couple dollars," he mumbled indistinctly. "He's been riding

along all evenin'—"

She snapped open a ridiculous little envelope-sized bag. There were five dollars in it; she'd just been paid tonight. She took two of them out. She didn't hand them to him, she dropped them disdainfully on the floor before him, with a million dollars worth of contempt.

Somewhere in back of her, Fisher spoke. "Let him use the bottle. You're only pushing me down a step lower, doing this."

She said without turning her head, "You're sick. Your mind's sick. I've watched you every night. No one's pushing you down, you're pushing yourself down."

The ringleted man in the doorway said, "Don't do this, Joan, what's matter with you? Why you quit?"

She didn't answer. She picked up the kit-bag standing at her feet, put two fingers behind Fisher's seedy coat-sleeve, said: "Come on, shall we? We don't belong in here—either of us."

Behind them, as they went out into the darkness side by side, the crest-fallen bartender was saying to anyone who would give him an ear: "She must be crazy, she don't even know the guy, never saw him before!" And then with a guilty look at his partner: "She was the best singer we ever had in here too."

A block away they stopped, in the ghostly light of an arc lamp. He turned toward her. "A man doesn't thank a woman for doing a thing like that," he blurted out. "That was the finishing touch you gave me in there just now. Hiding behind your skirts. Letting you buy them off for me."

She said, almost impatiently, "You're so easy to see through! Looking at you, listening to you, almost I know your whole story—without actually knowing any of it. A code is doing this to you. A code of your own that you've violated, or think you have. You'll go down under its weight, let it

push you down into what that mug mistook you for. But you won't, you can't, slur its weight and responsibility off you." She shrugged as though that was all there was to be said. "Well, aren't you worth saving—from bottle glass?"

He smiled derisively.

She went on, "You didn't see me slowly walking around that inside room with my mouth open, from table to table, three nights this past week. You didn't hear me. But I saw you. I watched you through the cheap music. You sat there at that little table just outside the door, looking my way but seeing ghosts. Your eyes were the only ones in the place turned inward. You drank until your head fell down, but you weren't drunk—you couldn't get drunk."

She picked up the little kit that contained her costume, made to move on once more. "My name's Joan Blaine," she said, "and I like people with personal codes, because I've got one, too. But handle it right. Don't go down under it; make it push you, lift you up, instead. Come back with me awhile and I'll make you a cup of coffee. I can see that you've been ill recently, and you've probably been sleeping around on park benches lately."

He moved weakly after her, shaking his head. "You're a funny girl. How do you know I won't turn on you, rob you, maybe even murder you?"

"Faces don't lie," she answered. "Why didn't you run out with your tail between your legs when he came at you with the bottle? A real bum would have. You faced him, hardly able to stand up. Besides, *some*thing, someone's, got to come out right for me."

"Most of it didn't?" he said, in the pitiful little threadbare room, with its single fly-blown bulb, its white-painted cot with the iron showing through.

"Most of it didn't." She handed him a chipped cup of steaming black coffee. "I didn't come to New York to sing in

a Third Avenue honkytonk at five dollars a throw. You'll never know how many tears and busted hopes this room of mine has seen. I was letting it get me down, too. The sight of you pulled me up short. That's why I quit my job so easily just now. Don't blame yourself for that. You've helped me, and perhaps I'm going to be able to help you before I'm through. Fisher—that what you said your name was?—you're going back and tackle this thing that threw you, all over again."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Yeah, I am." There was a steely glint in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "It isn't over why didn't I see that before? Just round one is over. But round one's never the whole fight. Even though I'm on my own now—"

She didn't ask him what he meant. "Then the credit and the glory'll be all your own too, look at it that way."

"I'm not doing it for the credit and the glory. I'm doing it because it was my job, and I can't find rest or peace until my job is done. And even though it's been taken away from me, I'll see it through—no matter what—!" He balled a fist and swung it with terrific emphasis around him where the shadows had been. Shadows that a man could fight, even though he couldn't understand them.

She smiled as though she'd gained her secret point. "All right, then," she said. "Tonight—there's a vacant room, little more than an attic, over me. Without a stick of furniture in it, without even a lock on the door. I'm going to give you one of the blankets from my bed, and you roll yourself up in it on the floor up there. No one needs to know. Tomorrow you and I are going out. You're going to get a shave and a necktie, and you're going after this thing that threw you, whatever it is. And I'm going to find the kind of a singing job I came to New York for, and lick it to a standstill when I do! Tomorrow—the world starts over for both of us, brand new."

He looked at her and he said once more what he'd said out on the street: "You're a funny girl. But a lovely one, too."

IT DIDN'T work itself out in no time at all, in an hour or a day or even a week, it never does. He'd slipped further down than he'd realized, and there were certain realities to be met first of all—to keep his head above water; to keep a roof over his head; to get his gun back out of hock. But he had to have money. He wasn't on the Bureau's payroll any more. So to have money he had to have a job. He knew he could have gone to Trilling or any of the other men that had worked with him, and written his own ticket. But his pride wouldn't let him. He would have worked for nothing, without salary, but—"Washington wants results," Trilling had said. He would have swept streets, waded through the filth of sewers, if only he could have had one thing back again—that little metal disk that had dropped so emphatically from the desk top into a drawer that day, pulling the sun and the moon and the stars down out of his sky after it.

So he sought Sixth Avenue and the melancholy Help-Wanted cards tacked up so thickly on its doorways, that usually mean only an unproductive agency fee. There was plenty that he could do—and agent's training is nothing if not painstaking, but most of it was highly specialized and in the upper brackets; there seemed to be more demand for waiters and dishwashers along here than for dead-shots, jiu-jitsu experts.

As he moved from knot to knot of dejected employment seekers gathered before each doorway to scan the cards, he became aware of a face that seemed to keep up with his own migrations from group to group. Which was not unusual in itself, since scores of people were moving along in the same direction he was. But this particular man

seemed to be studying him rather than the employment cards. Was it somebody who had recognized him from the old days, when he was with the Bureau? Fisher had a good memory for faces. He studied the man stealthily at first—he was a slimy, furtive-looking customer; but his clothes were both flashy and expensive. Fisher took care to keep his glance perfectly expressionless, to see if he could get the man to tip his hand. The man returned the look in a sort of questioning way, as though he were trying to ask him something.

Fisher took a chance, gave his head a slight nod in the affirmative. The man instantly left the group, strolled slowly on for a few yards, then halted with his back to the window of an empty store, obviously waiting for Fisher to join him.

Fisher moved as he had moved, with seeming aimlessness and unconcern, and stopped by him. The man turned his head the other way, away from him, then spoke through motionless lips even while he did so.

"Could you use any?"

FISHER understood instantly. A peddler, the lowest cog in that devil's hierarchy whose source of supply had been Belden, and whose capstone was lost somewhere in the nebulous clouds overhead. There had been a day when Fisher had hoped that pulling Belden out from under would bring the top man toppling within reach; that hope had been blasted. Fisher had to start over, single-handed now, at the lowest pier of the structure, work his way up. This slimy individual who tramped Sixth Avenue pavements probably no more knew who the ringleader was then Fisher did himself. But he was a means to an end.

Fisher understood the reason for the mistake the peddler had made, that only a short while before would have been so irretrievable. But then only a short while before, it wouldn't have been made. Now he, Fisher, still had the

telltale pallor and gauntness of his wounds and hospitalization. A misleading pallor, coupled with a suit whose cut suggested that he was not altogether penniless. So the peddler had jumped to the wrong conclusion. But then if anything backfired, the *could-you-use-any* gag could always be switched to shoelaces, razor blades, or anything equally harmless. Fisher knew many peddlers carried just such articles around with them in their pockets, just for an out. They never had the real thing; peddlers always traveled clean, to guard against sudden seizure and search. A second appointment was always necessary, no matter how well known both parties were to each other.

He answered the surreptitious question in a manner equally covert. “I could,” he said, and saw to it that his hand trembled unnecessarily as he lit a cigarette. That wasn’t wasted on the peddler.

“Who’s been handing it to you?” he said, “I never saw you before.”

Fisher pulled a name out of his mental card-index as you do a card in a card-trick. Someone that he knew had been rounded up while he was in Paris, was in a Federal pen now. “Revolving Larry,” he said.

“He’s at the Boarding House. So are half the others,” the man told him. “What’s your dish?”

Fisher knew the different underworld abbreviations for the deadly stuff—usually a single letter. “C,” he said promptly.

“We’re getting forty for it now. The lid went down something fierce six months ago.”

Fisher whistled. “I’ll never make it.”

“That’s what they all say. Ain’t you got some gold teeth in your mouth or something?” Then he relented a little. “I’ll get it for you for thirty-five, bein’ you’re an old buyer of Larry’s.”

Things must be pretty tough, Fisher knew, for it to come to that; Trilling and the rest must be doing a grand job.

Only he—he alone—had fumbled.

"I'll raise it somehow," he said. Ironically enough, he wasn't any too certain of being able to. Which was just the right attitude; too ready a supply of money would have immediately, raised the others suspicions.

"Go to Zillick's down the block. It has three booths at the back. Go in the middle one and wait. When you lamp me turning the pages of the directory outside, shove your money in the return-coin slot and walk out. Take it easy. Don't let the druggist see you. Your stuff'll be there when you go back for it. If you're even a dime short don't show up, it won't do ya no good. Twelve o'clock tonight."

"Twelve o'clock," Fisher agreed.

They separated. How many a seemingly casual street-corner conversation like that on the city's streets has just such an unguessed, sinister topic. Murder, theft, revenge, narcotics. While the crowd goes by around it unaware.

HE DIDN'T have thirty-five dollars. Go to Trilling or any of the others for it he could not and would not. Not because of any possible risk attached—he'd played and looked his part too well just now for the peddler to bother keeping him under observation.

He'd looked his part *too* well—that gave him the answer. He went back to the Mount of Olives, asked for MacKenzie, "So you want to borrow a hundred dollars?" MacKenzie said. He insisted on giving him a thorough physical examination first, as part of the bargain. Probably figuring it was the only way he could have got Fisher to submit to one. The results didn't seem to please him any too much.

"What've you been doing to yourself?" he snapped. "Not eating, and by the looks of you—See here, Fisher, if this is for liquor, you don't get it."

Fisher wondered what he'd have said if he knew what part of it was actually to be for. He said, "If it was for that,

why would I have to have a hundred? Ten would be enough. I don't go around giving my word of honor these days. All I can say is, it's not for liquor."

"That's sufficient," MacKenzie said briskly, and counted out the money. "For Pete's sake, soak a finn of it into a good thick steak. And don't be in any hurry about returning it. You working?"

Fisher smiled. "I'm starting to again—tonight at twelve." The full story of how he had been shot on the *Gascony* had of course never been divulged—either at the hospital or to the newspapers. Trilling had seen to the former, the *Compagnie Transatlantique* to the latter.

Wellington, who had been in the room watching him closely, said after he had gone: He's had a close shave, but it looks like somebody's beginning to probe for those bullets in his soul I spoke about."

"I think you love the guy," MacKenzie said testily, perhaps to get the fact that he'd loaned a hundred dollars out of his system.

"Sure I do," was the defiant reply. "You just finding out? I love every slug we ever took out of him, but what good does it do? He doesn't know a woman from a fire-hydrant."

But he was beginning to, even if he didn't know it himself yet. There was a difference to Joan's knock on his room door that evening, as though she too had had a break that day. It was the twenty-third day after they'd met in the honkytonk. He had his gun out, was sitting there cleaning it and going over it lovingly. It was like a part of him. He'd got it out about an hour before, with part of the hundred. He jumped nervously, thrust it out of sight under his mattress. The door of his room didn't have a lock yet, but she wasn't the kind would walk in on him, luckily, or she might have wondered, jumped to the wrong conclusions. He hadn't told her anything about himself yet, out of old habit and training that died hard. What he'd been, nor what it was that had thrown him. He'd tell her everything when—and if—the

second payoff came. And he had a long way to go yet before he reached that. Until then—

He went over and opened the door. She was standing there glowing. It always surprised him all over again, each time he looked at her, how beautiful she really was. Blond hair, blue eyes, and all the rest; somehow it all blended together into a gem. But that was for other men, not for his business. A shield in Trilling's desk drawer—that was *his* gem.

She said, "I brought in a can of spaghetti with me. Come on down. I've got news for you." And down in her room, while he pumped a can-opener up and down and—of course—gashed his knuckle, she asked: "What luck?"

"I'm on my way, that all I can say."

"Great. Looks like I am too. It's been on the fire for several weeks now, but I'm superstitious; I didn't want to say anything for fear I'd jinx it. Some fellow—he's new to show business—is opening up a road house tomorrow night. He has a spot for a specialty singer. Lots of backing and he doesn't care what he pays for his talent. I've already auditioned for him three separate times; I'm beginning to wonder if it's my voice he's interested in or if he just likes to have me around. He's not using a floor show, you see—just a band, and a combination singer and hostess. So by tomorrow I'll know definitely whether I've clicked or not."

"You'll click," he assured her, "unless the guy's stone blind."

She opened her mouth in pretended amazement. "The great block of ice is actually beginning to thaw!"

Chapter VII
Hot Spot

THE phone booth was cramped and stuffy, so small that the pane of glass kept clouding with his breath. He cleared it off each time with the point of his elbow, holding a dead receiver to his ear for a stall. At 12:10 the peddler was suddenly standing there at the little rack outside, wetting his thumb as he busily flicked the leaves of a city directory. He didn't look up.

Fisher took out the three tens and a five he'd prepared, wedged them tightly into the return-coin slot. He came out, walked by to the front of the store, lingered there by the door. The peddler seemed to find the elusive number he was looking for just then, went in the booth, came out again a moment later, and brushed by Fisher without so much as a glance.

It wasn't really necessary for Fisher to have the little pack-age that was back there in the booth now. This was not a decoy sale for the purpose of getting enough evidence to make an arrest. Fisher no longer had the authority to make an arrest, and even if he did have, he lacked witnesses. But he retrieved the packet nevertheless, to prevent its falling into the hands of some innocent person. He pocketed it and turned the corner in the same direction the peddler had.

Fisher walked on, then turned to glance quickly over his shoulder.

The peddler was still in full sight. Fisher plunged into the nearest doorway, lingered a moment, and came out—not exactly disguised but with a sufficiently altered silhouette to be mistaken for someone else at a great enough distance along the dimly lighted streets. His snugly buttoned coat

was open now, hanging loosely from the shoulders; instead of being bareheaded he had a disreputable felt hat jammed down on his head. A pair of heavily-outlined but lenseless eye-glass frames were stuck around his ears. He set out after the distant figure using a purposely altered gait and body-carriage.

When he returned to his room at three that morning, he knew where this minor bird-of-prey lived, what his name was. What remained to be found out was where and to whom he turned over the accrued profits of his transactions. That was tomorrow's job, for the peddler had made no further sales that night after leaving Fisher. Undressing, he left the little sealed packet in his coat pocket. It was probably three-quarters bicarbonate of soda, anyway.

He didn't see Joan in the morning, but he knew she had performed her usual self-imposed chore of brushing his suit before leaving, for it was neatly folded across the back of a chair just inside the door. He went back to where he had left off last night, resumed his vigil on the street corner near the peddler's room. They were ripping up car tracks on that street, and the presence of the WPA workers covered him beautifully. He dawdled on the curb, coatless, smoking and chatting with them, indistinguishable from the rest to a casual observer. Occasionally one would go out to the middle and strike a few lethargic blows with a pickaxe, very occasionally.

It was well past midnight again when he wearily climbed the rooming-house stairs, but the day hadn't been wasted. He knew now where the peddler forked over his intake, where he secured his stuff. He was creeping back up the ladder again, at least as high as when they'd sent him over after Belden.

There was a dim light still on behind Joan's door and he thought he heard a sound like muffled sobbing coming from inside, as he went by. Her hopes of landing the job she had

spoken of must have been dashed, the thing must have fallen through. He stopped and rapped lightly, thinking he might be able to cheer her up.

She didn't open for a minute or two. Then when she did, her eyes were bright and hard, like mica. She didn't smile.

"Did you land the spot?" he asked tentatively.

To his surprise she nodded, almost indifferently. "Yes," she said coldly looking him up and down as though she'd never seen him before. "I signed the contract this afternoon."

"You don't act very happy about it," he remarked uncertainly.

It was obvious something had happened to change her. "Don't I?" she said hostilely, and prepared to close the door in his face.

He threw out his hand and held the door open. "What's the matter, Joan? What's the rub? I thought I heard you crying just now—"

She flared up at that. "Don't kid yourself, mister!" she cried bitterly, "I don't waste my time crying over—over snow-birds!"

"So that's it!" He forced his way into the room, closed the door behind him.

She kept her back turned to him. "Go ahead; lie about it! Say that what I found in your coat-pocket this morning was sugar to feed the horses, or chemical to develop films! Go ahead, alibi why don't you?"

"No, it isn't," he said grimly, "it's cocaine. Now you listen to me, you little fool!" He caught her by the shoulders and swung her around to face him, and none too gently. "If you were a man I'd part your teeth in the middle—"

THERE were tears in her eyes again, tears of rage. "This crazy town's got to quit playing tricks on me! I can't take it any more! No wonder something threw you, no wonder

something got you down! And I wasted my time feeling sorry for you—”

“I wasn’t going to tell you,” he said, “but if you’re going to go around making noises like a kitten left out in the rain, then here goes. I was a Department of Justice agent. We were cracking down on the ring that imports and sells this stuff. They waylaid my kid brother, got him alone and unarmed, and shot him down like a dog. I got myself put on that job—I was in Texas going after marihuana smugglers at the time—I followed the man that did it to Paris. I got him, and I started back with him. What happened is too long a story to go into now. I made the worst hash of the assignment that anyone could make. He got away from me almost in sight of the dock, left me for dead. My badge was taken away from me. That was the thing that got me, that had me down when I first met you. I’m trying to come back now, trying to lick the thing singlehanded. I bought that stuff you found in my pocket purposely, from a peddler, as a means toward an end. Through him maybe I can get to the higher-ups.”

He glared at her. “Now you either take that or leave it. I’m not going to back it up with papers and documents—to try to convince you. Believe it or not as you choose.”

He could tell by her face she did. It was radiant again. “I might have known you had some perfectly good reason. The mere fact that what I found hadn’t been opened—Why, I remember reading about your brother. It was in all the papers the day I first came to New York; it had happened that very day. Fisher, the lady begs your pardon.”

“The lady’s going to make some guy a hell of a wife,” he assured her grumpily, “the way she goes through pockets. Now tell me about yourself.”

She had the signed contract right there with her. Six weeks at fifty a week, and, if she went over, it would be renewed for another six at seventy-five. Graham was the man’s name, and the formal opening was set for tomorrow

night. Luckily she wouldn't have to rehearse much, she was using most of the same numbers she had at the Third Avenue place, only one new one. She had to supply her own costumes, she rattled on, that was the only part of it she didn't like. And, oh yes, it was a little out of the way, hard to get to, but she supposed she'd get used to that. Chanticler was what they were going to call it, and they had a great big rooster set up on the grounds, outlined in electric lights, and fixed so that its head swung back and forth and it seemed to be crowing—

She broke off short, stared at him. "What are you looking at me like that for? You're all—white."

He said in a strained voice, "In Westchester? Just within sight of the Sound? A low white rambling place?"

"Yes, but how did you—?"

"I followed that peddler there and back today. On the return trip he was carrying several little parcels he hadn't had when he went in. I suppose if they'd been examined, they'd have been found to be samples of favors and noisemakers for the festivities. He poses as a toy- and novelty-maker. You've signed on as singer and hostess at what's really a dope-ring headquarters."

They were very still for awhile. Finally she said, in a small scared voice: "What shall I do, Frank?" She'd never called him by his given name until now. "How'll I get out of it? I can't—really I can't."

"You take the job anyway," he told her. "Nothing'll happen to you, you'll be all right. They're just using you, and the electric-lighted rooster, and the white rambling roadhouse, as a front. If you back out now, after wanting the job as badly as you did, you may be endangering yourself. It's safer if you go through with it. Besides, I'm going to be there—tomorrow night—within call of your voice."

She went white herself this time. "But suppose they recognize you?"

“It’ll be a ticklish spot,” he admitted, “but it’s a risk I’ve got to take. Trilling never exactly handed out publicity-photos of any of us around town, so I’m probably safe enough. Belden would be the only one would know me, and I hope he does!”

“But, you’re not going to walk in there alone, are you?”

“Certainly I’m going alone. I have to. I haven’t been assigned to go there, because I’m not a member of the Department any more, and accordingly I can’t ask it to back me up. I’ll either bring them this Graham, and Belden and the rest of the outfit too, or I’ll end up a grease-spot on one of the Chanticler’s tablecloths.”

She said, with almost comic plaintiveness, resting her hand on his arm, “Try not to be a grease-spot, Frank, I—I like you the way you are!”

At the door he said, “I’ll see you there, then, tomorrow night. Don’t let on you know me, try not to act nervous when you see me, or you’ll give me away. Little things like that count. I know I can depend on you.” He smiled, and faked a fist, and touched her lightly on the chin with it. “My life is in your hands, pretty lady.”

She said, “I had my costumes sent up there ahead, to the dressing room. My agent’s smart as a whip, he dug up some notice about an auction-sale they were having—the wardrobe of some wealthy Iowa woman who went out of her mind and had to be committed to an asylum. I went there today and picked up just what I was looking for, for that new number I spoke of, and dirt-cheap. Wait’ll you see, you won’t know me in it.”

GINGER ALE, the little gilt-edged folder said, was a dollar a bottle. You had to pay five dollars just to sit down, anyway, whether you ordered anything or not. Fisher’d had to pay

an additional ten, at the door just now, to get a table at all, because he wasn't known. Twenty dollars to rent the dinner jacket he had on, five dollars for cab fare to get out here—and oh yes, twenty-five cents for the crisp little white carnation in his button-hole. He smiled a little when he thought of the old days and the quizzical look Trilling's face would have worn if he'd sent him in an expense-account like that. When tonight was over the only coin he'd have left would be the six bullets in the gun under his arm. He hoped tonight would bring him something; he didn't see how he could come back again in a hurry.

He was up to his old tricks again—and it felt swell, like a horse must feel when it's back between the wagon-shafts—staring idly down at the little silver gas-beads in his ginger-ale glass, yet not missing a thing that went on all over the big overcrowded room.

They were drinking champagne, and most of them, he could sense, were just casual revelers, drawn here unwittingly to front for Graham, to aid a cause they would have shuddered at. Graham must have decided it was high time he had some enterprise to which he could safely ascribe the money he pulled out of the air—if he were suddenly pinned down. Awkward to be raking in money hand-over-fist and not be able to explain what it was derived from. By the looks of this place tonight, and the prices they were charging, he needn't worry; it could account for a big slice of his profits with just a little juggling of the books. And it made a swell depot and distribution center, Fisher could see that with one eye closed.

That gigantic electrically-outlined rooster outside, for instance, that towered high above the roof of the building, must be visible far up and down the Sound on the darkest night. It could come in handy as a signal and beacon for, say, small launches making shore from larger ships further out, sinister tramps and freighters from Marseilles or Istanbul, with cargoes of dream-death.

What gave the whole plan away to him, what showed that it was meant for something more than just a wayside ad to motorists going by on the Post Road, was that the sign was unnecessarily outlined in bulbs on *both* sides, the side that faced landward, and the side that faced the building—and the Sound. The people around him didn't need to be told where they were, they knew it already. He had a good view of the sign from where he was sitting, through a ceiling-tall French window. The side that faced outward toward the highway was illumined in dazzling white bulbs, the side that faced the building—and dwarfed it—was in red. Red, the color that means *Stop—Danger.* White, the color that means *All Clear—Go ahead.*

Here and there, spotted about the room, were quiet watchful individuals, whose smiles were a little strained, whose laughter rang false . . . They sat and minded their own business, while the rest of the guests raised the roof. They kept their heads slightly lowered, making geometric arrangements with the silverware or drawing designs on the tablecloths; they were taut, waiting for something.

Ten of them in all—no more than two at the same table. And no fizz at those tables, just black coffee and dozens, scores of cigarettes, chain-lighted, one from the last.

That stocky man standing beaming just inside the main door must be Graham, for he had an air of proud ownership, and he looked everyone over that came in, and twice Fisher had seen the maitre-d'hotel step up to him for unobtrusive instructions.

Suddenly the lights went down all over the place; the lighted rooster outside peered ruddily through the window outlines. People shifted expectantly in their chairs. Fisher murmured to himself: "Here she comes now. What a chance I'd be taking, if I didn't know I could count on her!"

He settled back.

There was a rolling build-up from the drums. Twin spotlights, one red, one green, leaped across the polished floor, found the door at the rear that led to the dressing room. Joan stepped out into the green spot, and a gasp of appreciation went all around the big silent place.

Chapter VIII
When Satan Sings

HE thought he'd never seen anything, anyone, so weirdly beautiful in his life before. But something like a galvanic shock had gone through him just now, had all but lifted him an inch above his chair for a moment. As though some forgotten chord of memory had been touched just then. Something about Joan reminded him of someone else, made him think he was seeing someone else. Before his eyes, a ghost from the past came to life and walked about in full sight.

Wait, that French mannequin, Belden's girl in Paris—that was it! No—that woman on the *Gascony,* that Mrs. Travis, that was who it was! But could it be both? And yet it seemed to be both. Stranger still, Joan didn't look in the least like either one of them, not even at this moment.

The red spot remained vacant, yet followed her around the room; the idea—and a fairly clever one at that—being that it contained the invisible tempter whom she addressed in her song, over her shoulder.

Slowly she circled the room from table to table, filling the place with her rich, lovely voice, making playful motions of warding off, equally playful ones of leading on. Then as she reached Fisher's table, suddenly she wasn't playful any more. She stiffened, seemed to glare; there was a noticeable break in her song.

The perimeter of the green spotlight fell across him too, revealed his face like a mask. He smiled up at her a little, admiringly, encouragingly. She answered—and yet there seemed to be menace, malice, in the parody of a smile that pulled her lips back clear of her teeth more like a snarl than

anything else. Unaccountably he could feel the hairs at the back of his neck bristling . . .

> Get Thee Behind Me, Satan—
> Stay where you are, it's too late!

Her bell-like voice, singing the Irving Berlin tune, throbbed down upon him; but its tone wasn't silver any more, it was bronze, harsh and clanging. He could see her bosom moving up and down, as though rage and fury were boiling in it.

She started to move backward toward the door by which she had entered, bowing to the thunderous applause that crashed out. But her eyes never once left his face as she did so. They were beady and hard and merciless. And that smile was still on her face, that grimace of derision and spite and undying hostility.

The lights flared up and as she stood there a moment by the exit door, her eyes finally left his face to travel the length of the room to the opposite doorway. He followed their direction, and saw Graham over there, pounding his pudgy hands together to show that he liked her.

Fisher looked back to her just in time to catch the beckoning toss of the head she sent Graham's away. Then she slipped through the door.

It was so obvious what that signal meant, and yet he couldn't believe it. No, not Joan. She wanted to ask Graham's advice about an encore; something like that, that was all. For more thoroughly than he realized, he had, in Nurse Wellington's words, learned the difference between a woman and a fire-hydrant these past few weeks, and he couldn't unlearn it all in a flash, couldn't teach himself to mistrust something he had learned to trust—any more than Belden could have in Paris, or Travis on the boat. Men's loyalty to their women dies hard—and almost always too late.

Graham was making his way around the perimeter of the room, to follow her back to her dressing room where she had called him. The background music kept on vamping, waiting for her to return and pick up her cue. A pale pink and a faint green ghost of the spotlights hovered there by the door, ready to leap out into full stength again as soon as the house lights went down.

The quiet, sullen men he'd noticed before didn't move their palms, their heads or their eyes. One of them glanced at his wrist-watch, without raising his arm. One of the gaudy women with them yawned in boredom. Outside, the rooster's red beak kept opening, closing, as its head and neck wavered back and forth, current passing from one circuit of lights to another, then back again.

Fisher kept pinching the bridge of his nose, groping, baffled. Why had Joan reminded him of two other women—one dead, one vanished into limbo—as she stood before his table a moment ago? Why had he thought he was seeing Mimi Brissard, and the Travis woman, when she didn't in the slightest resemble either one of them physically—nor had they resembled each other either, for that matter. Why had she seemed to be evil incarnate, the spirit of all wickedness, when he knew her to be just the opposite? It was more than just clever acting to go with her song; the very pores of his skin had seemed to exude her animosity, her baleful hatred. They couldn't be mistaken; that was an instinct going far back beyond man's reasoning power to the jungle ages.

ONLY a very few seconds went by; how hurried her whispers to Graham out there must have been! Graham came out again, sideward, his head still turned to where she must be standing, unseen behind the door. His face was whiter than it had seemed just now. His glance, as he turned to face the room again, arched over Fisher,

purposely avoiding looking at him directly. He didn't return to where he had been. He went casually to the nearest table where a group of those silent, waiting men was. He lingered a moment, then moved on to another table. The flamboyant woman who had been the tablemate of the man he had spoken to, stirred, got up, moved slowly toward the entrance as though she had been told to leave. Her companion kept his eyes lowered; but as the woman neared the door she couldn't resist throwing a casual little look over at Fisher.

He didn't see it. Graham had signaled the band, and Joan had come back. The lights went down again and Graham's movements, and the mass-exodus of the lady-friends of the "deep thinkers," were concealed by the darkness, while she sang.

She started her routine in reverse this time, began at Fisher's table instead of going around the other way and ending up at it. Began, yet ended there too, for she didn't move on, stayed there by him while the sultry, husky song enveloped him.

He sat there motionless, while she moved in closer, came around the table to his side. Slowly her bare arm slipped caressingly around his shoulder, inched affectionately down the satin-faced lapel toying with the white carnation in his buttonhole.

And again Fisher saw Mimi Brissard writhe her snakelike way up the stone steps of the Bal au Diable, the tiny little train wriggling after her—saw her stop and look back at him after she had betrayed her man. Again the heady, musk perfume of Mrs. Travis was in his nostrils; she seemed to stand beside him in the *Gascony's* deck . . . Was he going crazy? Had those bullets done something to his mind? Was it just the colors of the dress—red and black—the cut of it—or was it something more?

The caressing hand had traveled a little lower than the flower now, was turning insinuatingly in under his coat. And

the audience chuckled, thinking she was pretending to be a gold-digger, playfully pretending to pick his pocket. There was a momentary break in the spotlight-beam, as though the switch had been thrown off then on again. For an instant or so they were blacked-out, he and Joan. Then the green glare came on again. Her hand wasn't inside his jacket any more, it was held stiffly behind her back, hidden from the room at large. A white shirtfront gleamed there in the dimness as Graham approached her from behind, then ebbed away into the dimness again.

Fisher's hand reached upward, came to rest on her shoulder. He touched the fabric of her gown. A surge of unreasoning hatred welled through him. That too seemed to be a memory out of the past. He remembered doing this, turning his hand back like this, turning the lining of a gown —

She tried to pull away, and he held her fast. The shoulder of her dress turned over as he pulled, and on it was a little silk cachet. In the flickering green light he made out dim lettering.

I'm Dangerous Tonight—Maldonado, Paris.

THE yell that came from his throat drowned out the music, silenced it. His chair reeled backward with a crash, and he was erect, facing her. "It's the same one!" they heard him shout. "*Now* I know! *Now* at last—!"

The green spot sputtered out. The lights flared up. People jumped to their feet all over the room, staring petrified at the incredible sight taking place there in full view of everyone. For the man the girl had been teasing seemed to have gone suddenly mad, was growling like a hydrophobic dog, tearing, clawing at her gown. It came off in long,

brutally-severed tatters, revealing strips of white skin that grew and grew before their very eyes, until suddenly she stood there all but nude, trembling, statuelike.

They were shouting: “Stop him! He’s crazy …!” But a mad, panic-stricken rush for the door had started on the part of all the other celebrants, that couldn’t be stemmed, that hampered those who were trying to reach the attacker and his victim. Other women were screaming while their men pushed and jostled, trying to clear a way for them.

She alone hadn’t screamed through the whole thing. She stood there facing him quietly now, given a moment’s grace while Graham and all his silent men tried to force their way to them.

He took his coat off and threw it around her. The tattered remnants of the dress lay on the floor behind her. There was a look on her face impossible to describe—the stare of a sleep-walker suddenly awakened—then she let out a low, fearful cry.

“I’ve betrayed you, Frank! I’ve killed you. I told them what you were—and what you were here for—”

His hand instinctively jabbed toward his exposed shoulder-holster. It swayed empty at his touch.

“I took that too,” she gasped, “while I was singing—I gave it to Graham just now—”

She was suddenly thrust aside, and they were ringed about him—ten of them and Graham, their guns bared and thrusting into his body.

Outside, the enormous rooster was slowly pivoting on its base, turning its white-lighted side inward, toward the roadhouse—and the Sound. White—that meant *All Clear—Go ahead.* Far across the water sounded the faint bleat of a steamer’s whistle, two short ones and a long one, that seemed to end in a question-mark: “*Pip? Pip? Peep?* Are you ready?” Some lone night-bound vessel, furtively prowling

these inner waters of the Sound instead of sticking to the shiplane that led up through the Narrows.

"No, not in here."

Graham's crisp command stopped death, forced it back from the very muzzles of ten guns. "Take him out where he can get the right treatment," he said and grinned a little.

Through the encircling ring of his enemies Fisher had eyes for only one thing—the face of the girl who had done this to him. She was wavering there in the background, like a sick, tormented creature, his coat still around her. He saw her clasp her hands, hold them out toward him in supplication, unseen by all the others. As though trying to ask for pardon. The coat slipped off her shoulders, fell unheeded to the floor.

He stared at her without emotion. She might have been a stone or a tree stump. She was beneath his anger. To them, scathingly, he said: "Well, get it over with. Make it fast . . ."

One of the guns reversed, chopped down butt first, caught him across the mouth. His head went back, came forward again. A drop of blood fell, formed a splashy scarlet star.

Graham said with almost comic anxiety: "Not on my floor here! What's the water for?"

"Who's so smart now?" the girl behind them shrilled vindictively. "Use me for a stepping-stone, will you! You're going to get it now, and I hope you get it good!" She had changed again. The tattered dress was nowhere near her, its remnants lay kicked far out on the deserted dance-floor, and yet she had changed back again—to all she had been before, as though the very core of her being had become corroded with hate and malice.

Graham patted her commendingly on the shoulder. "You're worth your weight in gold, honey. You wait for us here, put something over you so you don't catch cold. Graham's going to get you a mink wrap for this, and a diamond bracelet, too, if you want. You're riding back to

town tonight in my own private car. We won't take long. If you hear any screaming out on the Sound, don't pay no never mind. It'll just be the wind coming over the water. All right, boys."

As they hustled him toward the entrance, in what was almost an exact replica of the old "flying wedge" at Jack's, he glanced back over his shoulder. Again she had clasped her hands, was holding them out tremblingly toward him.

They hurried down a long slope to where black water lapped whisperingly against the gray sand. "Okay, left," Graham said tersely. They broke up into Indian file, except for the pair gripping Fisher grimly each by an arm bent stiffly backward ready to be broken in its socket at the first sign of resistance. The Sound was empty of life, not a light showing anywhere. Their footsteps moiling through the soft sand were hushed to a hissing sigh.

"Flirt a little," Graham's voice came from the rear.

Somebody took out a pocket torch, clicked it on, off, on, off again. There was an answering firefly-wink straight ahead, on the shore itself. "There they are. They landed a little off-center."

THE white blur of a launch showed up, seemingly abandoned there at the water's edge; there was not a soul anywhere in sight. But a human voice crowed like a rooster somewhere near at hand. *Kri-kirri-kri-kre-e-e-e-e.*

Graham called out impatiently, "Yeah, yeah, it's us, you fools!"

Dark figures were suddenly swarming all over the lifeless launch; their trousers were rolled up to their knees. They started passing small-size packages, no bigger than shoe-boxes, to those on shore.

"Come on, reach! Come out closer. Don't be afraid to get your feet wet."

Fisher spoke for the first time since they'd hauled him out of the club-house. "Pick-up and deliver. Nice work."

There was a sudden stunned silence, tension in the air. "Who's that? Who you got with you?"

"Dead man," answered Graham tonelessly. "He's going out to the ship when we get through."

"Wait a minute! I know that voice!" One of the men jumped down into the water with a splash, came wading in, stood before Fisher. A torch mooned out, upward, between them illumining both faces.

Fisher said, almost inaudibly, "Belden. So you came back couldn't stay away. Glad you did. You came back to your death. They can kill me ten times over, but I'm still going to get you, murderer, somehow!"

Belden lunged, grabbed Fisher by the throat with both hands, sobbing crazily: "What does it take to kill you? What does it take to make you *stay* dead?"

They had to pry him away. Graham yelled: "No, no, no. Not here. On the boat. C'mon. Break it up."

Eight of those that had come with him were toiling back, Indian file, each with a shoe box under each arm.

"Tune her up!" A motor started to bark and cough, the boat to vibrate. Graham said something about his fifteen-buck patent-leathers, went wading clumsily out, scrambled aboard. Fisher was dragged floundering backward through the shallow water, caught at the hands and feet, hauled up over the side. He watched for the moment when his legs were freed as his spine slipped up over the rim of the boat; buckled one, shot it out full-length into one of the blurred faces.

The man dropped like a log, with a long-drawn exhalation that ended in a gurgle. They floundered around in the water over him. A voice exclaimed, "Holy—! He's busted Mickey's jaw and nose with that hoof of his! Pull him up out of there!"

Vengeful blows from the butt of a gun were already chopping Fisher down to his knees; in another second he'd gone flat on his face. He went out without a sound somewhere at the bottom of the little launch. The last thing he heard from far off, was Graham's repeated cry: "Wait, can't you—and do it right? I got ideas—"

BELDEN was saying, in the lamplit cabin of the motionless ship, "You can give the instructions, but I'm laying it on him personally. You can even take it out of my cut if you want to, I'll pay for the privilege, that's how bad I want it!" Fisher opened his eyes with a groan.

"So you're awake, stupid!"

Fisher said, trying to stem the weakness in his voice: "Just how personal do you want it, louse? 'Cause I want it personal too. You remember Jimmy Fisher, don't you?"

"Yep," Belden said, "we made him run the gauntlet down the stairs of an old five-story brownstone house. On every landing we put another bullet in him, but not where it would kill him. He started to die on the fourth landing from the top, so we rolled him the rest of the way with our feet."

Fisher's eyes rolled idly upward to the oil-lamp dangling on a hook. "Jimmy's all right," he said thoughtfully, "all a guy can do is die once. The big difference is whether he dies clean—or dirty—"

His arm suddenly swept out from the shoulder in a long downward arc. The hoop of the oil lamp sprang from the hook, there was a tinny crack and a crash of glass where Belden's face had been, and then he was lathered with lazy little flame points, giving off feeble light as if he were burnished with gold paint.

They tried to grab him, hold him, beat the flats of their hands against him. He gave a hoot-owl screech, turned and bolted out the door, and the cabin turned dark behind him. Fisher sprang after him with a quickness he hadn't thought

he’d be able to muster; left all his contusions and his gun-butt bruises and his aching human weariness behind him where he’d been, and shot out to the deck after that flickering squawking torch like a disembodied spirit of revenge.

Belden was poised on the rail, like a living torch. He went over with a scream, and Fisher went over after him, hurdling sidewise on one wrist. They must have both gone in at about the same spot. He got him below the surface, collided with him as Belden was coming up, and got the hold he wanted on his neck with both arms. They came up again together—not to live, but to die.

Fisher sputtered: “Now this is for Jimmy! This!” The throb that came when Belden’s neck snapped went through him. They went down again together.

When he rose to the surface again he was alone. The launch was chugging around idly near him, and angry pencils of light from torches came to a focus on his head, as he threw it back to get some air in. “There he is!”

“It’s taken care of, Jimmy,” he panted. “You can sleep tight.”

“Save it till you get to him—you’ll be right down to hell yourself!” The pencils of light now were suddenly orange, and cracked like whips, and made the water spit around his head.

Graham’s voice said, “I can get him. It’s a pushover,” and he stood up in the bow of the circling launch. Fisher could see the white of his shirtfront.

A violet-white aurora borealis suddenly shot up over the rim of the water—behind the launch—and Graham was an ink-black cut-out against it. Then he doubled over and went in, and something banged in back of him. A voice megaphoned: “Throw ’em up or we’ll let you have it!”

Distant thunder, or a high roaring wind, was coming up behind that blinding pathway of light.

Fisher wished it would get out of his eyes, it was putting the finishing touch to him. He flopped his way over to the near side of the launch to get out of the glare, caught the gunwale with one hand, and hung there like a barnacle, tired all over.

THERE were shoe-boxes stacked up on the tables next to overturned champagne-glasses, and a line of men were bringing their hands down from over their heads—all but Graham and a man sitting back-to-front on a chair, wrapped in an automobile-laprobe, watching everything, looking very tired very battered—and very eager. And, oh yes, a girl crumpled forward over one of the little tables, her blond head buried between her arms. Outside the rooster was black against the dawn; the current had been cut and they were pulling it down with ropes. Chanticler would never crow again to dream-laden ships out on the Sound.

None of it mattered very much to the bundled-up man in the laprobe just then: the questioning or the taking-down of statements or Trilling's staccato machine-gun firing of orders right and left. Only two things were important: an ownerless badge lying there on a table, and the tortured, twisted fragments of a dress huddled on the dance-floor.

They came to the badge first. Trilling took time off between orders to glance at it. Then he brought it over, held it out. "What're you waiting for?" he said gruffly, "It's yours."

Fisher took it with both hands and held it as a starving man would hold a crust of bread. Then he looked up and grinned lopsidedly. "Washington?" he said.

"Washington wants results," Trilling snapped. "Well, look around you. This whole job is yours. Don't try to act hard about that hunk of tin either. I know you're all mush inside." He glanced at the girl and said, "What's *she* crying about? She got us out here in time, didn't she?"

They came to the other thing last. “Fire extinguishers?” said Trilling as he was ready to leave in the wake of the captives, “What do you want fire extinguishers trained on the floor for? There’s no fire.”

“There’s going to be,” said Fisher.

He stepped forward with a tense, frightened face, struck a match, dropped it on what lay coiled there like something malign, ready to rear and strike at whatsoever ventured too near it. He retreated and put his arm around the girl, and she turned her face away and hid it against his chest. “I think I—see,” she said.

“Never mind. Just forget it,” Fisher murmured, “That’s the only out for both of us.”

A glow lit up the dance floor of the Chanticler. There was a hissing like a pit of snakes or a vat of rendering fat. There wasn’t any smoke to speak of, just a peculiar odor—a little like burnt feathers, a little like chemicals, a little like sulphur or coal gas. When the flames they had fed on were reduced to crumbling white ash, the fire died down again, sank inward. Then at the very last, just as it snuffed out altogether, a solitary tongue—thin as a rope and vivid green—darted straight up into the air, bent into the semblance of a question-mark, poised motionless there for a split second. Then vanished utterly without a trace.

A gasp went up. “Did you see that? What was it?” A dozen pair of trained eyes had seen it.

Trilling answered, after a long horrified silence. “Some chemical substance impregnated in the material the dress was made of, that’s all, A dye or tincture of some kind—”

Fisher just stood there lost in thought, without saying anything. There is always a rational explanation for everything in this world—whether it’s the true one or not. Maybe it is better so.

THE END

OFT IN THE SILLY NIGHT

I HAVE been on the local constabulary here in our lair city—well, all right, village—quite a spell. In that time I calculate I have made twenty-two and a half arrests, all told. The half-arrest was a midget belonging to a side-show, who threw a brick through the window of Donovan s saloon, because he couldn't get a drink inside, because the top of his head didn't show above the bar and Donovan couldn't tell where the order was coming from.

The point I wish to make is that each of those twenty-two and a half times the arrest was made against the person's will, they didn't come walking in and ask for it. Not until the day this Mortimer J. Griggs came walking in the stationhouse, Ed—that's our constable—and I had just begun our afternoon game of checkers, Blackie the station-house cat was curled up dozing in the corner, and Buster, our one patrolman, was over at Main and Elm keeping an eye on the brand-new cement sidewalk, our city's first, that had just been laid down. Complaints had come in that folks were gouging their initials into it. Everything was as peaceful as you could ask for, when a sort of shaking like an earthquake started in. Then a sound like artillery practice, mixed with grunting and squealing like a herd of pigs. Right after that the Griggs' Oldsmobile chugs to a stop outside the door—brass carriage lamps shining in the sun, with Griggs himself at the wheel in his goggles and duster, and

Mrs. Griggs sitting way up high on the back seat, also in goggles and duster and motoring veil. The Griggses have the only motor-buggy in town, in the whole county, matter of fact. They also have the only authentic, imported French castle, which they had taken apart, brought over stone by stone, and set up again out toward Meadowbrook. But more about that later. Griggs made his money by thinking up a toothpaste that lay down flat on the brush instead of curling up and rolling off. Mrs. Griggs used to be the Mary Thompson who worked down Pop's Lunchroom on the Square.

Anyway, in he comes raring, bangs his fist down on Ed's desk, and says in a voice like a man who has been goaded beyond endurance: "I want to be arrested! I want to be locked up, do you hear me?"

We just stare at him open-mouthed. "You what?" says Ed finally.

"You heard me," he says in a voice shaking with righteous indignation. "I want to be put where I can get some peace and quiet, where I can get one good night's sleep at least! I'm ready to crack wide open! I can't stand another night of it, I tell you?"

Ed says judiciously, "What seems to be bothering you?"

"*They* are!" he flares.

"Who's they?"

"Ghosts!" he sputters.

We just sit back and look at him. Then we look at each other. Now this is the year 1908, here in the United States of America, with Teddy Roosevelt, President, and a wonderful invention like an automobile standing right outside the door big as life, and he expects us to believe there is such a thing as ghosts.

"I don't blame you," he snaps, "I didn't believe in them either. I went ahead and bought it, even after they told me on the other side it was haunted; Mary thought it'd be kinda stylish. But now I've seen 'em with my own eyes, drat

it! Candles going up and downstairs all night long by themselves. Doors swinging open without anybody behind them. We've been without servants since yesterday morning. They left in a body when blood ran from all the water-faucets!"

GRIGGS takes a deep breath, pulls his coat together in front to show how much slack there is. "I've lost twenty pounds in the last three weeks, just from doing without my right amount of sleep! I work hard at my office out at the toothpaste plant all day, and when I come home and try to get a night's rest, what do I get—spooks!" He acts about ready to break down and cry from aggravation.

Ed is beginning to act a little doubtful, I mean about there not being spooks. After all Griggs is one of our most influential citizens, and a man like him wouldn't get so excited about nothing. He must have seen *something.* "You sure it ain't somebody just trying to play a practical joke on you, trying to drive you out of the place?"

"I thought of that; that was the first thing come to me," Griggs says. "I'm a hard-headed business man and I don't frighten easy—only when the Market dips. Now who is there in these parts, would you say, who would have a reason to try to scare us out of the place?"

"Only people in the county, outside of yourselves, with enough money to live in a castle like that would be the Joneses. I understand they tried to buy it at the same time you did, over there in France, but you beat 'em to it."

"Exactly! So what'd we do? We invited the Joneses to spend the weekend with us as our guests. Now if the spooks was somebody they hired to try to get rid of us, wouldn't they lay off them themselves?"

"Didn't they?"

He says, “Did Rutherford Jones tell you how he got that busted foot he’s been laid up in the hospital with these past two weeks? Jumping into the moat from his bedroom window to get away from them! And she’s had fainting spells ever since! They wouldn’t buy the place now if I paid ’em to take it off my hands!”

Ed is stroking his jaw, I can see that he’s inclined to agree with Griggs now that there *are* ghosts, only thing he’s trying to decide is what to do about it. “Looks like you need protection,” he says slowly.

Griggs waves his arms helplessly all around. “Don’t gimme that! I thought of that too, long before I ever came in here today! I went in to New York and Hired me one of these private defectives for a bodyguard Monday last.”

“Where is he now asks Ed.

“At a sanitarium in the Poconos!” snaps Griggs. “They don’t think he’ll ever be the same again, he’s gotta have a trained nurse night and day.”

“Huh!” says Ed, with professional scorn.

“Huh nothing! He was a former Spanish-War man, that’s what he was, one of Teddy’s Rough Riders from San Juan Hill and a dead-shot. He brought two big Colts with him, didn’t go to bed at all that night, stayed up laying for them with all the lights out.”

“And did he see them?”

“Did he see them!” Griggs laughs bitterly, takes out a handkerchief and mops his face. “He emptied his gun at one at point-blank range, at point-blank range I tell you, and the bullets went right through it without hurting it! That left him pretty badly shaken, but he’s a former Rough Rider, remember, they don’t give in easy. He followed another along the hall and cornered it. It must have been hungry or something. He says it was eating cobwebs as it went along. And what happened this time was what gave him the finishing touch.”

“What happened?” Ed and I both say together, hanging on his words.

“WHEN he emptied the second gun at this one, again at point-blank range, it scooped the bullets up and swallowed them right before his eyes. And then it rubbed the place where its stomach was supposed to be, like they tasted good! The bullets, of course, were too heavy on account of being lead, and they dropped right through it in a little heap on the floor. We found him down there in the morning, the Missus and I, hiding under the table, talking away to himself just like a little kid, poor fella.” Ed blows out his breath. Then he pulls himself together, straightens up, all constabulary dignity. “Well, now, Mr. Griggs,” he says, “there’s protection, *and* protection. I don’t care if he was a Rough Rider, you should have come to us in the first place. We’re your fellow townsmen. We’ll give you the kind of protection this matter requires. Won’t we, Mac?” he says to me.

“You bet we will!” I say heartily, and I step over to the door to see if there is any sign of our patrolman yet.

“You’ve come to us for protection and by golly we’re going to see that you get it!” he goes on. “That’s what we’re here for!”

“That what we’re here for,” I agree stoutly, and I am just about to step out and go after Buster, the patrolman, when suddenly I hear the most awful sounds behind me that the English language ever made.

“Mac here,” I hear Ed remarking calmly, “is going back with you to that castle, and he’s going to stay there on special duty until this business has been cleared up once for all. You have absolutely nothing further to worry about. Ready, Mac?”

I am ready all right—just about ready to drop in my tracks. But Ed goes on, “He’s a good man, let me tell you,” and after he’s said that, I haven’t much choice in the matter.

I ask Griggs half-heartedly if he’s sure he wants to stay in the castle tonight, maybe if there was no one around to frighten for a couple nights they’d get discouraged, go somewhere else.

“I doubt it,” he says hopelessly. “They’ve probably been in it hundreds of years. And it’s my home. You know how it is, a man’s castle is his home. I paid good money for that place.”

“Well, they’ve met their Waterloo,” I let him know, and I notch my suspenders higher. It’s a sign I mean business whenever I do that.

“Plaindale,” beams Ed proudly, “needs more men like you. Better take a gun. There used to be one for shooting squirrels around here some—”

“After what I told you about the private detective,” mourns Griggs, “what good would a gun be?”

We can’t find one, anyway, there isn’t much call for firearms in a law-abiding community like ours, so I take a grip on Ed’s hand, and follow Griggs to the door. Then I come back and take another grip on Ed’s hand, just for luck.

“You did that before,” he lets me know suspiciously, “You ain’t feeling blue by any chance, are you?”

“I’m seein’ red. I’m in the pink of condition, and I’m going to do this job up brown,” I contradict. And I think of that old Roman guy that said he’d either come back on top of his shield or underneath it.

We go out to the Oldsmobile and Griggs apologizes because there isn’t any equipment for me to wear on the drive—like goggles and a duster and gauntlets. “We law-enforcement agents are used to roughing it,” I let him know with Sparta a endurance.

He goes up ahead, cranks, and races the engine to the front seat. On the seventh try he beats it to the wheel before it dies. A couple of little boys help us start off with a push from behind, and we're on our way. As though there can be ghosts in an age of such scientific marvels!

WE can't talk much on account of the vibration, which makes it dangerous to use your tongue. It gets dark about halfway to the castle and Griggs switches on the brass headlamps, but they only make the trees and bushes look more scary than ever. A jackrabbit hops across the road in front of us and Griggs squeezes the rubber bulb attached to the horn when I am not expecting it. It goes *"Oink-Goou!"* and I nearly jump out of my skin. "Don't do that again unless it's absolutely necessary," I suggest when I have gotten my wind back. Which was some time later.

In about half-an-hour more the castle shows up, very eerie against the night sky. It isn't exactly a homey-looking place, and to make it worse a big cartwheel moan has come up directly behind it and splashes it full of shadows. It has four towers, one on each corner, and a wide ditch all around it, and for a doorstep they have a drawbridge.

Mrs. Griggs leans over from the back seat and touches him on the shoulder, and we nearly go off the road, with the jump he gives. "Did—did you leave a light burning in the northeast tower, Mort?" she chatters, pointing. There's a tiny pin-head gleam twinkling through one of the slits that they called windows in the old days, and used to shoot arrows through.

"Of course not," he shivers, "the sun was still up when we started out, and you know I never go up into them things anyway, on account of all the cobwebs and bats and things."

"Then it's *them,"* she whispers. "They're starting in early tonight . . ."

Right while we're staring fearfully up at it, *whiff* the light goes out. The chugging of the engine must have carried up there on the still air.

He and Mrs. Griggs are both looking at me sort of expectantly. "If you could get up there quick," he hints, "maybe you could sort of catch them red-handed."

I can't think of any excuse for backing out, much as I would like to, so we trot across the drawbridge on foot and lie unlocks a little door down ill the left-hand corner of a great big one the size of a barn, which they used to walk their horses through when they came back from war.

"Take those stairs over there," he says. "Have you got one of these newfangled pocket batteries? I never got around to wiring the towers of the castle for electricity." Which is a fine time to be told that! All I have with me is a pocketful of big sulphur-matches, which I helped myself to from the general store last time I was in. I can't turn around and come down again, because Mrs. Griggs has tiptoed in after us and is watching me, half-scared and half-admiring. So I go jogging up, sort of surprised at my own feet for playing a dirty trick like this on me.

"Go with him, Mort," she urges, "two heads are better than one. Sometimes," she adds dubiously.

"Right away," he agrees, going in the other direction, "just as soon as I get the car put away in the barn out of the dew."

ABOVE the second floor, where the turret part begins, the lights quit and the stairs begin spiraling around worse than a corkscrew. I start lighting matches one by one to see my way. Between standing still and thinking about what is up ahead, and going up and finding out, I am just as scared one way as the other, so I may as well go on up. Every time I stop, anyway, there is a big wavering shadow of myself up

ahead, and another one down below, so I keep going in self-defense.

The top of the stairs opens into a little round room, with slits all around it letting the moon in, and spiderwebs in the corners, and a mouse making a run for its hole. It was here that we saw the light coming from, but there's no sign now that anyone was ever in here, and I certainly didn't pass anyone on the stairs coming up, not even a ghost or a draft of air. There's an ancient iron ladder flat against the wall, leading up to a trap opening onto the tower roof, and I go up that to investigate. I dislodge the trap with one shoulder after a little trouble and stick my head through, and hold up my hand with a match in it. There's nothing up there, just a flat roof with a slotted circular parapet running around it, that they shot their crossbows through. A long row of things that look like black socks dangling around on the inside of it start coming to life and squeaking—bats!—so I back down in a hurry and close the trap after me.

As I pull my head down I have a disturbing optical illusion that a whole zig-zag row of the big stones in the wall, in the room below, are just slipping back into pace, and I nearly let go and fall off the ladder backwards for a minute, but I buck up by telling myself it was probably just the wavering light of the match that made me imagine it.

I go over and start tapping the different slabs of stone with my knuckles, to see if any of them sound hollow. I am down to my last match by now, and Griggs is certainly taking his time about putting his car away and coming up to join me. Then suddenly I see something that I could have sworn wasn't there when I came up just now. A big hefty chunk of candle leaning out from an old sconce stuck in the wall. I examine it closely, but I can tell this wasn't what made the light we saw down below, because the wick hasn't been used and there is no sign of drippings down the sides. It is so old it has turned color, is a dark brown instead of

white, but at least it's a light. I just have time to touch my last match to the wick, before it goes out.

The wick is so dry with age that it just sputters and sparks, doesn't even give as much light as the match did, but it is all I have. I leave it there and go back to the business of wall rapping.

At the third rap I get something. In fact I get more than I bargained for. There's a hiss, like I've stirred up a dozen copperheads, and the whole tower-room turns a ghostly green around me, like a photographer's studio. I've fiddled around until I've finally raised them, and by the way my shadow falls on the wall in front of me, there must be an awfully bright one standing right behind me.

I'm more dead than alive, but I manage to do my collapsing in a circle instead of straight up and down, and face around the other way. Instead of a long, lanky, wispy thing like I expected it to be, it has taken the form of a round ball of green fire, and is floating slow and dreamy up to the ceiling, right above where the candle in the wall is.

There's another viperish hiss, a "Whoosh!", and its mate has joined it, in the shape of a red ball of fire. This one must be the male, it is more active. It hits the roof, bounces down to the floor, spreads out into a long snaky shape, and comes wriggling at me across the floor.

FLESH and blood can stand no more, at least not without a little elbow room. I give a sort of disembodied howl, jump over it toward the door, touch about every tenth step on the stairs and skin my elbows going down. Behind me the hissing keeps up as more and more of them show up and one or two even chase me part of the way down. Then they sort of spit disgustedly after me and give up.

I make the landing where the electricity begins in something under thirty seconds flat, which no old-timer

ever did, especially in those iron pants they used to wear. Then I slow up and think things over, as it would be bad for the Griggs' morale to see me coming down in such a hurry, they might think I was frightened or something. A swig of very high grade liquor standing there in a decanter helps my reasoning powers along too, and when I have quit—er—vibrating with rage so much, I go the rest of the way down with a very knowing look on my face. They can't put anything over on T.J. MacComber—well, not for long, anyway.

Griggs is just coming in from putting his car away, which is what you call convenient timing. He and his wife cannot help but admire my perfect self-control. "What happened? Did—did you see them?" they ask.

"They knew better than to let me see them," I growl. "Tried to frighten me by setting off a roman candle. I just stepped aside and waited till it got through going off. I only came down because I ran out of matches."

She quickly grabs me by the sleeve, although I have not budged in the slightest. "You are not going up there again," she says firmly, "until you have a bite of supper first. The laws of hospitality come first in my house—er—chat-oo."

I am too well-brought-up to contradict a lady, so we sit down at the table, which is in the ma n banquet hall of the chat-oo. I take long deep breath, which I hope they will understand is one of regret because I am being kept from my duty. Griggs remarks that in the old days they used to eat in here on rushes.

"What was their hurry?" I ask.

He then goes on to tell me the history of the chat-oo, which I have not asked for and would be a lot happier without knowing. It seems it was built by some old baron, who had spent most of his life robbing folks and had collected quite a bit of treasure. He hid the treasure somewhere in the walls, and then went and had all the tongues cut off the laborers who had worked on the place,

so they wouldn’t be able to tell anyone. Ever since that time the castle was supposed to be haunted.

“Well it sure is haunted,” I admit, “but that story about the treasure must be a fake, because you had it taken apart stone by stone when you brought it over and you didn’t find anything, did you?”

“Not a red cent,” Griggs admits.

At this point all the lights go out all over the castle at one time. “Hello,” he says in the dark.

“This is no time to exchange greetings,” his wife answers, “do something about it. Get candles.”

Before I let him light them I take a nick in each one, because the supper table is no place for fireworks, but this time they are pure tallow, the real article.

We take one apiece and go downstairs to the power-house to see if we can find out what is wrong. The chat-oo generates its own current, on account of being quite a spell out of town, and Griggs has converted what used to be the torture chamber into a power-plant. Besides all the coils and dynamos and things he has installed, there are cozy little pieces of bric-a-brac like thumbscrews and a rack left over, so it is no place in which to digest a meal properly.

“Fuse musta blown out,” he says, poking around. Then he turns around and asks, “What was that funny choked sound you just made?”

I have been incautious enough to open up an iron lady that used to hug people to death, and there is a skeleton still inside which has sort of leaned out and bowed to me. I am now sitting down backward on the floor. “A crumb got caught in my throat,” I explain, “that is probably what you heard.”

WE neither of us have any great knack for electricity, so we have to give up. “I’ll phone in for an electrical repairman,”

he says, “it’s a job for an expert.”

Mrs. Griggs overhears this where she is waiting for us and says, “The phone’s been cut too, I just tried it.”

“I’ll have to drive in myself, then,” he says, “Mac can stay here with you till I get back.” He puts on his hat and he opens the little door inside the big one. He sticks out his leg, then just pulls it back in time and hangs onto the side of the door. “Who hauled the drawbridge up?” he asks in a scared voice. “I left it down when I came in.”

“*Some* ghosts, that can do a thing like that!” I remark grimly.

He starts cranking the handle just inside the door that lowers it. He cranks till he gets red in the face, and nothing happens, the thing sticks up flat against the chat-oo wall. “Must be jammed,” he says, and keeps on cranking till he just flops against the wall. Then I try my hand at it, until my arm nearly comes off. It doesn’t, but the crank handle itself finally does. Also a great big loose chain tumbles down from above and goes into the moat with a splash, just missing my head by inches.

“Well,” says Griggs, kind of pale, “looks like we stay here—for tonight anyway. I can’t swim—can you?—and that thing out there is too wide to jump across.”

“Maybe you can find a plank wide enough to stretch across,” his wife says.

At that, we both say the same thing at the same time: “Nothing doing, we’d find it had been sawed through when we got halfway over!” And he closes the door again and bolts it.

“Oh I wish we hadn’t come back here tonight!” Mrs. Griggs whimpers. “I don’t like this at all, being cut off in this horrible place. I wish I’d never asked you to buy it, Mort.”

“I kinda do too,” he admits.

For that matter, so do I.

They decide to go up to their room and lock themselves in until morning. “Of course, you’ll probably want to stay up

and lay for them," he tells me. Which doesn't leave me a very wide choice of answers.

"Bet your bottom dollar!" I gulp, with a look over my shoulder, to see if just the three of us are present.

"Have you any plan of campaign?" Mrs. Griggs asks me nervously.

I just nod wisely. As a matter of fact I do have one; it is to make myself as inconspicuous as possible—even at the risk of being overlooked by them—and live and let live.

Griggs shakes hands with me at the foot of the stairs, as if he never expected to see me alive again. "Well, good luck and here's hoping. If you need any help, don't hesitate to call me." Then he adds, "But I'm a very heavy sleeper, you might have to keep calling and calling." Something tells me I may as well not bother, I can count him out right here and now—at least until the morning sun comes up.

They lock themselves in upstairs, shove heavy pieces of furniture up against their door, and that is the end of the Griggses for the night. Which leaves me holding the fort single-handed. There is practically no one I would not change places with just then, but I don't notice any offers, so it looks like I am elected.

The first thing I decide to do is make sure I am not caught without plenty of light, like I was up in that tower. Mrs. Griggs has shown me where their supply of candles 's kept, so I go down there to bring up as many as I can carry. It is in a little room halfway down to the dungeons, which they now call the storeroom but which used to be the place where the gaol keeper slept, according to what Griggs has told me—although I was surprised to hear they played football in those days, and indoors at that.

JUST as I am reaching out for an armful of candles to take upstairs with me, I hear faint slithering footsteps going by

somewhere close to me.

Like someone walking in carpet-slippers. I rush out to the stairs I just came down myself, and the lighted candle I hold up is shaking like a lightning-bug, but the stairs are empty, there isn't a sign of anything on them, up or down. And the muffled footsteps sound fainter out here. They sound as though they are earning from the other direction, through the wall of the storeroom. I go back and put my ear up close to it, and I can hear them plainer for a minute. Then they stop, as though they got to wherever they were going, and there's a smothered clink, as though somebody dropped something. I can't figure how anyone can walk around inside solid stone walls, even ghosts, unless there is a secret passage or something back there that even the Griggses don't know about. But I am not in very good shape for figuring out anything much just then; it is raining all down my face, and my knee-joints keep wanting to get together in a huddle, and the soles of my feet are craving to carry me at high speed up the stairs away from here.

Meanwhile something else has started in, where the footsteps left off. A blurred kind of rapping against stonework, with something hard like a chisel or mallet. I can hear it coming faintly through the wall. *Bop-bop-bop,* like that. And then a sort of whispering sound, like one ghost saying to another, "How's it coming, Whitey?"

I decide I have hung around down here long enough. There's such a thing as looking for trouble. If I would stay up above where I belong, in the main banquet-hall, I probably wouldn't be able to hear all these footfalls and tappings. And I always say, what you don't know, won't hurt you. So I grab blindly for an armful of candles and get ready to leave with more haste than dignity.

But in my hurry I reach for the wrong bin or something, and what I get is fly-paper. A sheet of it sticks to my cuff and I have a heck of a time prying it off. I look and there is a whole drawerful of the stuff. What they need it for I don't

know, unless that moat outside breeds flies and gnats in the summertime, or maybe some ambitious drummer once caught Mrs. Griggs off guard and beat down her sales resistance to practically zero. Why, there is enough of it laid away to paper the side of a—

And with that, I get the idea of a lifetime, practically an inspiration, you might say. I know this one must be good, too, because I don't get them very often, so I better use it while I have it, no telling when I'll get another. What it amounts to is simply this: flypaper is good for catching light-weight winged things like flies and mosquitoes. Well, what is more light-weight than a ghost? If fly-paper will catch mosquitoes and flies, why don't it catch ghosts too? All I have to do is spread it around in the right place, and they will probably float right onto it and get stuck. They certainly have feet, as those slithering footsteps I just heard prove.

I get so excited that I even forget to be scared of the tapping any more. I grab up the whole stack, bin and all, and cart it up above to the banquet-hall. Then I go back and bring up plenty of candles. The rapping, meanwhile, is keeping up for dear life, faster and faster, like they were getting excited about something too. It is down below there where the dungeons are, you can't hear it up above.

The more I think over my inspiration, the more it appeals to me. In fact it seems to be the only possible way. A gun is no good, that private detective proved that; and a lasso wouldn't work, because they can probably make themselves very skinny and slip right through the knot, and anyway I can't throw one. And even if they got sense enough to steer clear of fly-paper, which I doubt, because it is a modern invention after their time, at least I can spread it around in a sort of deadline, make them stay away.

IT is a cinch they can't be in two places at once, ghosts or no ghosts, and as long as they seem to be busy down below in the dungeons right now, the safest place to begin seems to be the other extreme of the chat-oo, that tower where we saw the light when we came home.

So I take a good stiff hitch in my suspenders to get up my courage, and up I go. There are no lights anywhere in the chat-oo now, so it is no worse up here than down below, and this is the one place I am sure they are *not* at, at the moment, so in fact it is a whole lot better. I park lighted candles all around me on the floor so I can see what I am doing, and then I go down again and bring up a jug of maple syrup for paste, and a paint brush to apply it with, because of course the paper has to go stick right side up if it's going to work at all.

Just as I am ready to start in. on my hands and knees, I feel a slight coolness, you might say a draft, on the back of my neck. Now it isn't coming from the trap-door in the ceiling, because that is closed, and it isn't coming from those slits in the wall, because they are way over my head when I am crouched down like this.

I don't turn my head and look behind me, because you never can tell what you might see in a place like this, and I don't want any surprises. I just sort of stiffen a little, and slowly swing my arm around behind me and feel around vaguely in the air. If it runs into anything cool or clammy standing there, I would rather just leave without looking.

I swing my arm like a dog wagging its tail, and there is nothing there but air, so I turn my head, and all I see is the stones of the wall. But the draft keeps up, I can feel it on my face now—especially as my face is quite wet with perspiration from—er—annoyance. Well, I never heard of a draft coming through solid stone before, and I wet my thumb and stick it out against the wall, and, sure enough, a regular breeze is coming through from somewhere. I play

the candlelight up and down it, and then I see that certain of the stones have no mortar between them, just a solid black line.

I remember what I thought I saw coming down the ladder that time, a whole zig-zag row of stone blocks slipping back ii to place. So I run down to the second floor, remove a great big flat-headed lance from a suit of armor they have standing there, bring it up and start prying along that black line where the draft is coming from. Before I know it. out swings a whole zigzag row of the wall stones in one piece, hinged together. Only they’re not real stone at all, just wood carved and colored to loot dike stones. And the opening is just wide enough to pass a person through sideways.

On the other side there are stairs going down into the blackness, and way below some place I can hear that tapping still going on. Well, it takes a lot of courage and a lot of time, and a lot of swallows out of that decanter I have brought up from below, but finally I am edging down those stairs with a candle held in front of me.

They open out into a little room, that is in very untidy condition. There are chop bones and crusts of bread lying scattered around on the floor, and a pair of cots that haven’t been made up, and unionsuits of black underwear and unionsuits of white underwear, and empty cans of red paint, and a lot of other things that I can’t explain what ghosts would want with. Beyond this little room there are more stairs going still further down, and the tapping and whispering is very clear up here, it must be just at the bottom.

Well, I have found out about all I need to know, and it is surprising how self-confident I have become. But then whoever heard of meat-eating ghosts, or ghosts that wear woolen unionsuits to keep from catching cold? I get busy then and there, and in about half an hour I have that whole inner flight of stairs from the little room on up to the tower papered with fly-paper, stuck on with maple syrup; not only

the steps but the sides of the stair walls too. I keep working my way backward, so as not to cut myself off, and when I am through there isn't enough fly-paper left over for a gnat to sit down on. Then I carefully close the secret door again, and I go down the outer stairs.

Now all that remains to be figured out is how to drive them up those stairs in a hurry, without stopping to look where they are going. Nearly everyone is afraid of ghosts, I say to myself, but what the heck are ghosts afraid of? Then I snap my fingers and T have it. Why, other ghosts, of course!

I go down to the power-house torture-chamber and take out that skeleton that is inside the iron lady I told you about. It is not a real one of course, Griggs has explained to me. There was a real one in it when they bought the chat-oo, but the government over there wouldn't let it be taken out of the country, so in order to keep everything just the way it was, Griggs had an imitation one made.

THE next thing to do is try to locate about where the ghosts are, from this side. The tapping and the whispering guides me some, but what chiefly helps is that in one of the dungeons I notice wisps of dust coming out between the stones, so they must be hacking away right on the either side of that wall. I bring down my skeleton and I wait for them to break through.

But they don't seem to keep at any one block of stone very long. The puffs of dust keep coming out here, and there, and all over the place. Which is no way to excavate. I say to myself, they'll never get anywhere doing that. Then suddenly something crunches, or caves in, on their side that doesn't sound like stone at all, it sounds like rotten wood or plaster or something. This seems to get them all stirred up; they start jabbering away a mile a minute, I never heard such garrulous ghosts. I also hear a lot of clinking sounds,

like they were playing poker with iron washers for chips. Then before I know what has happened, chinks of light start showing through from their side. I have left it dark on mine, of course. One of the big blocks in the wall, which are about four by eight, starts sliding in under the rest, which means they are pulling it out from where they are. It moves very easily, though, with a splintering sound, so I guess that is the fake one that caved in just now. I hear iron clinkers falling all over the floor on their side and rolling around, and foreign words.

I wait just long enough to get a squint through, when the block has dropped out of the way and left a big oblong window, and in the lantern light on the other side I can make out a pair of fluttery figures jumping up and down. They are the Chat-oo Griggs ghosts all right, because they are in long white things like sheets, with pillowcases for hoods and round holes where their eyes are. They look a lot like Klansmen. One is tall and skinny, the other short and fat.

I take my bony lady-friend by the back of the neck and shove her skull through. By moving the wires from in back I can make her lower jaw work up and down, like them guys with puppets. Then I stick one bony arm through, holding it at the elbow-joint, and stroke the short fat one playfully down the back with it. I pull that falsetto voice that always sends the fellows around the cracker barrel into stitches, and squeak: “Hello, boys! Anyone got a chaw of terbacky?”

They both give a sort of lift off the floor at the same time, as if they were going to fly right up through the ceiling, but instead they come right down again where they were before, with a couple of pretty heavy clumps for ghosts to make. *Bop-bop-bop!* like that. Then they tear loose with a couple of the most ear-splitting screeches you ever heard in your life. A noon factory-whistle is silent by comparison. They both get in each other’s way trying to get over to the stairs on their side at one time. The tall skinny one makes it

first, but the other one isn't far behind. *Whisht!* and they are gone, elbowing each other aside all the way up.

All the way up you can hear scuffling and squeaks of "Le baron! Le baron!"

THEY might stop to get their breaths back, and get over being frightened, in that little room midway up, with the cots and all the garbage, so just to keep up the good work, I climb through, haul the skeleton with me, and start up after them. The skeleton's celluloid feet trail along the stone steps with a sort of rattling sound, and I guess they don't stop to take any naps on their little, cots, because the next thing I hear is a sort of slapping, ripping sound, and they don't seem to be making much headway any more. So when I come to their little nest, I put the skeleton down, and pick up a fairly heavy brass candlestick instead and hold it upside-down, and go up the rest of the way, with a lighted candle in my other hand.

When I come to where the fly-paper ought to begin, there isn't any. It has been swept clean off the steps and stair walls, just leaving sticky syrup smears. But farther on, near the tower, I come upon plenty of it, in fact all there is. It has peeled off the walls and steps in one long chain, and rolled itself all up together in two big mounds, and both are heaving and fluttering and flapping weakly.

So I just hole, the candle up, gauge about where the heads are under all that goo, and give each one a good substantial knock with the brass candlestick—not too hard, but just hard enough—and all motion stops for the time being. Then I open the secret door in the tower, cup my hands, and holler down: "Oh. Mr. Griggs!"

He is, as he warned me, a very heavy sleeper—or else maybe my voice don't give him much confidence, in the middle of the night like that. Anyway, by the time he does

come out, the birds have been singing for an hour in the trees outside and the sun is up. He comes down the stairs in his bathrobe and asks, “Did you call me?”

“Yeah,” I yawn, “about one or two this morning.”

“Tsk, tsk,” he says, “don’t time fly, though!” Then he asks, “Who’s this gentleman sitting next to you on the bottom of the stairs in towels?”

“This is no gentleman,” I correct, “this is one of your ghosts. And I am having a very hard time understanding him. This elementary French reader that was all I could find in your library, has nothing but people losing their aunts’ cousin’s umbrellas in it. He is in Turkish towels because he is very raw and tender all over.”

Mrs. Griggs bends down close and takes a good look at him. “Why, I have seen him before!” she exclaims. “He was the original caretaker when the chat-oo was still over in France!”

“Yes,” I say, “I found that out, but not without a lot of lost-umbrella trouble. And you will find his wife, who was the other ghost, upstairs soaking fly-paper off in a hot bath. You might go up and give her a hand, as it is a very arduous proceeding.”

“Then it was really them two *live* people did all that?” Griggs asks. “But what about them self-opening doors and floating candles and all that?”

“I’ve got it all written down here. They simply tied black thread to the doorknobs, stood back out of sight, and swung them slowly open. Then jerked and snapped the thread off short when you came out to look, about the floating candles: they just dressed up in black unionsuits and pulled stockings over their heads, and carried them up and down stairs; you couldn’t see them themselves in the dark. About that poor Rough Rider that shot at them: they took good care to empty his two guns and put blanks in when he wasn’t looking, don’t worry. And about the faucets running

blood, they just emptied some cans of red paint into the water-tank, that was all."

"But why'd they want to go to all that trouble for? Why'd they want to scare us out of here?" he says.

"Oh, I nearly forgot!" I say, snapping my fingers. "You'll find a heap of moldy green washers, and tarnished bracelets and rings and things, lying down there just on the other side of the second dungeon from the right; they came on: of one of the fake stones in the wall that was all hollow inside; a chest, really, covered with moss and plaster. That was what they was after, and why they went through all this ghost rigmarole, so they could do their prospecting undisturbed. They finally located it just last night, as I caught up with 'em."

"But how'd they get *in?*" he wails. "I had it all taken apart, and every stone numbered and brought over!"

"The place was chockfull of secret stairs and passageways, and your construction-engineers carried out your orders to the letter. They put 'em all back in again on this side. Trouble is, I guess you didn't bother going over the blueprints very closely, or you would have known about them. These two followed you over here, when you interrupted their treasure hunting by buying the place and taking it apart around them. They sneaked behind your back as soon as it was up again and went back to work. Probably not caretakers at all, but a pair of high-class crooks posing as caretakers. They musta had great confidence that the treasure was still inside one of the building-blocks intact. Well, they were right."

He says, "Mac my boy," putting his hand on my shoulder, "part of it is going to you. If it wasn't for you, they woulda gotten away with it right under my nose, right in my own chat-oo."

"Heck," I said modestly, scuffing my heel, "if you feel that way about it, guess there's nothing I can do but take it. 'Bout a third'll be enough."

Later, driving me back to town in the Oldsmobile to turn my two prisoners over to Ed, he says to me kind of sheepish: “I knew all along those weren’t real ghosts, but—but I wanted an expert’s opinion about it.”

“Shucks,” I answer, “I knew it too! Y’don’t suppose they had *me* fooled, do you?”

Then each one of us says to himself, “Wonder if he believes me, the big whopping liar?”

DUSK TO DAWN

It was just beginning to grow dark when Lew Stahl went in to the Odeon picture theater where his roommate Tom Lee worked as an usher. It was exactly 6:15.

Lew Stahl was twenty-five, out of work, dead broke and dead honest. He'd never killed anyone. He'd never held a deadly weapon in his hand. He'd never even seen anyone lying dead. All he wanted to do was see a show, and he didn't have the necessary thirty cents on him.

The man on door duty gave him a disapproving look while Lew was standing out there in the lobby waiting for Tom to slip him in free. Up and down, and up again the doorman walked like "You gotta nerve!" But Stahl stayed pat. What's the use having a pal as an usher in a movie house if you can't cadge an admission now and then?

Tom stuck his head through the doors and flagged him in. "Friend of mine, Duke," he pacified the doorman.

"Are you liable to get called down for this?" Stahl asked as he followed him in.

Tom said, "It's O.K. as long as the manager don't see me. It's between shows anyway; everyone's home at supper. The place is so empty you could stalk deer up in the balcony. Come on up, you can smoke up there."

Stahl trailed him upstairs, across a mezzanine, and out into the darkness of the sloping balcony. Tom gave the aisle his torch so his guest could see. On the screen below a woman's head was wavering, two or three times larger than

life. A metallic voice clanged out, echoing sepulchrally all over the house, like a modern Delphic Oracle. “Go back, go back!” she said. “This is no place for you!”

Her big luminous eyes seemed to be looking right at Lew Stahl as she spoke. Her finger came out and pointed, and it seemed to aim straight at him and him alone. It was weird; he almost stopped in his tracks, then went on again. He hadn’t eaten all day; he figured he must be woozy, to think things like that.

Tom had been right; there was only one other guy in the whole balcony. Kids went up there, mostly, during the matinees, and they’d all gone home by now, and the evening crowd hadn’t come in yet.

Stahl picked the second row, sat down in the exact middle of it. Tom left him, saying, “I’ll be back when my five-minute relief comes up.”

Stahl had thought the show would take his mind off his troubles. Later, thinking back over this part of the evening, he was willing to admit he hadn’t known what real trouble was yet. But all he could think of was he hadn’t eaten all day, and how hungry he was; his empty stomach kept his mind off the canned story going on on the screen.

He was beginning to feel weak and chilly, and he didn’t even have a nickel for a cup of hot coffee. He couldn’t ask Tom for any more money, not even that nickel. Tom had been tiding him over for weeks now, carrying his share of the room rent, and all he earned himself was a pittance. Lew Stahl was too decent, too fair-minded a young fellow, to ask him for another penny, not even if he dropped in his tracks from malnutrition. He couldn’t get work. He couldn’t beg on the street corner; he hadn’t reached that point yet. He’d rather starve first. Well, he was starving already.

He pulled his belt over a notch to make his stomach seem tighter, and shaded his hand to his eyes for a minute.

That lone man sitting back there taking in the show had looked prosperous, well fed. Stahl wondered if he’d turn

him down, if he went back to him and confidentially asked him for a dime. He'd probably think it was strange that Stahl should be in a movie house if he were down and out, but that couldn't be helped. Two factors emboldened him in this maiden attempt at panhandling. One was it was easier to do in here in the dark than out on the open street. The second was there was no one around to be a witness to his humiliation if the man bawled him out. If he was going to tackle him at all, he'd better not sit thinking about it any longer, he'd better do it before the house started to fill up, or he knew he'd never have the nerve. You'd be surprised how difficult it is to ask alms of a stranger when you've never done it before, what a psychological barrier separates the honest man from the panhandler.

Lew Stahl turned his head and glanced back at the man, to try and measure his chances ahead of time. Then he saw to his surprise that the man had dozed off in his seat; his eyes were closed. And suddenly it was no longer a matter of asking him for money, it was a matter of taking it, helping himself while the man slept. Tom had gone back to the main floor, and there was no one else up there but the two of them. Before he knew it he had changed seats, was in the one next to the sleeper.

"A dollar," he kept thinking, "that's all I'll take, just a dollar, if he has a wallet. Just enough to buy a big thick steak and . . ."

His stomach contracted into a painful knot at the very thought, and salt water came up into his mouth, and his hunger was so great that his hand spaded out almost of its own accord and was groping toward the inner pocket of the man's coat.

The coat was loosely buttoned and bulged conveniently open the way the man was sitting, and Stahl's downward dipping fingers found the stiff grained edge of a billfold without much trouble. It came up between his two fingers,

those were all he'd dared insert in the pocket, and it was promisingly fat and heavy.

A second later the billfold was down between Lew's own legs and he was slitting it edgewise. The man must have been sweating, the leather was sort of sticky and damp on one side only, the side that had been next to his body. Some of the stickiness adhered to Stahl's own fingertips.

It was crammed with bills, the man must have been carrying between seventy and eighty dollars around with him. Stahl didn't count them, or even take the whole batch out. True to his word, he peeled off only the top one, a single, tucked it into the palm of his hand, started the wallet back where he'd found it.

It was done now; he'd been guilty of his first criminal offense.

He slipped it in past the mouth of the pocket, released it, started to draw his arm carefully back. The whole revere on that side of the man's coat started to come with Lew's arm, as though the two had become glued together. He froze, held his arm where it was, stiffly motionless across the man's chest. The slightest move, and the sleeper might awake. The outside button on Lew's cuff had freakishly caught in the man's lapel button hole, twisted around in some way. And it was a defective, jagged-edged button, he remembered that now well; it had teeth to hang on by.

He tried to slip his other hand in between the lapel and his arm and free them. There wasn't enough room for leverage. He tried to hold the man's lapel down and pull his own sleeve free, insulating the tug so it wouldn't penetrate the sleeper's consciousness. The button held on, the thread was too strong to break that way.

It was the most excruciating form of mental agony. Any minute he expected the sleeper's eyes to pop open and fasten on him accusingly. Lew had a disreputable penknife in his pocket. He fumbled desperately for it with one hand, to cut the damnable button free. He was as in a strait-

jacket; he got it out of his right-hand pocket with his left hand, crossing one arm over the other to do so. At the same time he had to hold his prisoned arm rigid, and the circulation was already leaving it.

He got the tarnished blade open with his thumbnail, jockeyed the knife around in his hand. He was sweating profusely. He started sawing away at the triple-ply button-thread that had fastened them together. The knife blade was none too keen, but it finally severed. Then something happened; not the thing he'd dreaded, not the accusation of suddenly opened eyes. Something worse. The sleeper started sagging slowly forward in his seat. The slight vibration of the hacking knife must have been transmitted to him, dislodged him. He was beginning to slop over like a sandbag. And people don't sleep like that, bending over at the floor.

Stahl threw a panicky glance behind him. And now accusing eyes did meet him, from four or five rows back. A woman had come in and taken a seat some time during the past minute or two. She must have seen the jockeying of a knife blade down there, she must have wondered what was going on. She was definitely not looking at the screen, but at the two of them.

All presence of mind gone, Lew tried to edge his crumpled seat-mate back upright, for appearances' sake. Pretend to her they were friends sitting side by side; anything, as long as she didn't suspect he had just picked his pocket. But there was something wrong—the flabbiness of muscle, the lack of heavy breathing to go with a sleep so deep it didn't break no matter how the sleeper's body fell. That told him all he needed to know; he'd been sitting quietly for the past five minutes next to a man who was either comatose or already a corpse. Someone who must have dropped dead during the show, without even falling out of his seat.

He jumped out into the aisle past the dead man, gave him a startled look, then started excitedly toward the back to tip off Tom or whomever he could find. But he couldn't resist looking back a second time as he went chasing off. The woman's eyes strayed accusingly after him as he flashed by.

Tom was imitating a statue against the wall of the lounge, beside the stairs.

"Come back there where I was sitting!" Lew panted. "There's a guy next to me out cold, slopping all over!"

"Don't start any disturbance," Tom warned in an undertone.

He went back with Lew and flashed his torch quickly on and off, and the face it high-lighted wasn't the color of anything living; it was like putty.

"Help me carry him back to the restroom," Tom said under his breath, and picked him up by the shoulders. Lew took him by the legs, and they stumbled back up the dark aisle with the corpse.

The woman who had watched all this was feverishly gathering up innumerable belongings, with a determination that almost approached hysteria, as if about to depart forthwith on a mission of vital importance.

* * * *

Lew and Tom didn't really see it until they got him in the restroom and stretched him out on a divan up against the wall—the knife-hilt jammed into his back. It didn't stick out much, was in at an angle, nearly flat up against him. Sidewise from right to left, but evidently deep enough to touch the heart; they could tell by looking at him he was gone.

Tom babbled, "I'll get the manager! Stay here with him a second. Don't let anyone in!" He grabbed up a "No Admittance" sign on his way out, slapped it over the outside doorknob, then beat it.

Lew had never seen a dead man before. He just stood there, and looked and looked. Then he went a step closer, and looked some more. “So that’s what it’s like!” he murmured inaudibly. Finally Lew reached out slowly and touched him on the face, and cringed as he met the clammy feel of it, pulled his hand back and whipped it down, as though to get something off it. The flesh was still warm and Lew knew suddenly he had no time alibi.

He threw something over that face and that got rid of the awful feeling of being watched by something from the other world. After that Lew wasn’t afraid to go near him; he just looked like a bundle of old clothes. The dead man was on his side, and Lew fiddled with the knife-hilt, trying to get it out. It was caught fast, so he let it alone after grabbing it with his fingers from a couple of different directions.

Next he went through his pockets, thinking he’d be helping to identify him.

The man was Luther Kemp, forty-two, and he lived on 79th Street. But none of that was really true anymore, Lew thought, mystified; he’d left it all behind. His clothes and his home and his name and his body and the show he’d paid to see were here. But where the hell had he gone to, anyway? Again that weird feeling came over Lew momentarily, but he brushed it aside. It was just that one of the commonest things in life—death—was still strange to him. But after strangeness comes familiarity, after familiarity, contempt.

The door flew open, and Tom bolted in again, still by himself and panting as though he’d run all the way up from the floor below. His face looked white, too.

“C’mere!” he said in a funny, jerky way. “Get outside, hurry up!”

Before Lew knew what it was all about, they were both outside, and Tom had propelled him all the way across the dimly lighted lounge to the other side of the house, where there was another branch of the staircase going down. His

grip on Lew's arm was as if something were skewered through the middle of it.

"What's the idea?" Lew managed to get out.

Tom jerked his head backward. "You didn't really do that, did you? To that guy."

Lew nearly dropped through the floor. His answer was just a welter of words.

Tom telescoped it into "No," rushed on breathlessly, "Well, then all the more reason for you to get out of here quick! Come on down on this side, before they get up here! I'll tell you about it down below."

Half-way down, on the landing, Tom stopped a second time, motioned Lew to listen. Outside in the street some place the faint, eery wail of a patrol-car siren sounded, rushed to a crescendo as it drew nearer, then stopped abruptly, right in front of the theater itself.

"Get that? Here they are now!" Tom said ominously, and rushed Lew down the remaining half-light, around a turn to the back, and through a door stenciled "Employees Only."

A flight of steps led down to a sub-basement. He pushed Lew ahead of him the rest of the way down, but Tom stayed where he was. He pitched something that flashed, and Lew caught it adroitly before he even knew what it was. A key.

"Open twelve, and switch to my blue suit," Tom said. "Leave that gray of yours in the locker."

Lew took a step back toward him, swung his arm back. "I haven't done anything! What's the matter with you? You trying to get me in a jam?"

"You're in one already, I'm trying to get you out of it!" Tom snapped. "There's a dame out there hanging onto the manager's neck with both arms, swears she saw you do it. Hallucinations, you know the kind! Says he started falling asleep on you, and you gave him a shove, one word led to another, then you knifed him. Robbed him, too. She's just hysterical enough to believe what she's saying herself."

Lew's knees gave a dip. "But holy smoke! Can't you tell 'em I was the first one told you about it myself? I even helped you carry him back to the rest-room! Does that look like I—"

"It took me long enough to get this job," Tom said sourly. "If the manager finds out I passed you in free—what with this giving his house a bad name and all—I can kiss my job good-by! Think of my end of it, too. Why do they have to know anything about you? You didn't do it, so all right. Then why be a chump and spend the night in a station-house basement? By tomorrow they'll probably have the right guy and it'll be all over with."

Lew thought of that dollar he had in his pocket. If he went back and let them question him, they'd want to know why he hadn't paid his way in, if he had a buck on him. That would tell them where the buck came from. He hated to pony up that buck now that he had it. And he remembered how he'd tampered with the knife-hilt, and vaguely knew there was something called fingerprints by which they had a way of telling who had handled it. And then the thought of bucking that woman—from what he remembered of the look on her face—took more nerve than he had. Tom was right, why not light out and steer clear of the whole mess, as long as he had the chance? And finally this argument presented itself: If they once got hold of him and believed he'd done it, that might satisfy them, they mightn't even try to look any further, and then where would he be? A clear conscience doesn't always make for courage, sometimes it's just the other way around. The mystic words "circumstantial evidence" danced in front of his eyes, paralyzing him.

"Peel!" Tom said. "The show breaks in another couple minutes. When you hear the bugles bringing on the newsreel, slip out of here and mingle with the rest of them going out. She's tagged you wearing a gray suit, so it ought to be easy enough to make it in my blue. They won't think of

busting open the lockers to look. Wait for me at our place." Then Tom ducked out and the passageway-door closed noiselessly after him.

* * * *

Lew didn't give himself time to think. He jumped into the blue suit as Tom had told him to, put on his hat and bent the brim down over his eyes with fingers that were shaking like ribbons in a breeze. He was afraid any minute that someone, one of the other ushers, would walk in and catch him. What was he going to say he was doing in there?

He banged the locker closed on his own clothes, just as a muffled *ta-da* came from the screen outside. In another minute there were feet shuffling by outside the door and the hum of subdued voices. He edged the door open, and pressed it shut behind him with his elbow. The few movie goers who were leaving were all around him, and he let them carry him along with them. They didn't seem to be aware, down below here, of what had happened up above so short a time ago. Lew didn't hear any mention of it.

It was like running the gauntlet. There were two sets of doors and a brightly lighted lobby in between. One of the detectives was standing beside the doorman at the first set of doors. The watchful way he scanned all faces told Lew what he was. There was a second one outside the street doors. He kept looking so long at each person coming out—that told what he was.

Lew saw them both before he got up to them, through the clear glass of the inner doors. The lights were on their side, Lew was in the dark, with the show still going on in back of him. His courage froze, he wanted to stay in there where he was. But if he was going to get out at all, now was the time, with the majority of the crowd, not later on when he'd be more conspicuous.

One thing in his favor was the color of his suit. He saw the detectives stopping all the men in gray and motioning them

aside; he counted six being sidetracked before he even got out into the lobby. They weren't interfering with anyone else.

But that ticket-taker was a bigger risk than either of the plainclothes-men. So was the doorman. Before he'd gone in he'd been standing right under both their eyes a full five minutes waiting for Tom to come down. He'd gone in without paying, and that had burned the ticket-taker up. But going past them, Lew had to walk slow, as slowly as everyone else was walking, or he'd give himself away twice as quick. He couldn't turn around now and go back any more, either; he was too close to the detectives and they'd notice the maneuver.

A clod-hopper in front of him came to his rescue just when he thought he was a goner. The clod-hopper stepped backward unexpectedly to take a look at something, and his whole hoof landed like a stone-cutter's mallet across Lew's toes. Lew's face screwed up uncontrollably with pain, and before he straightened it out again, the deadly doorman's gaze had swept harmlessly over it without recognition, and Lew was past him and all he could see was the back of Lew's head.

Lew held his breath. Nothing happened. Right foot forward, left foot forward, right foot forward . . . The lobby seemed to go on for miles. Someone's hand touched him, and the mercury went all the way down his spine to the bottom, but it was only a woman close behind him putting on her gloves.

After what seemed like an eternity of slow motion, he was flush with the street-doors at last. Only that second detective out there to buck now, and he didn't worry him much. He drifted through with all the others, passed close enough to the detective to touch him, and he wasn't even looking at Lew. His eyes were on the slap-slap of the doors as they kept swinging to and fro with each new egress.

Lew moved from under the revealing glare of the marquee lights into the sheltering darkness. He didn't look back, and presently the hellish place was just a blob of light far behind him. Then it wasn't even that any more.

He kept dabbing his face, and he felt limp in the legs for a long time afterwards. He'd made it, but *whew!* what an experience; he said to himself that he'd undergone all the emotions of a hunted criminal, without having committed a crime.

* * * *

Tom and Lew had a cheap furnished room in a tenement about half an hour's walk away. Lew walked there unhesitatingly now, in a straight line from the theater. As far as he could see, it was all over, there wasn't anything to worry about now any more. He was out of the place, and that was all that mattered. They'd have the right guy in custody, maybe before the night was over, anyway by tomorrow at the latest.

He let himself into the front hallway with the key, climbed the stairs without meeting anyone, and closed the room door behind him. He snapped on the fly-blown bulb hanging from the ceiling, and sat down to wait for Tom.

Finally the clock rotated to 11 P.M. The last show broke at 11:30, and when Tom got here it would be about twelve.

About the time Tom should have been showing up, a newspaper delivery truck came rumbling by, distributing the midnight edition. Lew saw it stop by a stand down at the corner and dump out a bale of papers. On an impulse he got up and went down there to get one, wondering if it would have the story in it yet, and whether they'd caught the guy yet. He didn't open it until he'd got back.

It hadn't made a scare-head, but it had made a column on the front page. "Man stabbed in movie house; woman sees crime committed." Lew got sort of a vicarious thrill out of it for a minute, until he read further along. They were still

looking for a guy just his height and build, wearing a gray suit, who had bummed his way in free. The motive—probably caught by the victim in the act of picking his pocket while he slept. In panic, Lew doused the light.

From then on it was a case of standing watching from behind the drawn shade and standing listening behind the door, and wearing down the flooring in between the two places like a caged bear. He knew he was crazy to stay there, and yet he didn't know where else to go. It would be even crazier, he thought, to roam around in the streets, he'd be sure to be picked up before morning. The sweat came out of every pore hot, and then froze cold. And yet never once did the idea of walking back there of his own accord, and saying to them, "Well, here I am; I didn't do it," occur to him. It looked too bad now, the way he'd changed clothes and run out. He cursed Tom for putting him up to it, and himself for losing his head and listening to him. It was too late now. There's a finality about print, especially to a novice; because that paper said they were looking for him, it seemed to kill Lew's last chance of clearing himself once and for all.

He didn't see Tom coming, although he was glancing out through a corner of the window the whole time; Tom must have slunk along close to the building line below. There was a sudden scurry of quick steps on the stairs, and Tom was trying the door-knob like fury. Lew had locked it on the inside when he'd put the light out.

"Hurry up, lemme in!" Tom panted. And then when Lew had unlocked the door: "Leave that light out, you fool!"

"I thought you'd never get here!" Lew groaned. "What'd they do, give a midnight matinee?"

"Down at Headquarters, they did!" Tom said resentfully. "Hauled me down there and been holding me there ever since! I'm surprised they let me go when they did. I didn't think they were gonna." He threw the door open. "You gotta get out of here!"

“Where’m I gonna go?” Lew wailed. “You’re a fine louse of a friend!”

“Suppose a cop shows up here all of a sudden and finds you here, how’s that gonna make it look for me? How do I know I wasn’t followed coming back here? Maybe that’s why they let me go!”

Tom kept trying to shoulder Lew out in the hall, and Lew kept trying to hang onto the door-frame and stay in; in a minute more they would have been at it hot and heavy, but suddenly there was a pounding at the street-door three floors below. They both froze.

“I knew it!” Tom hissed. “Right at my heels!”

The pounding kept up. “Coming! Wait a minute, can’t you?” a woman’s voice said from the back, and bedroom-slippers went slapping across the oilcloth. Lew was out on the landing now of his own accord, scuttling around it like a mouse trying to find a hole.

Tom jerked his thumb at the stairs going up. “The roof!” he whispered. “Maybe you can get down through the house next door.” But Lew could see all he cared about was that he was out of the room.

Tom closed the door silently but definitely. The one below opened at the same instant, to the accompaniment of loud beefs from the landlady, that effectively covered the creaking of the stairs under Lew’s flying feet.

“The idea, getting people out of their beds at this hour! Don’t you tell me to pipe down, detective or no detective! This is a respectable hou—”

Lew was up past the top floor by that time. The last section was not inclined stairs any more but a vertical iron ladder, ending just under a fiat, lead skylight, latched on the underside. He flicked the latch open, climbed up a rung further and lowered his head out of the way, with the thing pressing across his shoulders like Atlas supporting the world. He had to stay there like that till he got in out of the stair-well; he figured the cop would hear the thing creak

and groan otherwise. It didn't have hinges, had to be displaced bodily.

There was a sudden commanding knock at Tom's door on the third, and an "Open up here!" that left no room for argument. Tom opened it instantly, with a whining, "What do you want this time?" Then it closed again, luckily for Lew, and the detective was in there with Tom.

Lew heaved upward with all his might, and felt as if he were lifting the roof bodily off the house. His head and shoulders pushed through into the open night. He caught the two lower corners of the thing backhanded so it wouldn't slam down again as he slipped out from under it, and eased it down gently on its frame. Before the opening had quite closed, though, he had a view down through it all the way to the bottom of the stair-well, and half-way along this, at the third floor, a face was sticking out over the bannister, staring up at him. The landlady, who had stayed out there eavesdropping. She had the same bird's-eye view of him that he had of her.

He let go the skylight cover and pounded across the graveled tar toward the next roof for all he was worth. The detective would be up here after him in a minute now.

The dividing line between the two roofs was only a knee-high brick parapet easy enough to clear, but after that there was only one other roof, instead of a whole block-length of them. Beyond the next house was a drop of six stories to a vacant lot. The line of roofs, of varying but accessible heights, lay behind him in the other direction; he'd turned the wrong way in the dark. But it didn't matter, he thought, as long as he could get in through the twin to the skylight he'd come out of.

He couldn't. He found it by stubbing his toe against it and falling across it, rather than with the help of his eyes. Then when he knelt there clawing and tugging at it, it wouldn't come up. Latched underneath like the first one had been!

There wasn’t any time to go back the other way now. Yellow light showed on the roof behind him as the detective lifted the trap. First a warning thread of it, then a big gash, and the dick was scrambling out on the roof-top. Lew thought he saw a gun in his hand, but he didn’t wait to find out. There was a three-foot brick chimney a little ways behind Lew. He darted behind it while his pursuer’s head was still turned up the other way. But the gravel under him gave a treacherous little rattle as he carried out the maneuver.

There was silence for a long time. He was afraid to stick his head out and look. Then there was another of those little giveaway rustles, not his this time, coming from this same roof, from the other side of the chimney.

Then with a suddenness that made him jump, a new kind of planet joined the stars just over his head, blazed out and spotted him from head to foot. A pocket-torch. Lew just pressed his body inward, helpless against the brick work.

“Come on, get up,” the detective’s voice said without any emotion, somewhere just behind the glare. To Lew it was like the headlight of a locomotive; he couldn’t see a thing for a minute. He straightened up, blinking; even thought he was going to be calm and resigned for a minute. “I didn’t do it,” he said. “Honest, I didn’t do it! Gimme a break, will you?”

The detective said mockingly that he would, sure he would, using an expression that doesn’t bear repetition. He collared Lew with one hand, by both sides of his coat at once, pulling the reveres together close up under Lew’s chin. Then he balanced the lighted torch on the lip of the chimney-stack, so that it stayed pointed at Lew and drenched him all over. Then he frisked him with that hand.

“I tell you I was just sitting next to him! I didn’t touch him, I didn’t put a finger on him!”

“And that’s why you’re hiding out on the roof, is it? Changed your suit, too, didn’t you? I’ll beat the truth out of

you, when I get you where we're going!"

It was that, and the sudden sight of the handcuffs twinkling in the rays of the torch, that made Lew lose his head. He jerked backwards in the detective's grip, trying to get away from him. His back brushed the brick work. The flashlight went out suddenly, and went rattling all the way down inside the chimney. Lew was wedged in there between the detective and the stack. He raised the point of his knee suddenly, jabbed it upward between them like a piston. The detective let go Lew's collar, the manacles fell with a clink, and he collapsed at Lew's feet, writhing and groaning. Agonized as he was, his hand sort of flailed helplessly around, groping for something; Lew saw that even in the dark. Lew beat him to it, tore the gun out of his pocket, and pitched it overhand and backwards. It landed way off somewhere behind Lew, but stayed on the roof.

The detective had sort of doubled up in the meantime, like a helpless beetle on its back, drawing his legs up toward his body. They offered a handle to grab him by. Lew was too frightened to run away and leave him, too frightened that he'd come after him and the whole thing would start over. It was really an excess of fright that made him do it; there is such a thing. He grabbed the man around the ankles with both hands, started dragging him on his back across the gravel toward the edge of the roof, puffing, "You're not gonna get *me!* You're not gonna get *me!* You're not taking *me* with ya while I know it!"

Toward the side edge of the building he dragged the detective. He didn't bother looking to see what was below; just let go the legs, spun the detective around on his behind, so that the loose gravel shot out from under him in all directions, grabbed him by the shoulders, and pushed him over head-first. The dick didn't make a sound. Lew didn't know if he was still conscious or had fainted by now from the blow in the groin Lew had given him. Then he was

snatched from sight as if a powerful magnet had suddenly pulled him down.

Then Lew did a funny thing. The instant after the detective was gone, Lew stretched out his arms involuntarily toward where he'd been, as if to grab him, catch him in time to save him. As though he hadn't really realized until then the actual meaning of what he was doing. Or maybe it was his last inhibition showing itself, before it left him altogether. A brake that would no longer work was trying to stop him after it was too late. The next minute he was feeling strangely light-headed, dizzy. But not dizzy from remorse, dizzy like someone who's been bound fast and is suddenly free.

* * * *

Lew didn't look down toward where the man had gone, he looked up instead—at the stars that must have seen many another sight like the one just now, without blinking.

"Gosh, it's easy!" he marveled, openmouthed. "I never knew before how easy it is to kill anyone! Twenty years to grow 'em, and all it takes is one little push!"

He was suddenly drunk with some new kind of power, undiscovered until this minute. The power of life and death over his fellowmen! Everyone had it, everyone strong enough to raise a violent arm, but they were afraid to use it. Well, he wasn't! And here he'd been going around for weeks living from hand to mouth, without any money, without enough food, when everything he wanted lay within his reach all the while! He had been green all right, and no mistake about it!

Death had become familiar. At seven it had been the most mysterious thing in the world to him, by midnight it was already an old story.

"Now let 'em come after me!" he thought vindictively, as he swayed back across the roof toward the skylight of the

other house. “Now I’ve given ‘em a real reason for trying to nab me!” And he added grimly, “If they can!”

Something flat kicked away from under his foot, and he stopped and picked up the gun that he’d tossed out of reach. He looked it over after he was through the skylight and there was light to examine it by. He’d never held one in his hand before. He knew enough not to squint down the bore, and that was about all he knew.

The stair-well was empty; the landlady must have retreated temporarily to her quarters below to rouse her husband, so he wouldn’t miss the excitement of the capture and towing away. Lew passed Tom’s closed door and was going by it without stopping, going straight down to the street and the new career that awaited him in the slumbering city, when Tom opened it himself and looked out. He must have heard a creak and thought it was the detective returning, thought Lew, and figured a little bootlicking wouldn’t hurt any.

“Did you get him—?” Tom started to say. Then he saw who it was, and saw what Lew was holding in his hand.

Lew turned around and went back to him. “No, he didn’t get me,” he said, ominously quiet, “I got him.” He went in and closed the door of the room after him. He kept looking at Tom, who backed away a little.

“Now you’ve finished yourself!” Tom breathed, appalled.

“You mean I’m just beginning,” Lew said.

“I’m going to get out of here!” Tom said, in a sudden flurry of panic, and tried to circle around Lew and get to the door.

Lew waved him back with the gun. “No, you’re not, you’re going to stay right where you are! What’d you double-cross me for?”

Tom got behind a chair and hung onto it with both hands —as though that was any good! Then almost hysterically, as he read Lew’s face: “What’s the matter, ya gone crazy? Not *me,* Lew! Not *me!*”

“Yes, you!” Lew said. “You got me into it. You knew they’d follow you. You led ‘em to me. But they still don’t know what I look like—but you do! That one went up there after me can’t tell now what I look like, but you still can! They can get me on sight, while you’re still around.”

Tom was holding both palms flat out toward Lew, as though Lew thought they could stop or turn aside a bullet! Tom had time to get just one more thing out: “You’re not human at all!”

Then Lew pulled the trigger and the whole room seemed to lift with a roar, as though blasting were going on under it. The gun bucked Lew back half a step; he hadn’t known those things had a kick to them. When he looked through the smoke, Tom’s face and shoulders were gone from behind the chair, but his forearms were still hanging across the top of it, palms turned downward now, and all the fingers wiggling at once. Then they fell off it, went down to join the rest of him on the floor.

Lew watched him for a second, what he could see of him. Tom didn’t move any more. Lew shook his head slowly from side to side. “It sure is easy all right!” he said to himself. And this had been even less dramatic than the one up above on the roof.

Familiarity with death had already bred contempt for it.

He turned, pitched the door open, and went jogging down the stairs double-quick. Doors were opening on every landing as he whisked by, but not a move was made to stop him—which was just as well for them. He kept the gun out in his hand the whole time and cleared the bottom steps with a short jump at the bottom of each flight. Bang! and then around to the next.

The landlady had got herself into a bad position. She was caught between him and the closed street-door as he cleared the last flight and came down into the front hall. If she’d stayed where she belonged, Lew said to himself, she could have ducked back into her own quarters at the rear

when he came down. But now her escape was cut off. When she saw it was Lew, and not the detective, she tried to get out the front way. She couldn't get the door open in time, so then she tried to turn back again. She dodged to one side to get out of Lew's way, and he went to that side too. Then they both went to the other side together and blocked each other again. It was like a game of puss-in-the-corner, with appalled faces peering tensely down the stair-well at them.

She was heaving like a sick cat in a sand-box, and Lew decided she was too ludicrous to shoot. New as he was at the game of killing, he had to have dignity in his murders. He walloped her back-handed aside like a gnat, and stepped over her suddenly upthrust legs. She could only give a garbled description of him any way.

The door wasn't really hard to open, if you weren't frightened, like Lew wasn't now. Just a twist of the knob and a wrench. A voice shrieked down inanely from one of the upper floors, "Get the cops! He's killed a fellow up here!" Then Lew was out in the street, and looking both ways at once.

A passerby who must have heard the shot out there had stopped dead in his tracks, directly opposite the doorway on the other side of the street, and was gawking over. He saw Lew and called over nosily: "What happened? Something wrong in there?"

It would have been easy enough to hand him some stall or other, pretend Lew was himself looking for a cop. But Lew had this new contempt of death hot all over him.

"Yeah!" he snarled viciously. "I just shot a guy! And if you stand there looking at me like that, you're gonna be the next!"

He didn't know if the passerby saw the gun or not in the dark, probably not. The man didn't wait to make sure, took him at his word. He bolted for the nearest corner. *Scrunch, and he was gone!*

"There," Lew said to himself tersely, "is a sensible guy!"

* * * *

Black window squares here and there were turning orange as the neighborhood began belatedly to wake up. A lot of interior yelling and tramping was coming from the house Tom and Lew had lived in. He made for the corner opposite from the one his late questioner had fled around, turned it, and slowed to a quick walk. He put the gun away; it stuck too far out of the shallow side-pocket of Tom's suit, so he changed it to the inner breastpocket, which was deeper. A cop's whistle sounded thinly behind him, at the upper end of the street he'd just left.

A taxi was coming toward him, and he jumped off the sidewalk and ran toward it diagonally. The driver tried to swerve without stopping, so he jumped up on the running-board and wrenched the wheel with his free hand. He had the other spaded into his pocket over the gun again. "Turn around, you're going downtown with me!" he said. A girl's voice bleated in the back. "I've got two passengers in there already!" the driver said, but he was turning with a lurch that nearly threw Lew off.

"I'll take care of that for you!" he yanked the back door open and got in with them. "Out you go, that side!" he ordered. The fellow jumped first, as etiquette prescribed, but the girl clung to the door-strap, too terrified to move, so Lew gave her a push to help her make up her mind. "Be a shame to separate the two of you!" he called after her. She turned her ankle, and went down *kerplunk* and lay there, with her escort bending over her in the middle of the street.

"Wh-where you want me to g-go with you, buddy?" chattered the driver.

"Out of this neighborhood fast," Lew said grimly.

He sped along for a while, then whined: "I got a wife and kids, buddy—"

"You're a very careless guy," Lew said to that.

He knew they'd pick up his trail any minute, what with those two left stranded in the middle of the street to direct them, so he made for the concealing labyrinth of the park, the least policed part of the city.

"Step it down a little," he ordered, once they were in the park. "Take off your shoes and throw them back here." The driver's presence was a handicap, and Lew had decided to get rid of him, too. Driving zig-zag along the lane with one hand, the cabbie threw back his shoes. One of them hit Lew on the knee as it was pitched through the open slide, and for a minute Lew nearly changed his mind and shot him instead, as the easiest way out after all. The cabbie was half dead with fright by this time, anyway. Lew made him take off his pants, too, and then told him to brake and get out.

Lew got in at the wheel. The driver stood there on the asphalt in his socks and shirt-tails, pleading, "Gee, don't leave me in the middle of the park like this, buddy, without my pants and shoes, it'll take me all night to get out!"

"That's the main idea," Lew agreed vindictively, and added: "You don't know how lucky you are! You're up against Death's right-hand man. Scram, before I change my mind!"

The cabbie went loping away into the dark, like a bow-legged scarecrow and Lew sat at the wheel belly-laughing after him. Then he took the cab away at top speed, and came out the other end about quarter of an hour later.

He was hungry, and decided the best time to eat was right then, before daylight added to the risk and a general alarm had time to circulate. The ability to pay, of course, was no longer a problem in this exciting new existence that had begun for him tonight. He picked the most expensive place open at that hour, an all-night delicatessen, where they charged a dollar for a sandwich and named it after a celebrity. A few high-hats were sitting around having bacon and eggs in the dim, artificial blue light that made them look like ghosts.

He left the cab right at the door and sat down where he could watch it. A waiter came over who didn't think much of him because he didn't have a boiled shirt. He ran his finger down the list and picked a five-dollar one.

"What's a Jimmy Cagney? Gimme one of them."

"Hard-boiled egg with lots of paprika." The waiter started away.

Lew picked up a glass of water and sloshed it across the back of his neck. "You come back here! Do that over, and say sir!" he snarled.

"Hard-boiled egg with lots of paprika, sir," the waiter stuttered, squirming to get the water off his backbone.

When he was through, Lew leaned back in his chair and thumbed him over. "How much do you take in here a night?"

"Oh, around five hundred when it's slow like this." He took out a pad and scribbled "5.00" at the bottom, tore it off and handed it to Lew.

"Lend me your pencil," Lew said. He wrote "Pay me" in front of it, and rubbed out the decimal point. "I'll take this over to the cashier myself," he told the waiter.

Then as he saw the waiter's glance sweep the bare table-top disappointedly, "Don't worry, you'll get your tip; I'm not forgetting you."

Lew found the tricky blue lighting was a big help. It made everyone's face look ghastly to begin with and you couldn't tell when anyone suddenly got paler. Like the cashier, when he looked up from reading the bill Lew presented and found the bore of the gun peering out from Lew's shirt at him like some kind of a bulky tie pin.

He opened the drawer and started counting bills out. "Quit making your hands shake so," Lew warned him out of the corner of his mouth, "and keep your eyes down on what you're doing, or you're liable to short-change me!"

Lew liked doing it that way, adding to the risk by standing there letting the cashier count out the exact amount,

instead of just cleaning the till and lamming. What was so hectic about a hold-up, he asked himself. Every crime seemed so simple, once you got the hang of it. He was beginning to like this life, it was swell!

There were thirty or so bucks left in the drawer when the cashier got through. But meanwhile the manager had got curious about the length of time Lew had been standing up there and started over toward them. Lew could tell by his face he didn't suspect even yet, only wanted to see if there was some difficulty. At the same time Lew caught sight of the waiter slinking along the far side of the room, toward the door in back of him. He hadn't been able to get over to the manager in time, and was going to be a hero on his own, and go out and get a cop.

So Lew took him first. The waiter was too close to the door already for there to be any choice in the matter. Lew didn't even aim, just fired what he'd heard called a snap-shot. The waiter went right down across the doorsill, like some new kind of a lumpy mat. Lew didn't even feel the thing buck as much as when he'd shot Tom. The cashier dropped too, as though the same shot had felled him. His voice came up from the bottom of the enclosure, "There's your money, don't shoot me, don't shoot me!" Too much night-work isn't good for a guy's guts, Lew mused.

There was a doorman outside on the sidewalk. Lew got him through the open doorway just as he got to the curb, in the act of raising his whistle to his lips. He stumbled, grabbed one of the chromium stanchions supporting the entrance canopy, and went slipping down like a fireman sliding down a pole. The manager ducked behind a table, and everyone else in the place went down to floor-level with him, as suddenly as though they were all puppets jerked by strings. Lew couldn't see a face left in the room; just a lot of screaming coming from behind empty chairs.

Lew grabbed up the five hundred and sprinted for the door. He had to hurdle the waiter's body and he moved a

little as Lew did so, so he wasn't dead. Then Lew stopped just long enough to peel off a ten and drop it down on him. "There's your tip, chiseler!" Lew hollered at him, and beat it.

Lew couldn't get to the cab in time, so he had to let it go, and take it on foot. There was a car parked a few yards in back of it, and another a length ahead, that might have blocked his getting it out at the first try, and this was no time for lengthy extrications. A shot came his way from the corner, about half a block up, and he dashed around the next one. Two more came from that, just as he got to the corner ahead, and he fired back at the sound of them, just on general principle. He had no aim to speak of, had never held one of the things in his hand until that night.

He turned and sprinted down the side street, leaving the smoke of his shot hanging there disembodiedly behind him like a baby cloud above the sidewalk. There were two cops by now, but the original one was in the lead and he was a good runner. He quit shooting and concentrated on taking Lew the hard way, at arms' length. Lew turned his head in time to see him tear through the smoke up there at the corner and knock it invisible. He was a tall limber guy, must have been good in the heats at police games, and he came hurtling straight toward Death. Tick, tick, tick, his feet went, like a very quick clock.

A fifth shot boomed out in that instant, from ahead of Lew this time, down at the lower corner. Somebody had joined in from that direction, right where Lew was going toward. They had him sewn up now between them, on this narrow sidestreet. One in front, two behind him—and to duck in anywhere was curtains.

Something happened, with that shot, that happens once in a million years. The three of them were in a straight line—Lew in the middle, the sprinter behind him, the one who had just fired coming up the other way. Something spit past Lew's ear, and the tick, tick behind him scattered into a

scraping, thumping fall—*plump!*—and stopped. The runner had been hit by his own man, up front.

He didn't look, his ears had seen the thing for him. He dove into a doorway between the two of them. Only a miracle could save him, and it had no more than sixty seconds in which to happen, to be any good.

His star, beaming overtime, made it an open street door, indicative of poverty. The street was between Second and Third Avenues, and poverty was rampant along it, the same kind of poverty that had turned Lew into a ghoul, snatching a dollar from a dead man's pocket, at six-thirty this night. He punched three bell-buttons as he flashed by.

"If they come in here after me," he sobbed hotly, "there's going to be shooting like there never was before!" And they would, of course. The header-offer down at Second, who had shot his own man, must have seen which entrance he'd dived for. Even if he hadn't, they'd dragnet all of them.

Lew reached in his pocket as he took the stairs, brought out a fistful of the money and not the gun for once. At least a hundred's worth came up in his paw. One of the bills escaped, fluttered down the steps behind him like a green leaf. What's ten, or even twenty, when you've got sixty seconds to buy your life?

"In there!" One of the winded, surviving cops' voices rang out clearly, penetrated the hail from the sidewalk. The screech of a prowl car chimed in.

He was holding the handful of green dough up in front of him, like the olive branch of the ancients, when the first of the three doors opened before him, second-floor front. A man with a curleycue mustache was blinking out as he raced at him.

"A hundred bucks!" Lew hissed. "They're after me! Here, hundred bucks if you lemme get in your door!"

"Whassa mat' ?" he wanted to know, startled wide awake.

"Cops! Hundred bucks!" The space between them had been used up, Lew's whole body hit the door like a

projectile. The man was holding onto it on the inside, so it wouldn't give. The impact swung Lew around sideways, he clawed at it with one hand, shoved the bouquet of money into the man's face with the other. "Two hundred bucks!"

"Go 'way!" the man cried, tried to close Lew out. Lew had decided to shoot him out of the way if he couldn't buy his way in.

A deep bass voice came rumbling up behind him. "*Che cosa, Mario?*"

"Two hundred bucks," Lew strangled, reaching for the gun with his left hand."

Due cento dollari!" The door was torn away from him, opened wide. An enormous, mustached, garlicky Italian woman stood there. "Issa good? Issa rill?" Lew jammed them down her huge bosom as the quickest way of proving their authenticity. Maybe Mario Jr. had had a run-in with cops about breaking a window or swiping fruit from a pushcart; maybe it was just the poverty. She slapped one hand on her chest to hold the money there, grabbed Lew's arm with the other.

"*Si! Vene presto!*" and spat a warning "*Silenzio! La porta!*" at her reluctant old man.

She pounded down the long inner hail, towing Lew after her. The door closed behind them as the stairway outside was started vibrating with ascending feet—flat feet.

The bedroom was pitch black. She let go of him, gave him a push sideways and down, and he went sprawling across an enormous room-filling bed. A cat snatched itself out of the way and jumped down. He hoisted his legs up after him, clawed, pulled a garlicky quilt up to his chin. He began to undress hectically under it, lying on his side. She snapped a light on and was standing there counting the money. "*Falta cento—*" she growled aggressively.

"You get the other hundred after they go 'way." He stuck his hand out under the cover, showed it to her. He took the

gun out and showed her that too. “If you or your old man give me away—!”

Pounding had already begun at their door. Her husband was standing there by it, not making a sound. She shoved the money down under the same mattress Lew was on. He got rid of his coat, trousers and shoes, pitched them out on the other side of him, just as she snapped out the light once more. He kept the gun and money with him, under his body.

The next thing he knew, the whole bed structure quivered under him, wobbled, all but sank flat. She’d got in alongside of him! The clothes billowed like sails in a storm, subsided. She went, “Ssst!” like a steam radiator, and the sound carried out into the hail. Lew heard the man pick up his feet two or three times, plank them down again, right where he was standing, to simulate trudging toward the door. Then he opened it, and they were in. Lew closed his eyes, spaded one hand under him and kept it on the gun.

“Took you long enough!” a voice said at the end of the hall. “Anyone come in here?”

“Nome-body.”

“Well, we’ll take a look for ourselves! Give it the lights!”

The lining of Lew’s eyeiids turned vermilion, but he kept them down. The mountain next to him stirred, gyrated. “*Che cosa, Mario?*”

“*Polizia, non capisco*.”

Kids were waking up all over the place, in adjoining rooms, adding to the anvil chorus. It would have looked phony to go on sleeping any longer in that racket. Lew squirmed, stretched, blinked, yawned, popped his eyes in innocent surprise. There were two cops in the room, one of them standing still, looking at him, the other sticking his head into a closet.

Lew had black hair and was sallow from undernourishment, but he didn’t know a word of Italian.

“Who’s this guy?” the cop asked.

“*Il mio fratello*. “Her brother. The volume of noise she and Mario and the kids were making covered him.

The first cop went out. The second one came closer, pulled the corner of the covers off Lew. AIl he saw was a skinny torso in an undershirt. Lew’s outside shirt was rolled in a ball down by his feet. His thumb found and went into the hollow before the trigger underneath him. If he said “Get up outa there,” those would be the last words he ever said.

He said, “Three in a bed?” disgustedly. “Sure y’ain’t got your grandfather in there, too? These guineas!” He threw the covers back at Lew and went stalking out.

Lew could hear him through the open door tramp up the stairs after the others to the floor above. A minute later their heavy footsteps sounded on the ceiling right above his head.

A little runty ten-year-old girl peered in at him from the doorway. He said, “Put that light out! Keep them kids outa here! Leave the door open until they go! Tell your old man to stand there rubber-necking out, like all the others are doing!”

They quit searching in about fifteen minutes, and Lew heard them all go trooping down again, out into the street, and then he could hear their voices from the sidewalk right under the windows.

“Anything doing?” somebody asked.

“Naw, he musta got out through the back yard and the next street over.”

“O’Keefe hurt bad?”

“Nicked him in the dome, stunned him, that was all.” So the cop wasn’t dead.

* * * *

When Mario came out the front door at eight-thirty on his way to the barber shop where he worked, his “brother-in-law” was with him, as close to him as sticking plaster. Lew

had on an old felt hat of Mario's and a baggy red sweater that hid the coat of Tom's blue suit. It would have looked too good to come walking out of a building like that on the way to work. That red sweater had cost Lew another fifty. The street looked normal, one wouldn't have known it for the shooting gallery it had been at four that morning. They walked side by side up toward Second, past the place where O'Keefe had led with his chin, past the corner where the smoke of Lew's shot had hung so ghostily in the lamplight. There was a newsstand open there now, and Lew bought a paper. Then he and Mario stood waiting for the bus.

It drew up and Lew pushed Mario on alone, and jerked his thumb at the driver. It went sailing off again, before Mario had time to say or do anything, if he'd wanted to. It had sounded to Lew, without knowing Italian, as though the old lady had been coaching Mario to get a stranglehold on the rest of Lew's money. Lew snickered aloud, ran his hand lightly over the pocket where the original five-hundred was intact once more. It had been too good to miss, the chance she'd given him of sneaking it out of the mattress she'd cached it under and putting it back in his pocket again, while her back was turned. They'd had all their trouble and risk for nothing.

Lew made tracks away from there, went west as far as Third and then started down that. He stayed with the sweater and hat, because they didn't look out of character on Third. The cops had seen him in the blue suit when they chased him from Rubin's; they hadn't seen him in this outfit. And no matter how the *signora* would blaze when she found out how Lew had gypped them, she couldn't exactly report it to the police, and tell them what he was wearing, without implicating herself and her old man.

But there was one thing had to be attended to right off, and that was the matter of ammunition. To the best of Lew's calculations (and so much had happened, that they were

already pretty hazy) he had fired four shots out of the gun from the time he had taken it over from the dick on the roof. One at Tom, two in Rubin's, and one on the street when they'd been after him. There ought to be two left in it, and if the immediate future was going to be like the immediate past, he was going to need a lot more than that. He not only didn't know where any could be bought, he didn't even know how to break the thing and find out how many it packed.

He decided a pawnshop would be about the best bet, not up here in the mid-town district, but down around the lower East Side or on the Bowery somewhere. And if they didn't want to sell him any, he'd just blast and help himself.

He took a street car down as far as Chatham Square. He had a feeling that he'd be safer on one of them than on the El or the subway; he could jump off in a hurry without waiting for it to stop, if he had to. Also, he could see where he was going through the windows and not have to do too much roaming around on foot once he alighted. He was a little dubious about hailing a cab, dressed the way he now was. Besides, he couldn't exactly tell a hackman, "Take me to a pawnshop." You may ride in a taxi coming out of one, you hardly ride in a taxi going to one.

He went all the way to the rear end and opened the newspaper. He didn't have to hunt it up. This time it *had* made a scare-head. "One-Man Crime Wave!" And then underneath, "Mad dog gunman still at large somewhere in city." Lew looked up at the oblivious backs of the heads up forward, riding on the same car with Lew. Not one of them had given him a second glance when he'd walked down the aisle in the middle of all of them just now. And yet more than one must be reading that very thing he was at the moment; he could see the papers in their hands. That was he, right in the same trolley they were, and they didn't even know it! His contempt for death was beginning to expand dangerously toward the living as well, and the logical step

beyond that would be well past the confines of sanity—a superman complex.

Fortunately, he never quite got to it. Something within this same paper itself checked it, before it got well started. Two things that threw cold water over it, as it were. They occurred within a paragraph of each other, and had the effect of deflating his ego almost to the point at which it had been last night, before he'd touched that dead man's face in the theater restroom. The first paragraph read: "The police, hoping that young Tom Lee might unknowingly provide a clue to the suspect's whereabouts, arranged to have him released at Headquarters shortly after midnight. Detective Walter Daly was detailed to follow him. Daly trapped Stahl on the roof of a tenement, only to lose his balance and fall six stories during the scuffle that ensued. He was discovered unconscious but still alive sometime after the young desperado had made good his second escape, lying with both legs broken on an ash-heap in a vacant lot adjoining the building."

That was the first shock. Still alive, eh? And he'd lost his balance, huh? A line or two farther on came the second jolt:

"Stahl, with the detective's gun in his possession, had meanwhile made his way down the stairs and brutally shot Lee in his room. The latter was rushed to the hospital with a bullet wound in his neck; although his condition is critical, he has a good chance to survive . . ."

Lew let the thing fall to the floor and just sat there, stunned. Tom wasn't dead either! He wasn't quite as deadly as he'd thought he was; death wasn't so easy to dish out, not with the aim he seemed to have. A little of his former respect for death came back. Step one on the road to recovery. He remembered that waiter at Rubin's, flopping flat across the doorway; when he'd jumped over him, he'd definitely cringed—so he hadn't finished him either. About all he'd really managed to accomplish, he said to himself, was successfully hold up a restaurant, separate a cab driver

from his pants and his machine, and outsmart the cops three times—at the theater, on the roof, and in the Italians' flat. Plenty for one guy, but not enough to turn him into a Manhattan Dillinger by a long shot.

A lot of his self-confidence had evaporated and he couldn't seem to gel it back. There was a sudden, sharp increase of nervousness that had been almost totally lacking the night before.

He said to himself, "I need some bullets to put into this gun! Once I get them, I'll be all right, that'll take away the chills, turn on the heat again!"

He spotted a likely looking hockshop, and hopped off the car.

He hurried in through the swinging doors of the pawnshop and got a lungful of camphor balls. The proprietor came up to him on the other side of the counter. He leaned sideways on his elbow, tried to stop the shaking that had set in, and said: "Can you gimme something to fit this?" He reached for the pocket he'd put the gun in.

The proprietor's face was like a mirror. Expectancy, waiting to see what it was; then surprise, at how white his customer was getting; then astonishment, at why Lew should grip the counter like that, to keep from falling.

It was gone, it wasn't there any more. The frisking of the rest of his pockets was just reflex action; the emptiness of the first one told the whole story. He thought he'd outsmarted that Italian she-devil; well, she'd outsmarted him instead! Lifted the gun from him while she was busy seeming to straighten this old red sweater of her husband's on him. And the motive was easy to guess: So that Mario wouldn't be running any risk when he tried to blackmail Lew out on the street for the rest of the five hundred, like she'd told him to. Lew had walked a whole block with him, ridden all the way down here, and never even missed it until now! A fine killer he was!

He could feel what was left of his confidence crumbling away inside him, as though this had been the finishing touch it needed. Panic was coming on. He got a grip on himself; after all, he had five hundred in his pocket. It was just a matter of buying another gun and ammunition, now.

"I wanna buy a revolver. Show me what you've got."

"Show me your license," the man countered.

"Now, listen," he was breathing hard, "just skip that part of it. I'll pay you double." He brought out the money.

"Yeah, skip it," the proprietor scoffed. "And then what happens to me, when they find out where you got it? I got myself to think of."

Lew knew he had some guns; the very way he spoke showed he did. He sort of broke. "For the love of Gawd, lemme have a gun!" he wailed.

"You're snowed up, mac," he said. "G'wan, get out of here."

Lew clenched his teeth. "You lemme have a gun, or else —" And he made a threatening gesture toward the inside of his coat. But he had nothing to threaten with; his hand dropped limply back again. He felt trapped, helpless. The crumbling away kept on inside him. He whined, pleaded, begged.

The proprietor took a step in the direction of the door. "Get out of here now, or I'll call the police! You think I want my license taken away?" And then with sudden rage, "Where's a cop?"

Police. Cops. Lew turned and powdered out like a streak.

And Lew knew then what makes a killer; not the man himself, just the piece of metal in his hand, fashioned by men far cleverer than he. Without that, just a snarling cur, no match even for a paunchy hockshop owner.

Lew lost track of what happened immediately after that. Headlong, incessant flight—from nothing, to nothing. He didn't actually run, but kept going, going, like a car without a driver, a ship without a rudder.

It was not long after that he saw the newspaper. Its headline screamed across the top of the stand where it was being peddled. “Movie Murderer Confesses.” Lew picked it up, shaking all over.

The manager of Tom’s theater. Weeks, his name was. Somebody’d noticed that he’d been wearing a different suit during the afternoon show than the one he’d had on earlier. The seat behind Kemp’s, the dead man’s, had had chewing gum on it. They’d got hold of the suit Weeks had left at the dry-cleaner’s, and that had chewing gum on the seat of the trousers, too. He’d come in in a hurry around six, changed from one to the other right in the shop, the tailor told them. He’d had one there, waiting to be called for. He admitted it now, claimed the man had been breaking up his home.

Lew dropped the paper and the sheets separated, fell across his shoes.

It stuck to his shoe and Lew was like someone trudging through snow. “Movie Murderer Confesses—Murderer Confesses—Confesses . . .”

Subconsciously he must have known where he was going, but he wasn’t aware of it, was in a sort of fog in the broad daylight. The little blue and white plaque on the lamp-post said “Center Street.” He went slowly down it. He walked inside between the two green lamps at the police station entrance and went up to the guy at the desk and said, “I guess you people are looking for me. I’m Lew Stahl.”

Somehow, Lew knew it would be better if they put him away for a long while, the longer the better. He had learned too much that one night, got too used to death. Murder might be a habit that, once formed, would be awfully hard to break. Lew didn’t want to be a murderer.

GUNS, GENTLEMEN

Every young lad has his hero. Sometimes it’s a football player, sometimes a baseball star or a world’s heavyweight champion. Or maybe it’s just the policeman down on the next corner, or the bully from over the tracks. But every young lad has his hero.

Stephen Botillier’s was a different kind of a hero from most. Stephen Botillier’s hero was a heavy gilt frame, up on the wall of the picture gallery that formed an extension to the porticoed, white-columned old bayou mansion, in its setting of pepper trees and Spanish moss.

He first saw him when he was nine. His father took him through there. Oh, he’d been in and out of there before, of course, but those dim faces on the walls had been just “ole pitchers,” a part of his surroundings. His father made them come alive for him. “It’s time you learned who we Botilliers were.” He said that last word just a little regretfully; a grownup might have understood something by that, a kid of nine couldn’t possibly. And yet, a grownup might have failed to understand, too, what there was to regret. They had money, they had influence, their ships came into port from three continents; this beautiful ancestral place that sheltered them had been carefully preserved, was in good repair, alive, lived-in; not a decayed relic like so many others of its kind. They were the biggest, most flourishing import-and-export house in New Orleans, sir. And yet there was that faint nostalgia in his father’s eyes as he led him

slowly hand in hand from frame to frame, as though there once had been better things for Botilliers to occupy themselves with than invoices and bills-of-lading and profits-and-losses.

"This man here was once the King of France's lieutenant governor—before this was a State, before there were any States. Just think, young Stephen, his word was law, from the Delta to the Great Lakes and the forests of Minnesota."

Stephen Botillier stared solemnly up at the glistening steel cuirass, the curly shoulder-length perruque, and couldn't get any fellow feeling out of it. The picture stayed as dead as the cuts of Marquette and La Salle in his school histories.

"This man here left his home and his family and friends, gave up wealth and position, endured cold and hunger and privation, finally met death, for an ideal: liberty. He fought for what is now our country, though it wasn't his yet in those days. He was on Washington's staff."

The boy squinted gravely at the buff-and blue uniform, the pigtailed white hair. Again, somehow, he couldn't feel that that man up there had ever been alive; all he was reminded of was a two-cent stamp.

"This man here was a naval officer under Decatur. He sailed against the Barbary pirates, then he came back and helped defend our city in the Battle of New Orleans—"

Pirates—that sounded a little more exciting—but it was still a lot like the things your teachers told you about in school.

"And this one here—" His father pointed to the name plate set into the bottom of the frame. *Stephen Botillier, 18—, 18—*. "His name was the same as yours. He was your great-grandfather's younger brother—"

It might have been the similarity of name, to begin with—yet the others had all been Botilliers too—but the boy had a sudden sense of kinship come over him as he gazed up at the long-dead boyish face before him. The crackling black

eyes seemed to look into his understandingly, as though they knew all about one another, would have made a perfect pair. He was younger than the others—that might have helped the impression too.

"He was hardly more than a boy when he died," Stephen's father admitted. "Twenty-five, about." But there was sneaking admiration in the way he said it, not regret or disapproval. And, more to himself than to the boy beside him, he murmured, "That's better than growing old in a counting-house—"

Stephen couldn't tear himself away; those whimsical, humorous, reckless eyes seemed to hold him. The picture had come alive with a vengeance. A psychologist would have said, "Nine is the most impressionable age in life. Telling a boy things like that is of doubtful value." Psychologists don't know everything.

"What'd *he* do?" Stephen breathed reverently.

"I can't tell you much. He lost his life away from home, in a foreign country. He died as a gentleman should—"

Stephen Botillier moved onward along the gallery, hand clasped in his father's, but his head was turned backward toward that young face on the wall that had somehow struck a responsive chord. The rest of it went over his head, scarcely heard. A man in the flattened kepi of the Mexican War, a man in the butternut gray of Lee's army. And then—the doors at the opposite end of the gallery, leading out to the present, and cargoes and shipments and invoices and bills-of-lading, and a stifled pang in the hearts of men who had never known their birthright.

"So now you know what it was to be a Botillier. Remember what I've shown you. That's the most I can do for you." His father let go of his hand and touched him fondly on the top of the head.

The boy went back along the gallery, stopped midway down it, pointed. "I'm going to be like *him,*" he said. Again that sense of familiarity, of merged identity, as the black

eyes looked into his, alive, compelling, infinitely understanding, with a comradely “Hello, there!” down the generations.

Stephen Botillier had found his hero.

It wasn’t a transitory schoolboy thing that passed as he grew older. It stayed with him from that day on, became a part of the web of his living. It was an everyday thing, and yet it was a special thing, set apart. But there was nothing strange, other-worldly or mystical about him in the least. He was as normal, healthy, boisterous a young animal as any other boy his age. He went to school and hated it, played truant and got soundly shellacked for it when he was found out. Tossed a baseball through somebody’s store window and got trounced for that. Went swimming in the summer without permission, came home with his clothes dripping and got in trouble for that. But there was always this alter ego to draw consolation from, to stand before with a smarting back and an equally smarting sense of injustice and sulkily admit: “I guess they did that to you too, didn’t they, Steve?” And that feeling of kinship, of a commonly shared experience, would somehow make it all right.

That was the first place he went after all his fights. To report triumphantly, “I licked the stuffing out of him, Steve,” and demonstrate his prowess and his special, secret blows, shadowboxing against an imaginary adversary. Or, if he’d come out second-best, to lick his wounds, salve his pride, show cause why he hadn’t been able to do any better. “He had a longer reach than me, Steve. You know how it is, I couldn’t get in under it; you must have had that happen to you too.” And the dark young eyes on the wall seemed to crackle and to try to say appreciatively, “I sure enough did!”

He never thought of him as old, as dead and gone, never thought of him as his great-grandfather’s younger brother. It was as though they were twins, as though they were one and the same, as though the fellow on the wall was—how to put it?—his mascot, his scout leader, his lucky charm. He’d

never been old anyway, maybe that was why. He'd passed into Time at twenty-five, just the right age for a hero to be; stayed as young through all eternity as he was eternally young on the canvas.

Stephen Botillier shot up like a cornstalk, passed through the awkward age; the boy became a youth. He finished prep school in his home city, and his father entered him in the Southern university all the Botilliers had gone to. Small, provincial maybe, compared to some of the colossi up North, but tradition-laden. The picture stayed upon the wall, but he took this thing with him that had become inextricably a part of himself. For this was no hero to be admired from afar; this was something in the heart and blood that had nothing to do with mere outward emulation.

Kissing his first girl, in the roadster his father had given him, in a mossy lane under a golden harvest moon, the thing somehow became less a maiden effort than a remembered experience. It was as though he'd felt this mixture of nervousness, bashfulness and daring before. And even in that moment he could whisper deep in his heart, unheard by the fluffy little coed in the crook of his arm, "Is that the way you felt about it too, Steve?"

They hadn't had little roadsters in those days, or coeds either, but what was the difference? A moss-silvered lane, a harvest moon, a demure little miss—those things didn't change. A horse and carriage, maybe, with the chuckling darky coachman sent off about his business for a while. He could almost hear the plink of a ghost banjo from some nearby slave quarters, where now the radio of his roadster simmered softly, *You're the Top.*

Or when, for the almost unnecessary as yet first time, he passed that badge of manhood, the razor, across his face—he thought of Stephen Botillier, the other Stephen Botillier. "Wonder if he nicked himself like that—the first time?" And again—the trappings were different but not the kernel of the experience. They hadn't had safety razors in those days

yet, nor creams that didn’t require brush and water. But the pride, the sense of maturity it gave you, the haste to be at it before it was really indispensable—those things had always been and always would be.

So he lived with him, through all the hours of all his days. It was not an obsession, not a fanatical thing. It was a warm, human, down-to-earth, companionable thing. Sitting stumped before some tricky question on a midterm exam, his instinctive plea for help went out to Stephen Botillier. Or running for a touchdown, with the interference closing in on him ahead and bound to head him off. Or even being stuck with a lemon on the dance floor at the prom, unable to get her off his hands. No one, not father nor brother nor bosom friends, could come as close to him as this man dead a century, whose only trace was a square of canvas within a gilded frame.

He got through as his father had before him, not with flying colors, just got through. They had never been bookish men, the Botilliers. And the old world, dead and gone now, had felt that a gentleman didn’t need to be a scholar. Even today it didn’t matter. The mercantile house of Botillier and Son was well established enough, flourishing enough, to allow for that; it didn’t require a pedant for its purposes.

He was twenty-four and a half years old, six months short of his namesake’s age at the time of his death, when he came home from college for the last time. Ready now—and there was the rub—for what? Gone were the things the faces along that picture gallery spoke of, the blood-stirring things, the bright sharp jewel-like patterns of individual lives, no two quite alike. Oh, there were still wars, true enough. Unclean, impersonal things now, horrid mechanical butcheries carried out by automatons. But the old world was gone, and its codes had been swept away with it. Botillier and Son, Imports and Exports, was waiting to claim the rest of his life. That was all the world of today had to offer.

His father seemed to understand, although Steve had said not a word, given not a sign, that it went against the grain. His father said, “It’s June, and the firm has got along without you for seventy years. It can get along without you for a few more months, Steve. You’re only young this once, and once you take up the reins you’ll never be able to let go of them again. They’ll fasten themselves tighter around you each year. I know, I found that out myself. I’m sending you away on a trip first, before you join me at the office. Take your time, go where you want to go, take a good look at the world, before you come back ready to buckle down. How’ll that be?”

“That,” said Stephen Botillier quietly, “will be great.”

He drifted into the picture gallery, from old habit and present necessity, sauntered partway down it and stopped there. The rest were just moldy ancestral pictures on a wall. They looked at each other. They were nearly of an age now; and Steve, the living Steve, stood there, six months the other’s junior.

You can look into your mirror every day of your life, and still you will not know the real appearance of your own face, for you cannot see it as others see it. His father had come in after him; he stopped short there in the doorway, as though something had stunned him for a minute. He was looking from Steve to the picture on the wall, pointing at it.

“You’re the dead image of him—I never saw anything like it! I never noticed it myself until now—your face must have been changing all along, little by little.” He detached a framed mirror, held it out, “Look at that. It could almost be a picture of yourself, in fancy dress.”

Steve, with his back to the wall, could see his own features and those on the canvas side by side. It was true; the proportions of both heads, the width of the foreheads and cheekbones, the shape of the noses, mouths and chins were alike. And more than anything else, the clear, alert, black eyes. It might have been the same man, in all the

things that mattered. The only differences were superficial, man-made—the trim of the hair, the neck-apparel.

Something made Stephen Botillier glow with inner satisfaction as he noted it. It gave him a sense of personal completion, as though, had he looked otherwise, he would have felt lacking in some way, having failed to measure up to what he should have been.

His father set the mirror down still amazed, shaking his head. “Uncanny. And they say there’s no such thing as heredity! It must skip generations.” He himself was of an entirely different coloring and appearance. So, he informed Steve as they walked outside again, had his own father been. Steve glanced back over his shoulder at the square upon the wall, narrowed now to an oblong by perspective. Yet even now the black eyes seemed to be still upon him—in appraisal and approval—just as the eyes in any portrait follow one about, no matter in which direction one moves, if the artist has painted them fixed upon him.

“He’s always been your favorite out of the lot, hasn’t he?” his father said knowingly.

“Something seems to draw me to him,” Steve admitted. “Hard to say what.”

He started out on his trip a week later. No parting admonitions, no stuffy advice from his father. The Botilliers were supposed to be able to think for themselves. Just some letters of introduction, a hard handshake and a grip on the shoulder. “If you feel like using them, use them—if not throw them away. If you run short of funds you know where to reach me. Get all you can out of it, young Steve. It’s the best we can do for ourselves nowadays. *They* had all the breaks.” No need to ask whom he meant by they.

New York first, as jumping-off place. He’d been there before, and he didn’t linger there now; it was a beehive of

offices and trade, symbol of the same sort of life that awaited him later on. Then a boat to Europe. London and Paris for a while, but they didn't interest him much. From there, by easy stages, further and further off the beaten track, into nooks and crannies of the Mediterranean Basin. Strange scenes strange people and customs; strange, that was the right word—never seen by him before.

He woke up in his cabin on the morning of his twenty-fifth birthday, and the lack of motion told him the ship had dropped anchor sometime during the night. They had told him the next port of call was going to be Danubia, and this must be it. The itinerary was complicated, a little hard to keep track of, so he couldn't be positive. He'd never heard of the place before. It was just a name on a map as far as he was concerned, and—perhaps like the other Stephen Botillier before him—he was no avid porer-over of maps, no guidebook tourist.

He took his time about dressing, without bothering to glance out the porthole to see what the place was like, and only went up on deck when he was good and ready, for the novelty of these incessant halts was beginning to wear off.

There was an officer at the rail, and he stopped casually beside him, hands in pockets. "Danubia, this one?" he wanted to know idly. Then before the other man could answer, "Yes, sure, there's the Tower of Skulls over there on that headland, see it?" He was pointing to a dazzling white turretlike structure that dominated the harbor.

The officer turned to him sharply, eyes wide. "How did you know that?"

Stephen Botillier looked at him vacantly, surprised himself. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Did I give it its right name?"

"Yes, its old one. They forbade the use of it over fifty years ago, changed it to the Tower of Roses to make Danubia more attractive to visitors. In fact we're not allowed to mention it to our passengers—that's part of our working

arrangement with the port authorities. So you didn't hear it abroad this ship. And I thought you said you'd never been here before?"

"I never have," Steve Botillier told him. "This is my first trip out of the United States."

"Well, you picked it up somewhere." What he wanted to say was that Steve hadn't struck him as being a very bookish person until now, hence this bit of antiquarian lore was totally unexpected.

"Guess I must have." But he tried to remember where and couldn't. He'd never even heard the name of the little vest-pocket country until two days after they'd sailed, and if, as the officer said, the discarded name of the structure was strictly taboo among the personnel of visiting ships, how had he been able to dig it out of the oblivion of half a century before—and identify it at sight, moreover? There were several other similar landmarks it could easily have been confused with along the shoreline—a lighthouse, a fort, etc.

Must have pulled it out of thin air, he thought. And yet he realized that one just doesn't pull the right name for a place out of thin air, out of all the possible name combinations in the language. And it had a haze of familiarity spread over it, in some vague way that he couldn't analyze. Tower of Skulls, Tower of Skulls—it seemed to roll down the soundwaves of the past, into the drums of his ears. Dazzling white, reflected upside-down in the blue-green waters about its base, it seemed to focus itself down the vistas of the past, into the irises of his eyes. He put his hand up beside them, baffled; let it go—he had to.

In the launch going ashore with the second relay of the sight-seeing party, he sat by the gunwale on the left-hand side. A remembered sense of blue-green water, level with his eyes like this, warm under a blue sky, came over him overpoweringly. He looked down at his own form in surprise, as though startled to find himself in a white linen

suit, as though expecting to see skintight buff trousers, caught under the arches of his shoes by straps, a powder-blue jacket, cut away in front, tailed in back. He absently raised a hand to his throat as at remembered tightness of a linen stock in the hot sun, and there was only a low, negligible modern collar. He had, momentarily, almost a sense of loss, as though he'd misplaced part of his attire.

The gentle chugging of the motor, too, sounded out of true, refused to blend in with the scene; there should have been the slop of oars, the boat should have floated on less of an even keel, risen and fallen more at prow and stern. And a great patch of the sky behind his shoulder, when he turned to look, showed startlingly blank, as though empty of some great creamy sail. The denuded, slantwise smokestacks of the ship failed utterly to make up for this impalpable sense of loss.

But—translucent green water under a glazed blue sky, and the Tower of Skulls dazzling white across the horn-shaped harbor, those things harmonized in his senses like the music of the spheres. It was going to feel as warm and thick as rice gruel when he let his hand drop in, and yet a thread of coldness was going to run through it . . . He let his hand trail idly over the side, and it felt as warm and thick as rice gruel, yet a thread of coldness ran through it. He wondered how he'd known that beforehand. Judged by its appearance, he supposed. But he knew that wasn't true—

The word "splinter" flashed through his mind at this point, in from nowhere, out into nowhere again. He drew his hand in out of the water, and because it was dripping across his shoes, flung his fingertips downward to shake off the water. They grazed the gunwale of the boat as he did so, and a sliver of rotted wood skewered under the nail of one with a little stab of pain. He drew it out, and a drop of blood formed. He put the finger to his mouth and effaced it. But he was too surprised to lower it again, kept it there at his lips like a wondering child. The sense of repetition the

incident gave was agonizingly elusive. Going ashore in a small boat, hand in water, water warm as rice gruel, splinter in finger—Where, when had that happened to him before, in just that sequence? It was on the tip of his mind's tongue, and yet he couldn't bring it forth—it slipped back, evaded him . . .

The age-old stone quay, the greasy moss-covered landing-steps set into it at right angles to their line of approach were somehow lacking in that utter strangeness, that complete foreignness previous ports had had. It was as though he had arched his legs like this before, straddling the gap between boat and steps. He should have felt a tightness at his calves, a pulling of skintight trousers, but the funnel-like things he had on—they were wearing trousers wider in London this year—hung slackly all around his outstretched legs.

There was a young girl in the party already hurrying up the steps, ahead of the others, on ridiculous high heels. He called up warningly, "Look out, that third one down from the top wobbles—it's liable to throw you." They all looked at him, and again the officer in charge said, "I remember that now, from the last time we touched here. They haven't repaired this landing stage in a hundred years. But how did you know which one?"

Stephen Botillier answered lamely, "I imagined it would, by the looks of it. It must have looked that way to me from the boat—" But he knew he hadn't been looking at it at all, so how could he have told? He tested it himself with his own foot from the one above it, and it shook treacherously back and forth on its base, unsupported by any mortar, enough to throw anyone who wasn't on guard.

Ashore, the strangeness of familiarity left him for a while and the familiarity of strangeness that he'd had in other ports took its place. The commercial and business section of the town was largely modern; there had been a devastating earthquake thirty years ago, their guide explained, and it

had been largely rebuilt since then. Like a hundred other such places, it called itself “a little Paris,” and then did its utmost to live up to the self-assumed title. An occasional creaky tramcar, sidewalk cafés, advertisement kiosks, and a single electric sign that proudly proclaimed *Pernod* after dark sufficed to stake out its claim to being one of the little Parises. The rest was semi-Oriental bazaars, colorful Balkan and gypsy and Levantine costumes on the streets, onion-domed Greek Orthodox churches, smelly lanes and byways, and officers everywhere. The whole army seemed to consist of officers; it was a caste-ridden little country if there ever was one. Always by twos, never singly; shaven-skulled, wearing monocles, white caps with black visors, open-tailed Russian blouses over their braided trousers. Demanding right of way from other pedestrians, even women, and glaring their scorn of mere civilians.

To Stephen Botillier it seemed ridiculous the way the little group he was part of split in two time after time to form a lane down which a pair of these humorless automatons would stride without so much as an acknowledgement. “Custom of the country,” explained their guide tactfully. “Saves trouble in the long run to do as everyone else does. They’re an arrogant lot, these gentry.”

Later, turning away from a stall at the mouth of a narrow alley, where he had lingered behind the others to examine some fancy leatherwork, he met a brace of these demigods face to face, coming his way. There was no sidewalk; the entire passage was too narrow to permit three people passing one another abreast without stepping down into an open drain that ran down the middle of it. Stephen Botillier had no idea of doing this for any other man on two feet; he was getting a little tired of standing aside by now, anyway.

His immobility had brought them up short in surprise. There was comic disbelief on their faces. Both their mouths opened slightly like goggling fish. One even dropped his monocle, caught it mechanically in his cupped hand, twisted

it in again. His mate made a contemptuous half-gesture whose meaning could not be mistaken—stand aside.

Stephen Botillier, eyes flashing angrily, gave them the same gesture back and followed it up by striding through between them himself, shoving them apart by the passage of his shoulders, flattening one against the wall, compelling the one on the outside to thrust a foot into the drain to keep his balance.

He kept going, too scornful of their childish pretensions to stand there and bother any more about them. The ship's officer in charge of his own party, who had been up ahead with the others, flashed by him, face aghast. Steve turned, then, and stood there looking on. One, in the act of drawing his dress-sword, was being held by the officer's restraining hand on his arm. The officer was talking fast and soothingly, too low for Steve to catch what he was saying.

That hand on sword-hilt, that restraining hold on the arm, that sulky juvenile mask of wounded pride his face wore—it should have been taken as a parody, a laughable bit of comic opera or of movie pantomime. By all the canons of the world of today it should have been something to be derided. The man was making a fool of himself, that was all. To meet him on his own ground was to make an equal fool of oneself.

Yet Stephen Botillier, eyes attentively on that hand gripping the sword-hilt, said to himself, "If he draws it all the way out of the scabbard I'll have to step back there and resent it." He wondered why, and yet he knew it was so. He had never been taught there was any difference between a fully drawn sword and a quarter-drawn one or a half-drawn one. Why should a senseless gesture with a toylike sliver of steel be able to draw him like a magnet into a quarrel, where no word had been said, no blow exchanged? Those were the modern world's challenges, and neither had been given.

The hilt dropped back under the persuasion of the officer's urgent eloquence, the two bantams drew themselves up stiffly, turned on their heels and went on their way. The incident was over.

The officer, coming back, wiped his forehead and said, "That's the time you nearly did it! I explained that you were an American sight-seer, just off the ship, weren't familiar with the etiquette of the streets here in Danubia—"

"You needn't have taken it upon yourself to apologize for me!" Botillier blurted out, and half angrily took a step back after them. "If I'd known that was what you were doing—"

The officer quickly caught him by the shoulder, held him fast. "You've got to adjust yourself to these local vagaries. Please don't make my assignment any more difficult for me than it already is, Mr. Botillier."

Steve shrugged, relented, smiled a little, rejoined the others with him. The other Steve, he reasoned, would have let it go by like that the first time too, in good-natured tolerance of their childish swagger. But it was more like an echo of the past than a thought of his own. "Pick something worth fighting about, you two, and I'm your man!" Had he shouted that scornfully back at them just now? Obviously not—and yet somehow the words seemed to hang suspended in the stagnant alley-shaft over him, as though they had just issued from his mouth.

At sundown, from the top of the Tower of Skulls, Danubia lay spread below them on all sides like a varicolored carpet. But while some pointed to their ship lying out in the roadstead, and others to the square and streets they had traversed earlier that afternoon, Stephen Botillier's eyes were drawn to a distant point out beyond the confines of the city, where a speck of white peering through the foliage of the countryside marked some suburban villa or residence. It seemed to tug at him with a sense of compulsion, like a bird's-eye view of one's destination when one has come a long way.

The setting sun was still hotly red all over Danubia, yet he caught himself thinking, Blue in the moonlight—it looks blue with the moonlight on it, and it smells of roses and of pines . . .

“Care for a closer look through the glasses?” the officer invited.

Stephen Botillier smiled and shook his head. No, he thought, I know what it looks like—And one doesn’t spy on the secret places of the heart.

He must have said it aloud. The officer nearly dropped the glasses he was holding out to him. “Oh,” he said, giving him a curious look. Not a doubting look, just a searching one. “You do? But outsiders aren’t allowed near there, from what I’ve heard. That’s the Moravath estate—historic place.”

Stephen Botillier hardly heard what he was saying, He nodded impatiently, as if to say “Tell me my own name, tell me of the beat of my heart.”

“And all that green,” he murmured, pointing, “from the shoreline way over to there, halfway around the compass, those are its gardens.”

“You seem to be a step ahead of me all the time.”

A step? he wondered. Or a lifetime?

He lingered up there on the tower-roof after all the others had gone down again. Something welling up inside him at sight of that single white speck far off down there. Some yearning, longing, that he had never known before. Like a wanderer in sight of his homecoming, like a bereaved man in sight of his lost love. A single star stood out above it in the deepening purple sky, arrow-straight above it, like a beacon, like a marker. “Yes,” he said slowly, “I’m coming—” though those below at the foot of the tower had not called to him.

They returned to the stone quay, and he stood there in their midst watching them clamber down into the launch

one by one. “Coming, Mr. Botillier?” the officer asked when all the rest had seated themselves in the boat.

He shook his head and smiled a little. “No,” he said, “I’m staying.”

The officer thought he understood. “Oh—ah, you bet,” he said, came a little closer and dropped an eyelid at him, whispered with sudden new-found camaraderie, “The hell with this rubberneck sight-seeing, don’t blame you. Try Tanya’s, off the main square, where they have that bear chained up at the door—can’t miss it. May see you there later on myself. But don’t forget, we’re sailing at daybreak.”

Steve just stood there and looked at him, as though he were talking a foreign language.

The launch went put-putting across the darkening harbor, gleaming like patent leather now with the lights of the town caught in its depths. He stood there looking after it until its little red stern-light was swallowed up in the maw of the night and the open roadstead, out beyond the breakwater. Then he turned and went back into the town he’d never been in before.

His feet seemed to carry him along without his willing it or knowing it, and there was a look on his face of a man walking in his sleep. Sights and lights and an evening crowd all around him, and he didn’t see any of it. His eyes were fixed blankly, questioningly ahead, on nothing.

A chausseur caught at his sleeve, began to jabber ingratiatingly, trying to draw him within a lighted doorway through which balalaika music was streaming. He noticed a small live bear chained up beside it, begging on its hind paws from the passers-by. He shook off the cajoling doorkeep. “No,” he said, “no,” and motioned him away. Then, as though reminded by this of his real purpose, he threw up his hand at a droshky passing just then, a small one-horse vehicle of the type they had in Russia before the war.

He seated himself, and the man turned around to look at him inquiringly. Stephen Botillier pointed straight before them. “That way,” he said.

The modern, showcase part of the town gave way to its older, more characteristic part. The electric street lights changed to the yellow-green of oil wicks flickering behind glass shields, one to a whole street. The houses turned in upon themselves with the secretiveness of the Orient, became blank walls built around inner gardens. The past was closer here, the sense of familiarity grew stronger with every turn of the wheels under him.

He spoke suddenly to the driver, and the language was not English. Yet he knew no other and wondered where these words came from. “Hurry,” he said, “I want to buy a single rose from the old flower woman, in front of the fountain ahead, and she goes home at ten.”

She was furling her mats and collecting her watering cans when they swept into sight around a long curved alley.

“Mariushka,” he said, leaning out, “the finest white rose in all Danubia—just one. You saved it for me?”

The toothless old crone looked at him frightenedly, crossed herself. “Mariushka was my grandmother,” she quavered, “I am Annushka.” She snatched up a single perfectly formed white rose, held it tremblingly out to him.

Coins chinked on the cobbles, the droshky drove on.

They were climbing upward now, out of the town. The last houses, the last cobbles, dropped behind them. There were no more oil lamps, only the moon, coming up topaz, in an enormous wagon wheel. The dirt road branched in two before them. “That way,” he said again, pointing to the right.

The driver glanced around uneasily. “That one goes nowhere, except past the Moravath place. There is nothing at the end of it—”

“There is—everything at the end of it,” said Stephen Botillier softly. He was holding the stalk of the rose flat

across one palm, the other tenderly supporting its head, to keep the jolting of the carriage from shaking its petals free.

A ten-foot stone wall zigzagged out from the left to join them, ran parallel to that side of the road, endlessly, as far as the eye could see. The foliage of treetops was like the dark plumage of marching warriors behind it. The odor of roses was in the air, thousands of roses from some hidden garden nearby.

“The Moravath domain,” said the coachman guardedly, as though even to mention its name was risky.

A grilled gate streamed up to them, and through it as they flashed past Steve caught a glimpse of a vast sprawling house, set far in the background and blue in the moonlight. There was a sentry box on the inside of the gate, and a soldier sprang out at the sound of their passing, carbine under arm. He craned his neck suspiciously after them as they went careening down the road in a cloud of blue moonlit dust.

The coachman had whipped up his horse, to hurry by as quickly as possible. “Slower!” Steve rapped out. “You’ll miss it! There’s a postern-gate ahead somewhere, screened by vines—”

The coachman whined, “Tovarich, don’t try to get in there—you’ll get in trouble! *I’ll* get in trouble for bringing you out here—”

“Here’s for your trouble, then.” Steve flung money at him. “Now stop here—it’s just ahead somewhere. You get off the road and wait under that clump of trees over there. And when you hear me whistle see that you come and get me—I’ll have someone with me.”

He climbed down, stood there waiting in the middle of the road until horse and driver had vanished under the gloom of a thick copse of overhanging trees. He could still hear the coachman sighing dolorously at the madness of it. Midnight was striking faintly from one of the far-off belfries in town.

He turned and started walking close in along the wall, the rose carefully cradled across the crook of one arm. A thick patch of vines, black in the moonlight, mottled the wall's whiteness ahead. When he'd reached there he began to probe through the vines, sounding with the back of his hand. The toneless impact of stone suddenly gave way to the deep resonance of wood. He tore the leafy screen out of the way bodily, and a shower of small leaves fell about him like black confetti; he made a gap wide enough to reveal part of a low, narrow, age-old wooden insert in the stonework. He felt down the edge of it for something to catch hold of. A slight protuberance, pear-shaped, marked a blotted-out keyhole.

He dropped to his heels suddenly as though he had just remembered something, began clawing at the damp moldy earth just before the barrier with his bare fingernails. Finally he picked up a stick and dug deeper with that. When his hand was wrist-deep in topsoil he pulled it out again, holding a moldy bone-shaped object, unrecognizable in outline. He freed it of the adhering earth and revealed a long-stemmed key. He had to clear the keyhole itself out next, for it was tightly packed with the dust of decades.

He inserted the key finally, turned it, strained. The mechanism resisted for a long time. Then suddenly something long-disused squealed, there was a sharp click, and the whole barrier sprang back before him as though it were too large to fit into its frame.

Before he did anything he carefully cleaned his soil-caked fingertips on a handkerchief, picked up the rose he had put down, then lowered his head and stepped through to the other side of the wall, partly closing the barrier behind him.

He started walking down a finely sanded path without any hesitancy, though it wound in and out, crossed and recrossed a labyrinth of others, all identical. In the remote background, across the vast private park, the house with its spreading wings was like a low blue cliff. The odor of roses

was in the air, mingled with the sharper tang of pine. A fish plopped lazily in a hidden pool or basin somewhere near at hand. Over-head was that single bright star he'd seen from the Tower of Skulls. Face slightly tilted toward it, his lips formed the words, "Be kind to me."

A low domelike shape, blue like the house but nearer at hand, peered over the top of an ink-black hedge. He went toward it and, as the hedges opened out, stood before a little pergola or summerhouse, simply a circular roof supported by six columns. He was in shadow now, and the moonlight was a blue belt all around outside. Someone was sitting on a marble bench inside it, perfectly still, as though listening to his approaching tread. It might have been mistaken for a statue ensconced there under the pergola.

He stopped short and spoke, said softly, "Did I frighten you?"

The figure moved, stood up before him with a stir of soft garments, and a girl's voice answered in his own language, English, "How could you frighten me, Stephen, when I know your step so well, when that's all I've been sitting here waiting for, the past half-hour?" The only trace of accent was in the way she pronounced his given name—Steffen.

He held out the rose to her, and both her hands met both of his, in a sort of double knot, with the rose at its center.

He said, "It's the finest one in Danubia—outside these gardens. You have a thousand here, I know, but they're not mine to give you."

"But not white ones. They won't grow here, I don't know why. The peasants say it's because our family has had such a bloody past. Red, pink, yellow—but when our gardeners try to plant white ones they wither and die. The very soil must be cursed."

"That's why I want to take you away from here, that's why I want you to come with me."

Head close to his shoulder, like someone unutterably weary, she whispered, "I've waited so long."

“I have a carriage outside under the trees, and there’s a ship in the harbor. Will you come with me tonight?”

“Right now—without a backward look.”

They came out from under the sheltering pergola side by side, she moved swiftly along beside him down the sanded path, like a blue and white flame in the moonlight. The fine sand crunched beneath them; they were not ghosts. He could hear her breath quicken with her hurrying, he could feel the quickened beat of his own heart in his breast. The ink-black hedges came forward to meet them, walling them in; their heads and shoulders seemed to glide along the tops of them like moths.

They reached the postern gate, and he caught at it and pulled it back. Then they stopped dead, and she shrank closer to him with a wordless inhalation of fear.

A man was standing there framed by the wall opening. Its low top cut him off at shoulder level, so that he seemed headless at first glance. Steve glimpsed the braided trousers, tunic, sword and sword belt, of the military clique. The hands were clasped behind the body in an attitude of ironic patience. The mirror-polished boots were flexing up and down on their toes as an expression of the same attitude. An eight-inch native cigarette fell smoldering beside them on the ground; one of them inched aside and trod it out. His shoulders dipped and he came through to the inside, straightened up again, hands still behind his back as if in mocking inquiry.

She breathed, “Basil!”—something like that. Steve, staring into the supercilious, monocled face as the moonlight fell across it, recognized one of the two he had jostled in the narrow streets of the town that afternoon.

There was a slight stir behind them in the garden itself, and three more detached themselves from the shadows of the hedge, where they had been waiting. Not furtively, but with an air of smug satisfaction, as though their

concealment had been eminently successful. One of these was the second of the two from that afternoon.

Steve and the girl turned back again to face their first accoster. He unnoticeably detached her grasp on his arm, guided her a little aside, out of harm's way.

The man in the gateway saluted her smartly, inclining at the waist, heels swiveling together with a click. "Who is this man, Irina? You must know I cannot soil my gauntlet on the cheeks of unknown American moujiks. Speak! Is it a matter of a flogging by my orderlies or can it be settled between gentlemen?"

Steve answered for her. "My ancestors were grandees of Louisiana when yours were still roaming the woods in bear-skins, eating roots. I am Stephen Botillier of New Orleans."

The other continued to address the girl. "Forgive me for seeming to doubt your taste and judgment, but it was important not to lose caste. And now if you will excuse us. The night air in the park is very damp."

She answered in a throaty pleading voice, as much to Steve as to the other: "I stay, until I know—what becomes of me. Oh, have it over quickly, gentlemen, don't torture me!"

"A word from you is a command." He turned to Steve then. "Allow me, Mr. Botillier. Count Basil Moravath."

Steve inclined his head, like an actor who has played his part so many times before his cues come to him without thinking about them. "Moravath," he acknowledged briefly.

The other brought his right hand up, flicked the two loose gloves it held past Steve's mouth. The contact was little better than a perfunctory flirt. Steve's hands didn't move in retaliation, as the code of the modern world had taught them to; some older code, in full possession of him now, held them motionless at his sides, inclined his head in a second brief nod of acquiescence.

"It is understood that this is a matter of your making me step down into a gutter this afternoon—" Moravath glanced briefly aside at the motionless girl—and nothing else."

“My discretion is equal to any man’s,” was Steve’s cold answer.

One of the others came forward. “May I offer myself as your second?” and gave his name.

“I appoint you mine,” Moravath said to his companion of the afternoon walk.

The two seconds strolled off down one of the paths, smoking confidentially together. Steve and Moravath conscientiously turned their backs on one another, separated, stood apart. The girl remained alone, close to the wall, head bowed as if in silent prayer.

Every move was as rigidly formalized as in a minuet, as in a game of chess. The modern world would have said, “The gate is unguarded, the carriage is still out there somewhere, there is just this one fellow here; clip him one and be on your way with her—don’t be an ass.” An echo from an older world, in his heart, said, “Thus, and only thus, does a gentleman act.” He could no more have disregarded it than he could have flown through the air. It was as inexorable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians. It was too strong in his blood to be disobeyed. He stood there, smoking a Lucky Strike but living a code of the Middle Ages.

The two seconds returned by a different path than the one along which they had departed. They too separated. Steve’s came over to him. “Pistols,” he reported, “as soon as there is enough daylight to see by at twenty paces. On the edge of the bluff overlooking the sea, up the road from here a way. Is that satisfactory?”

“Why, is he a better shot than swordsman?” Steve laughed mirthlessly.

“On the contrary, he is equally at home with both. His second and I agreed that perhaps an American would not be the best swordsman in the world.”

“I appreciate your fairness, although it was unnecessary in this case. Pistols then.”

The age-old ceremonial played itself out to its penultimate step. The two seconds came together briefly again, reported the consent of their principals, separated once more until the final meeting. Moravath, his second and the third officer filed out through the postern one by one, each with a bow toward the oblivious tear-blinded girl. Steve overheard him say, from the other side of the wall, “If it were not such a mucky climb down, I would enjoy a before-dawn dip in the sea, before the meeting.”

He understood that attitude. It didn’t surprise him, he felt that way about it himself. A meeting like theirs was to be taken as a matter of course, as a necessary part of a man’s existence. Never to be disregarded or evaded, no—but on the other hand to be taken for granted, as part of one’s normal routine. So that when his own second, like a host doing his best to entertain a guest, suggested they kill time by playing with a deck of cards he happened to have about him, he willingly agreed. There would not, the other explained, be time enough for him to go back to town and then come out again by daylight. As for remaining alone with the girl, etiquette forbade that. They both ignored her, as though she were not in the garden at all, while they squatted down and used the fine sand of the path for a playing table. Steve, in his white London suit with a radium-dialed watch upon his wrist, thought, This is the way the old world went. And wondered why he felt so thoroughly at home in it.

They stood up when a first film of dirty gray showed along the top of the wall. “Your winnings,” said Steve, motioning to the pile of coins on the ground.

“Unlucky at cards—” smiled his second pleasantly. He went outside first, and Steve stopped a moment by the girl. She hadn’t moved in that whole time. She raised her head now, looked into his face. Her arms crept partly up his shoulders.

“Stephen, I’ve waited so long. Don’t leave me.”

He knew what she meant—not that he should not go out there now to the bluff but that he should not fail to come back afterwards. “It has been a long time for me too, Irina, so don’t doubt that I’ll come back.”

She held his hand in both of hers until he had gone through the postern, then trailingly released it.

It was dark under the trees, for the moon had gone long ago and the dawn wasn’t strong enough to filter through yet. His second, as if to apologize for the inconvenience, assured him: “It’s an ideal spot. You’ll admire it the minute you see it. I have all mine there, too.”

There was a whiff of salt air through the trees, sharp and cool as a knife, and suddenly the landscape opened out and two of them were facing a long narrow strip of grassy tableland, which at its opposite edge dropped down hundreds of feet into the gray bowl of the sea. Far down below on the blurred roadstead he could make out the small almond-shaped cluster of twinkling lights that was his ship, due to sail at seven.

The others had already arrived, bringing a doctor, with his satchel and dressings and long cape, and the necessary witnesses. The two seconds met, the case of weapons was opened, examined, the choice made. Even here in the open the scene was still hazy with imperfect visibility.

“Is the light satisfactory to you, Count Moravath, at twenty paces?”

“I have perfect eyes.”

“And you, Mr. Botillier?”

“The gentleman’s white tunic is easy to see.”

“Then, there is no point in waiting any longer. Count Moravath, as the injured party, has first shot. Stand here, please, back to back. At the command forward’ you will each take twenty paces in a straight line. You will halt. At the command ‘turn’ you will both turn and face one another. At the command ‘fire’ you will level your pistol and fire,

Count Moravath. At the second command ‘fire,’ if uninjured, you will level yours and fire, Mr. Botillier. Proceed.

Steve could feel Moravath’s shoulder blades touching his own; they were nearly the same height. A flurry of white broke the dark line of the trees to his left, deflected his eyes over that way momentarily. The girl had followed them, was standing there crouched against a tree-trunk, one hand to her throat. He turned his eyes away again, ignored her presence as though he hadn’t seen it.

“Forward.” The contact of their shoulders parted and he struck out slowly, counting as he went, forearm and pistol uptilted. The grass felt slippery with dew under his feet. Twenty. He brought his left foot into line with his right, came to a halt with a slight click of the heels.

“Turn.” He wheeled around and looked over and across at Moravath. The white of his uniform tunic showed up splendidly in the surrounding grayness that still soft-focussed the scene. I can kill him easily, he thought, unless he gets me first in the head or heart.

“Fire!” He never saw Moravath’s right forearm drop down. There was a crack as though a large bough had broken off one of the trees, and something hissed sharply past his head.

Five seconds ticked off. Moravath didn’t move, straightened a little—that was all.

“Fire!”

He thought, “I don’t want his life. All I’m interested in, now that he’s missed me, is over there—by the trees.” He kept his pistol perpendicular, pulled the trigger. It flashed upward into the gray vault over him with a sharp, clean-sounding detonation.

He threw the pistol down and started over to where she was. She was coming forward to meet him now, face radiant, arms half outstretched. They hovered about him, touched his face, a lock of his hair that the stiff breeze had dislodged. “You came back! Stephen, you came back! My

wait was rewarded at last! Stephen, what joy awaits us now —nothing can ever part us again!”

As they turned and went off together, arm in arm, along the edge of the bluff, he gave a look back. The others had disappeared, were already gone. There was a still form lying there on the grass where he had been just now. A form encased in a white linen London suit, 1949 cut. The dial of a wrist watch glinted on the back of one out-thrust hand. Something unrecognizable for what it was, a squat, slide-rule modern revolver, lay just beyond the spread fingers. Far down below the cluster of twinkling lights was moving out toward the open sea; a puff of white came from one of its smokestacks, then moments later a faint bleat followed.

“Our love was so strong, Stephen,” she murmured. “How could anything have hoped to end it?” They turned and went off together, arm in arm.

AFTER-DINNER STORY

MACKENZIE GOT ON the elevator at the thirteenth floor. He was a water-filter salesman and had stopped in at his home office to make out his accounts before going home for the day. Later on that night he told his wife, half-laughingly, that that must have been why it happened to *him*, his getting on at the thirteenth floor. A lot of buildings omit them.

The red bulb bloomed and the car stopped for him. It was an express, omitting all floors, both coming and going, below the tenth. There were two other men in it when he got on, not counting the operator. It was late in the day, and most of the offices had already emptied themselves. One of the passengers was a scholarly-looking man with rimless glasses, tall and slightly stooped. The time came when MacKenzie learned all their names. This was Kenshaw. The other was stout and cherubic looking, one of two partners in a struggling concern that was trying to market fountain pens with tiny lightbulbs in their barrels—without much success. He was fiddling with one of his own samples on the way down, clicking it on and off with an air of proud ownership. He turned out to be named Lambert.

The car was very efficient looking, very smooth running, sleek with bronze and chromium. It appeared very safe. It stopped at the next floor down, the twelfth, and a surly-looking individual with bushy brows stepped in,

Prendergast. Then the number 11 on the operator's call board lit up, and it stopped there too. A man about MacKenzie's own age and an older man with a trim white mustache were standing there side by side when the door opened. However, only the young man got on; the elder man gripped him by the arm in parting and turned away remarking loudly, "Tell Elinor I was asking for her." The younger answered, " 'Bye, Dad," and stepped in. Hardecker was his name. Almost at the same time 10 was flashing.

The entry from 11 had turned to face the door, as all passengers are supposed to do in an elevator for their own safety. MacKenzie happened to glance at the sour-pussed man with the bushy brows at that moment; the latter was directly behind the newest arrival. He was glaring at the back of Hardecker's head with baleful intensity; in fact MacKenzie had never seen such a hundred-watt glower anywhere before except on a movie "heavy." The man's features, it must be admitted, lent themselves to just such an expression admirably; he had a swell head start even when his face was in repose.

MacKenzie imagined this little by-play was due to the newcomer's having inadvertently trodden on the other's toe in turning to face forward. As a matter of fact, he himself was hardly conscious of analyzing the whole thing thus thoroughly; these were all just disconnected thoughts.

Ten was still another single passenger, a bill collector judging by the sheaf of pink, green, and canary slips he kept riffling through. He hadn't, by the gloomy look he wore, been having much luck today; or maybe his feet hurt him. This one was Megaffin.

There were now seven people in the car, counting the operator, standing in a compact little group facing the door, and no more stops due until it reached street level. Not a very great crowd; certainly far from the maximum the mechanism was able to hold. The framed notice, tacked to

the panel just before MacKenzie's eyes, showed that it had been last inspected barely ten days before.

It never stopped at the street floor.

MacKenzie, trying to reconstruct the sequence of events for his wife that night, said that the operator seemed to put on added speed as soon as they had left the tenth floor behind. It was an express, so he didn't think anything of it. He remembered noticing at this point that the operator had a boil on the back of his neck, just above his uniform collar, with a Maltese cross of adhesive over it. He got that peculiar sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach many people get from a too-precipitated drop. The man near him, the young fellow from the eleventh, turned and gave him a half-humorous, half-pained look, so he knew that he must be feeling it too. Someone farther back whistled slightly to show his discomfort.

The car was a closed one, all metal, so you couldn't see the shaft doors flashing up. They must have been ticking off at a furious rate, just the same. MacKenzie began to get a peculiar ringing in his ears, like when he took the subway under the East River, and his knee joints seemed to loosen up, trying to buckle under him.

But what really first told him—and all of them—that something had gone wrong and this was not a normal descent, was the sudden, futile, jerky way the operator was wangling the control lever to and fro. It traveled the short arc of its orbit readily enough, but the car refused to answer to it. He kept slamming it into the socket at one end of the groove, marked Stop for all eyes to read, and nothing happened. Fractions of seconds, not minutes, were going by.

They heard him say in a muffled voice, "Look out! We're going to hit!" And that was all there was time for.

The whole thing was a matter of instants. The click of a camera shutter. The velocity of the descent became sickening; MacKenzie felt as if he were going to throw up.

Then there was a tremendous bang like a cannon, an explosion of blackness, and of bulb glass showering down as the light went out.

They all toppled together in a heap, like a bunch of ninepins. MacKenzie, who had gone over backward, was the luckiest of the lot; he could feel squirming bodies bedded under him, didn't touch the hard-rubber floor of the car at all. However, his hip and shoulder got a bad wrench, and the sole of his foot went numb, through shoe and all, from the stinging impact it got flying up and slapping the bronze wall of the car.

There was no opportunity to extricate one's self, to try to regain one's feet. They were going up again—on springs or something. It was a little sickening too, but not as bad as the coming down had been. It slackened, reversed into a drop, and they banged a second time. Not with the terrific impact of the first, but a sort of cushioned bang that scrambled them up even more than they were already. Somebody's shoe grazed MacKenzie's skull. He couldn't see it but quickly caught it and warded it aside before it kicked him and gave him a fracture.

A voice near him was yelling, "Stop it! Cut it out!" half-hysterically, as though the jockeying up and down could be controlled. Even MacKenzie, badly frightened and shaken up as he was, hadn't lost his head to that extent.

The car finally settled, after a second slight bounce that barely cleared the springs under it at all, and a third and almost unnoticeable jolt. The rest was pitch darkness, a sense of suffocation, a commingling of threshing bodies like an ant heap, groans from the badly hurt and an ominous sigh or two from those even beyond groaning.

Somebody directly under MacKenzie was not moving at all. He put his hand on him, felt an upright, stiff collar, and just above it a small swelling, crisscrossed by plaster. The operator was dead. There was an inertness that told

MacKenzie, and the rubber matting beneath the operator's skull was sticky.

He felt then for the sleek metal wall of the enclosure that had buried them all alive, reached up it like a fly struggling up glass, with the heels of his hands and the points of his elbows. He squirmed the rest of his body up after these precarious grips. Upright again, he leaned against cold bronze.

The voice—there's always one in every catastrophe or panic—that had been pleading to "Cut it out!" was now begging with childish vehemence: "Get me outa here! For the love of Mike, I've got a wife and kids. Get me outa here!"

MacKenzie had the impression it was the surly-looking follow with the bushy eyebrows. The probabilities, he felt, were all for it. Such visible truculence and toughness are usually all hollow inside, a mask of weakness.

"Shut up," he said, "I've got a wife too. What's that got to do with it?"

The important thing, he recognized, was not the darkness, nor their trapped position at the bottom of a sealed-up shaft, nor even any possible injuries any of them had received. But the least noticeable of all the many corollaries of their predicament was the most dangerous. It was that vague sense of stuffiness, of suffocation. Something had to be done about that at once. The operator had opened the front panel of the car at each floor, simply by latch motion. There was no reason why that could not be repeated down here, even though there was no accompanying opening in the shaft wall facing it. Enough air would filter down the crack between the jammed-in car and the wall, narrow though it was, to keep them breathing until help came. They were going to need that air before this was over.

MacKenzie's arms executed interlocking circles against the satiny metal face of the car, groping for the indented

grip used to unlatch it. “Match,” he ordered. “Somebody light a match. I’m trying to get this thing open. We’re practically airtight in here.”

The immediate, and expected, reaction was a howl of dismay from the tough-looking bird, like a dog’s craven yelp.

Another voice, more self-controlled, said, “Wait a minute.” Then nothing happened.

“Here I am; here, hand ’em to me,” said MacKenzie, shoveling his upturned hand in and out through the velvety darkness.

“They won’t strike, got all wet. Glass must have cut me.” And then an alarmed “My shirt’s all covered with blood!”

“All right, it mayn’t be yours,” said MacKenzie steadyingly. “Feel yourself before you let loose. If it is, hold a handkerchief to it. That bulb glass isn’t strong enough to pierce very deep.” And then in exasperation he hollered out, “For the love of God! Six men! Haven’t any of you got a match to give me?” Which was unfair, considering that he himself had run short just before he left his office, and had been meaning to get a folder at the cigar store when he got off the car. “Hey, you, the guy that was fiddling with that trick fountain pen coming down, how about that gadget of yours?”

A new voice, unfrightened but infinitely crestfallen, answered disappointedly: “It—it broke.” And then with a sadness that betokened there were other, greater tragedies than what had happened to the car: “It shows you can’t drop it without breakage. And that was the chief point of our whole advertising campaign.” Then an indistinct mumble: “Fifteen hundred dollars capital! Wait’ll Belman hears what a white elephant we’ve got on our hands.” Which, under the circumstances, was far funnier than was intended.

At least he’s not yellow, whoever he is, thought MacKenzie. “Never mind,” he exclaimed suddenly. “I’ve got

it.” His fingertips had found the slot at the far end of the seamless cast-bronze panel. The thing didn’t feel buckled in any way but if the concussion had done that to it, if it refused to open…

He pulled back the latch, leaning over the operator’s lifeless body to do so, and tugged at the slide. It gave, fell back about a third of its usual orbit along the groove, then stalled unmanageably. That was sufficient for their present needs, though there was no question of egress through it. The rough-edged bricks of the shaft wall were a finger’s width beyond the lips of the car’s orifice; not even a venturesome cat could have gotten a paw between without jamming it. What mattered was that they wouldn’t asphyxiate now, no matter how long it took to free the mechanism, raise it.

“It’s all right, fellows,” he called reassuringly to those behind him, “I’ve got some air into the thing now.”

If there was light farther up the shaft, it didn’t reach down this far. The shaft wall opposite the opening was as black as the inside of the car itself.

He said, “They’ve heard us. They know what’s happened. No use yelling at the top of your voice like that, only makes it tougher for the rest of us. They’ll get an emergency crew on the job. We’ll just have to sit and wait, that’s all.”

The nerve-tingling bellows for help, probably the tough guy again, were silenced shamefacedly. A groaning still kept up intermittently from someone else. “My arm, oh, Gawd, it hurts!” The sighing, from an injury that had gone deeper still, had quieted suspiciously some time before. Either the man had fainted, or he, too, was dead.

MacKenzie, matter-of-factly but not callously, reached down for the operator’s outflung form, shifted it into the angle between two of the walls, and propped it upright there. Then he sat himself down in the clear floor space provided, tucked up his legs, wrapped his arms around

them. He wouldn't have called himself a brave man; he was just a realist.

There was a momentary silence from all of them at once, one of those pauses. Then, because there was also, or seemed to be, a complete stillness from overhead in the shaft, panic stabbed at the tough guy again. "They gonna leave us here all night?" he whimpered. "What you guys sit there like that for? Don't you wanna get out?"

"For Pete's sake, somebody clip that loudmouth on the chin!" urged MacKenzie truculently.

There was a soundless indrawn whistle. "My arm! Oh, my arm!"

"Must be busted," suggested MacKenzie sympathetically. "Try wrapping your shirt tight around it to kill the pain."

Time seemed to stand still, jog forward a few notches at a time every so often, like something on a belt. The rustle of a restless body, a groan, an exhalation of impatience, an occasional cry from the craven in their midst, whom MacKenzie sat on each time with increasing acidity as his own nerves slowly frayed.

The waiting, the sense of trapped helplessness, began to tell on them, far more than the accident had.

"They may think we're all dead and take their time," someone said.

"They never do in a case like this," MacKenzie answered shortly. "They're doing whatever they're doing as fast as they can. Give 'em time."

A new voice, that he hadn't heard until then, said to no one in particular, "I'm glad my father didn't get on here with me."

Somebody chimed in, "I wish I hadn't gone back after that damn phone call. It was a wrong number, and I coulda ridden down the trip before this."

MacKenzie sneered, "Ah, you talk like a bunch of ten-year-olds! It's happened; what's the good of wishing about it?"

He had a watch on his wrist with a luminous dial. He wished that he hadn't had, or that it had gone out of commission like the other man's trick fountain pen. It was too nerve-racking; every minute his eyes sought it, and when it seemed like half an hour had gone by, it was only five minutes. He wisely refrained from mentioning it to any of the others; they would have kept asking him, "How long is it now?" until he went screwy.

When they'd been down twenty-two and one-half minutes from the time he'd first looked at it, and were all in a state of nervous instability bordering on frenzy, including himself, there was a sudden unexpected, unannounced thump directly overhead, as though something heavy had landed on the roof of the car.

This time it was MacKenzie who leaped up, pressed his cheek flat against the brickwork outside the open panel, and funneled up the paper-thin gap: "Hello! Hello!"

"Yeah," a voice came down, "we're coming to you, take it easy!"

More thumping for a while, as though somebody were jigging over their heads. Then a sudden metallic din, like a boiler factory going full blast. The whole car seemed to vibrate with it, it became numbing to touch it for long at any one point. The confined space of the shaft magnified the noise into a torrent of sound, drowning out all their remarks. MacKenzie couldn't stand it, finally had to stick his palms up flat against his ears. A blue electric spark shot down the narrow crevice outside the door from above. Then another, then a third. They all went out too quickly to cast any light inside.

Acetylene torches! They were having to cut a hole through the car roof to get at them. If there was a basement opening in the shaft, and there must have been, the car must have plunged down even beyond that, to subbasement level, wound up in a dead end cul-de-sac at pit bottom. There was apparently no other way.

A spark materialized eerily through the ceiling. Then another, then a semicircular gush of them. A curtain of fire descended halfway into their midst, illuminating their faces wanly for a minute. Luckily it went out before it touched the car floor.

The noise broke off short and the silence in its wake was deafening. A voice shouted just above them: “Look out for sparks, you guys below, we’re coming through. Keep your eyes closed, get back against the walls!”

The noise came on again, nearer at hand, louder than before. MacKenzie’s teeth were on edge from the incessant vibration. Being rescued was worse than being stuck down here. He wondered how the others were standing it, especially that poor guy with the broken wing. He thought he heard a voice scream: “Elinor! Elinor!” twice, like that, but you couldn’t be sure of anything in that infernal din.

The sparks kept coming down like a dripping waterfall; MacKenzie squinted his eyes cagily, kept one hand shielded up over them to protect his eyesight. He thought he saw one spark shoot across horizontally, instead of down vertically, like all the others; it was a different color too, more orange. He thought it must be an optical illusion produced by the alternating glare and darkness they were all being subjected to; either that, or a detached splinter of combusted metal from the roof, ricocheting off the wall. He closed his eyes all the way, just to play safe.

There wasn’t much more to it after that. The noise and sparks stopped abruptly. They pried up the crescent-shaped flap they had cut in the roof with crowbars, to keep it from toppling inward and crushing those below. The cool, icy beams of torches flickered through. A cop jumped down into their midst and ropes were sent snaking down after him. He said in a brisk, matter-of-fact way: “All right, who’s first now? Who’s the worst hurt of yez all?”

His torch showed three forms motionless at the feet of the others in the confined space. The operator, huddled in

the corner where MacKenzie had propped him; the scholarly-looking man with the rimless glasses (minus them now, and a deep gash under one eye to show what had become of them) lying senseless on his side; and the young fellow who had got on at the eleventh, tumbled partly across him, face down.

"The operator's dead," MacKenzie answered as spokesman for the rest, "and these two're out of their pain just now. There's a guy with a busted arm here, take him first."

The cop deftly looped the rope under the armpits of the ashen-faced bill collector, who was knotting the slack of one sleeve tightly in his other hand and sweating away like a fish in the torchlight.

"Haul away!" the cop shouted toward the opening. "And take your time, the guy's hurt."

The bill collector went up through the ceiling, groaning, legs drawn up under him like a trussed-up fowl.

The scholarly-looking man went next, head bobbing down in unconsciousness. When the noose came down empty, the cop bent over to fasten it around the young fellow still on the floor.

MacKenzie saw him change his mind, pry open one eyelid, pass the rope on to the tough-looking mug who had been such a crybaby, and who was shaking all over from the nervous reaction to the fright he'd had.

"What's the matter with him?" MacKenzie butted in, pointing to the floor.

"He's dead," the cop answered briefly. "He can wait, the living come first."

"Dead! Why, I heard him say he was glad his father didn't get on with him, long after we hit!"

"I don't care what you heard him say!" the cop answered. "He coulda said it, and still be dead now! Nuts. Are you telling me my business? You seem to be pretty chipper for a guy that's just come through an experience like this!"

“Skip it,” said MacKenzie placatingly. He figured it was no business of his anyway, if the guy had seemed all right at first and now was dead. He might have had a weak heart.

He and the disheartened fountain pen entrepreneur seemed to be the only two out of the lot who were totally unharmed. The latter, however, was so brokenhearted over the failure of his appliance to stand up under an emergency, that he seemed hardly to care whether he went up or stayed down or what became of him. He kept examining the defective gadget even on his way up through the aperture in the car roof, with the expression of a man who has just bitten into a very sour lemon.

MacKenzie was the last one up the shaft, except the two fatalities. He was pulled in under the lip of the basement opening, from which the sliding doors had been taken down bodily. It was a bare four feet above the roof of the car; in other words the shaft continued on down past it for little more than the height of the car. He couldn’t understand why it had been built that way, and not ended flush with the basement, in which case their long imprisonment could have been avoided. It was explained to him later, by the building superintendent, that it was necessary to give the car additional clearance underneath, else it would have run the risk of jamming each time it came down to the basement.

There were stretchers there in the basement passageway, and the bill collector and the scholarly-looking man were being given first aid by a pair of interns. The hard-looking egg was gulping down a large glass of spirits of ammonia between clicking teeth. MacKenzie let one of the interns look him over, at the latter’s insistence; was told what he knew already, that he was okay. He gave his name and address to the lieutenant of police in charge, and walked up a flight of stairs to the street level, thinking: The old-fashioned way’s the best after all.

He found the lobby of the building choked with a milling crowd, warded off a number of ambulance chasers who tried to tell him how badly hurt he was. “There’s money in it, buddy, don’t be a sucker!” MacKenzie phoned his wife from a nearby booth to shorten her anxiety, then he left the scene for home.

His last fleeting impression was of a forlorn figure standing there in the lobby, a man with a trim white mustache, the father of the young fellow lying dead below, buttonholing every cop within reach, asking over and over again, “Where’s my son? Why haven’t they brought my son up yet?” And not getting any answer from any of them—which was an answer in itself. MacKenzie pushed out into the street.

Friday, that was four days later, the doorbell rang right after supper and he had a visitor. “MacKenzie? You were in that elevator Monday night, weren’t you, sir?”

“Yes,” MacKenzie grinned, he sure was.

“I’m from Police Headquarters. Mind if I ask you a few questions? I’ve been going around to all of ’em checking up.”

“Come in and sit down,” said MacKenzie interestedly. His first guess was that they were trying to track down labor sabotage, or some violation of the building laws. “Matter, anything phony about it?”

“Not for our money,” said the dick, evidently because this was the last leg of what was simply a routine questioning of all the survivors, and he refused to differ from his superiors. “The young fellow that was lying dead there in the bottom of the car—not the operator but young Wesley Hardecker—was found by the examiner to have a bullet embedded in his heart.”

MacKenzie, jolted, gave a long-drawn whistle that brought his Scotty to the door questioningly. “Whew! You mean somebody shot him while we were all cooped up down there in that two-by-four?”

The dick showed, without being too pugnacious about it, that he was there to ask the questions, not answer them. “Did you know him at all?”

“Never saw him in my life before, until he got on the car that night. I know his name by now, because I read it in the papers next day; I didn’t at the time.”

The visitor nodded, as though this was the answer he’d gotten from all the others too. “Well, did you hear anything like a shot while you were down there?”

“No, not before they started the blowtorches. And after that, you couldn’t have heard one anyway. Matter of fact, I had my hands over my ears at one time. I did see a flash, though,” he went on eagerly. “Or at least I remember seeing one of the sparks shoot *across* instead of dropping down, and it was more orange in color.”

Again the dick nodded. “Yeah, a couple of others saw that too. That was probably it, right there. Did it light up anyone’s face behind it, anything like that?”

“No,” MacKenzie admitted, “my eyes were all pinwheels, between the coal blackness and these flashing sparks coming down through the roof; we’d been warned, anyway, to keep them shut a minute before.” He paused thoughtfully, went on: “It doesn’t seem to hang together, does it? Why should anyone pick such a time and place to —”

“It hangs together beautifully,” contradicted the dick. “It’s his old man, the elder Hardecker, that’s raising a stink, trying to read something phony into it. It’s suicide while of unsound mind, and has been all along; and that’s what the findings of the coroner’s inquest are going to be too. We haven’t turned up anything that throws a doubt on that. Old man Hardecker himself hasn’t been able to identify a single

one of you as having ever known or seen his son—or himself—before six o'clock last Monday evening. The gun was the fellow's own, and he had a license for it. He had it with him when he got in the car. It was under his body when it was picked up. The only fingerprints brought out on it were his. The examiner finds the wound a contact wound, powder burns all around it."

"The way we were crowded together down there, any kind of a shot at anyone would have been a contact," MacKenzie tried to object.

The dick waved this aside. "The nitrate test shows that his fingers fired the shot. It's true that we neglected to give it to anyone else at the time, but since there'd been only one shot fired out of the gun, and no other gun was found, that don't stack up to much. The bullet, of course, was from that gun and no other, ballistics has told us. The guy was a nervous, high-strung young fellow. He went hysterical down there, cracked up, and when he couldn't stand it any more, took himself out of it. And against this, his old man is beefing that he was happy, he had a lovely wife, they were expecting a kid, and he had everything to live for."

"Well, all right," objected MacKenzie mildly, "but why should he do it when they were already working on the roof over us, and it was just a matter of minutes before they got to us? Why not before? That don't sound logical. Matter of fact, his voice sounded calm and unfrightened enough while we were waiting."

The detective got up, as though the discussion were ended, but condescended to enlighten him on his way to the door: "People don't crack up at a minute's notice; it was after he'd been down there twenty minutes, half an hour, it got him. When you heard him say that, he was probably trying to hold himself together, kid himself he was brave or something. Any psychiatrist will tell you what noise'll do to someone already under a strain or tension. The noise of the blowtorches gave him the finishing touch; that's why he did

it then, couldn’t think straight any more. As far as having a wife and expecting a kid is concerned, that would only make him lose his head all the quicker. A man without ties or responsibilities is always more cold-blooded in an emergency.”

“It’s a new one on me, but maybe you’re right. I only know water filters.”

“It’s my job to be right about things like that. Good night, Mr. MacKenzie.”

The voice on the wire said, “Mr. MacKenzie? Is this the Mr. Stephen MacKenzie who was in an elevator accident a year ago last August? The newspapers gave—”

“Yes, I was.”

“Well, I’d like you to come to dinner at my house next Saturday evening, at exactly seven o’clock.”

MacKenzie cocked his brows at himself in the wall mirror. “Hadn’t you better tell me who you are, first?”

“Sorry,” said the voice, crisply. “I thought I had. I’ve been doing this for the past hour or so, and it’s beginning to tell on me. This is Harold Hardecker, I’m head of the Hardecker Import and Export Company.”

“Well, I still don’t place you, Mr. Hardecker,” MacKenzie said. “Are you one of the men who was on that elevator with me?”

“No, my son was. He lost his life.”

“Oh,” said MacKenzie. He remembered now. A man with a trim white mustache, standing in the milling crowd, buttonholing the cops as they hurried by…

“Can I expect you then at seven next Saturday, Mr. MacKenzie? I’m at—Park Avenue.”

“Frankly,” said MacKenzie, who was a plain soul not much given to social hypocrisy, “I don’t see any point to it. I don’t

believe we've ever spoken to one another before. Why do you single me out?"

Hardecker explained patiently, even good-naturedly, "I'm not singling you out, Mr. MacKenzie. I've already contacted each of the others who were in the car that night with my son, and they've all agreed to be there. I don't wish to disclose what I have in mind beforehand; I'm giving this dinner for that purpose. However, I might mention that my son died intestate, and his poor wife passed away in childbirth in the early hours of the following morning. His estate reverted to me, and I am a lonely old man, without friends or relatives, and with more money already than I know what to do with. It occurred to me to bring together five perfect strangers, who shared a common hazard with my son, who were with him during the last few moments of his life." The voice paused, insinuatingly, to let this sink in. Then it resumed, "If you'll be at my house for dinner Saturday at seven, I'll have an announcement of considerable importance to make. It's to your interest to be present when I do."

MacKenzie scanned his water-filter-salesman's salary with his mind's eye, and found it altogether unsatisfactory, as he had done not once but many times before. "All right," he agreed, after a moment's consideration…

Saturday at six he was still saying, "You can't tell me. The guy isn't in his right mind, to do a thing like this. Five people that he don't know from Adam, and that don't know each other. I wonder if it's a practical joke?"

"Well, if you feel that way, why didn't you refuse him?" said his wife, brushing off his dark blue coat.

"I'm curious to find out what it's all about. I want to see what the gag is." Curiosity is one of the strongest of human traits. It's almost irresistible. The expectation of getting something for nothing is no slouch either. MacKenzie was a good guy, but he was a guy after all, not an image on a stained-glass window.

At the door she said with belated anxiety, “Steve, I know you can take care of yourself and all that, but if you don’t like the looks of things, I mean if none of the others show up, don’t stay there alone.”

He laughed. He’d made up his mind by now, had even spent the windfall ahead of time, already. “You make me feel like one of those innocents in the old silent pictures, that were always being invited to a big blowout and when they got there they were alone with the villain and just supper for two. Don’t worry, Toots, if there’s no one else there, I turn around and come back.”

The building had a Park Avenue address, but was actually on one of the exclusive side streets just off that thoroughfare. A small ultra-ultra cooperative, with only one apartment to a floor. “Mr. Harold Hardecker?” asked Mr. MacKenzie in the lobby. “Stephen MacKenzie.”

He saw the hallman take out a small typed list of five names, four of which already had been penciled out, and cross out the last one. “Go right up, Mr. MacKenzie. Third floor.”

A butler opened the single door in the elevator foyer for him, greeted him by name and took his hat. A single glance at the money this place spelled would have been enough to restore anyone’s confidence. People that lived like this were perfectly capable of having five strangers in to dinner, subdividing a dead son’s estate among them, and chalking it off as just that evening’s little whimsy. The sense of proportion alters above a certain yearly income.

He remembered Hardecker readily enough as soon as he saw him coming toward him along the central gallery that seemed to bisect the place like a bowling alley. It took him about three and a half minutes to get up to him, at that. The man had aged appreciably from the visual snapshot that

was all he'd had of him at the scene of the accident. He was slightly stooped, very thin at the waist, looked as though he'd suffered. But the white mustache was as trim and needle-pointed as ever, and he had on one of the new turned-over soft collars under his dinner jacket, which gave him a peculiarly boyish look in spite of the almost blinding white of his undiminished hair, cropped close as a Prussian's.

Hardecker held out his hand, said with just the right mixture of dignity and warmth, "How do you do, Mr. MacKenzie, I'm very glad to know you. Come in and meet the others and have a pickup."

There were no women present in the living room, just the four men sitting around at ease. There was no sense of strain, of stiffness; an advantage that stag gatherings are apt to have over mixed parties anyway, not through the fault of women, but through men's consciousness of them.

Kenshaw, the scholarly-looking man, had a white scar still visible under his left eye where his glasses had broken. The cherubic Lambert had deserted the illuminated fountain pen business, he hurriedly confided, unasked, to MacKenzie, for the ladies' foundation-girdle business. No more mechanical gadgets for him. Or as he put it, unarguably, "A brassière they gotta have, or else. But who needs a fountain pen?" The hard-bitten mug was introduced as Prendergast, occupation undisclosed. Megaffin, the bill collector, was no longer a bill collector. "I send out my own now," he explained, swiveling a synthetic diamond around on his pinky.

MacKenzie selected Scotch, and when he'd caught up with the rest the butler came to the door, almost as though he'd been timing him through a knothole. He just looked in, then went away again.

"Let's go and get down to business now, gentlemen, shall we?" Hardecker grinned. He had the happy faculty, MacKenzie said to himself, of making you feel perfectly at

home, without overdoing it, getting in your hair. Which looks easier than it is.

No flowers, candles, or fripperies like that were on the table set for six; just good substantial man's board. Hardecker said, "Just sit down anywhere you choose, only keep the head for me." Lambert and Kenshaw took one side, Prendergast and Megaffin the other. MacKenzie sat down at the foot. It was obvious that whatever announcement their host intended making was being kept for the end of the meal, as was only fitting.

The butler had closed a pair of sliding doors beyond them after they were all in, and he stayed outside. The waiting was done by a man. It was a typical bachelor's repast, plain, marvelously cooked, without dainty or frivolous accessories to detract from it, salads, vegetables, things like that. Each course had its vintage corollary. And at the end no cloying sweets—Roquefort cheese and coffee with the blue flame of Courvoisier flickering above each glass. It was a masterpiece. And each one, as it ended, relaxed in his chair in a haze of golden daydreams. They anticipated coming into money, money they hadn't had to work for, maybe more money than they'd ever had before. It wasn't such a bad world after all.

One thing had struck MacKenzie, but since he'd never been waited on by servants in a private home before, only in restaurants, he couldn't determine whether it was unusual or customary. There was an expensive mahogany buffet running across one side of the dining room, but the waiter had done no serving or carving on it, had brought in each portion separately, always individually, even the roast. The coffee and the wines, too, had been poured behind the scenes, the glasses and the cups brought in already filled. It gave the man a lot more work and slowed the meal

somewhat, but if that was the way it was done in Hardecker's house, that was the way it was done.

When they were already luxuriating with their cigars and cigarettes, and the cloth had been cleared of all but the emptied coffee cups, an additional dish was brought in. It was a silver chalice, a sort of stemmed bowl, holding a thick yellowish substance that looked like mayonnaise. The waiter placed it in the exact geometrical center of the table, even measuring with his eye its distance from both sides, and from the head and foot, and shifting its position to conform. Then he took the lid off and left it open. Threads of steam rose sluggishly from it. Every eye was on it interestedly.

"Is it well mixed?" they heard Hardecker ask.

"Yes, sir," said the waiter.

"That will be all, don't come in again."

The man left by the pantry door he had been using, and it clicked slightly after it had closed behind him.

Somebody—Megaffin—asked cozily: "What's *that* got in it?" evidently on the lookout for still more treats.

"Oh, quite a number of things," Hardecker answered carelessly, "whites of eggs, mustard, as well as certain other ingredients all beaten up together."

MacKenzie, trying to be funny, said, "Sounds like an antidote."

"It is an antidote," Hardecker answered, looking steadily down the table at him. He must have pushed a call button or something under the table, for the butler opened the sliding doors and stood between them, without coming in.

Hardecker didn't turn his head. "You have that gun I gave you? Stand there, please, on the other side of those doors and see that no one comes out of here. If they try it, you know what to do."

The doors slipped to again, effaced him, but not before MacKenzie, facing that way, had seen something glimmer in his hand.

Tension was slow in coming on, the change was too abrupt, they had been too steeped in the rosy afterglow of the meal and their own imminent good fortune. Then too, not all of them were equally alert mentally, particularly Megaffin, who had been on such a fourth dimensional plane of unaccustomedness all evening he couldn't tell menace from hospitality, even when a gun was mentioned.

Its first focal point was Hardecker's own face—that went slowly white, grim, remorseless. From there it darted out to MacKenzie and Lambert, caught at them, paled them too. The rest grew allergic to it one by one, until there was complete silence at the table.

Hardecker spoke. Not loudly, not angrily, but in a steely, pitiless voice. "Gentlemen, there's a murderer in our midst."

Five breaths were sharply indrawn together, making a fearful "Ffff!" sound around the table. Not so much aghast at the statement itself, as aghast at the implication of retribution that lurked just behind it. And behind that was the shadowy suspicion that it had already been exacted.

No one said anything.

The hard, remorseless cores of Hardecker's eyes shot from face-to-face. He was smoking a long slim cigar, cigarette-thin. He pointed it straight out before him, indicated them all with it without moving it much, like a dark finger of doom. "Gentlemen, one of you killed my son." Pause. "On August 30, 1936." Pause. "And hasn't paid for it yet."

The words were like a stone going down into a deep pool of transparent water, and the ripples spreading out from them spelled fear.

MacKenzie said slowly, "You're setting yourself above the properly constituted authorities? The findings of the coroner's inquest were suicide while of unsound mind. Why do you hold them incompe—"

Hardecker cut him short like a whip. “This isn’t a discussion. It’s—” a long pause, then very low, but very audible, “an execution.”

There was another of those strangling silences. They took it in a variety of ways, each according to his temperament. MacKenzie just kept staring at him, startled, apprehensive. Apprehensive, but not inordinately frightened, any more than he had been that night on the elevator. The scholarly-looking Kenshaw had a rebuking look on his face, that of a teacher for an unruly pupil, and the scar on his cheek stood out whitely. Megaffin looked shifty, like some small weasel at bay, planning its next move. The pugnacious-looking guy was going to cave in again in a minute, judging by the wavering of his facial lines. Lambert pinched the bridge of his nose momentarily, dropped his hand, mumbled something that sounded like, “*Oy*, I give up my pinochle club to come here, yet!”

Hardecker resumed, as though he hadn’t said anything unusual just now. “I know who the man is. I know which one among you the man is. It’s taken me a year to find out, but now I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt.” He was looking at his cigar now, watching the ash drop off of its own weight onto his coffee saucer. “The police wouldn’t listen to me, they insisted it was suicide. The evidence was insufficient to convince them the first time, and for all I know it still may be.” He raised his eyes. “But I demand justice for the taking of my son’s life.” He took an expensive, dime-thin, octagonal watch out of his pocket, placed it face up on the table before him. “Gentlemen, it’s now nine o’clock. In half an hour, at the most, one of you will be dead. Did you notice that you were all served separately just now? One dish, and one alone out of all of them, was deadly. It’s putting in its slow, sure work right as we sit here.” He pointed to the silver tureen, equidistant from all of them. “There’s the answer. There’s the antidote. I have no wish to set myself up as executioner above the law. Let the murderer be the

chooser. Let him reach out and save his life and stand convicted before all of you. Or let him keep silent and go down to his death without confessing, privately executed for what can't be publicly proved. In twenty-five minutes collapse will come without warning. Then it will be too late."

It was Lambert who voiced the question in all their minds. "But are you sure you did this to the right—"

"I haven't made any mistake, the waiter was carefully rehearsed, you are all perfectly unharmed but the killer."

Lambert didn't seem to derive much consolation from this. "Now he tells us! A fine way to digest a meal," he brooded aloud. "Why didn't you serve the murderer first, so then the rest of us could eat in peace at least?"

"Shut up," somebody said, terrifiedly.

"Twenty minutes to go," Hardecker said, tonelessly, as a chime signal over the radio.

MacKenzie said, without heat, "You can't be sane, you know, to do a thing like this."

"Did you ever have a son?" was the answer.

Something seemed to snap in Megaffin. His chair jolted back. "I'm gettin' out of here," he said hoarsely.

The doors parted about two inches, silently as water, and a black metal cylinder peered through. "That man there," directed Hardecker. "Shoot him where he stands if he doesn't sit down."

Megaffin shrank down in his seat again like a whipped cur, tried to shelter himself behind Prendergast's shoulder. The doors slipped together again into a hairline crack.

"I couldn't," sighed the cherubic-faced Lambert, "feel more at home if I was in the Brown House at Munich!"

"Eighteen minutes," was the comment from the head of the table.

Prendergast suddenly grimaced uncontrollably, flattened his forearms on the table, and ducked his head onto them. He sniveled aloud. "I can't stand it! Lemme out of here! *I* didn't do it!"

A wave of revulsion went around the table. It was not because he'd broken down, analyzed MacKenzie, it was just that he didn't have the face for it. It should have been Lambert with his kewpie physiognomy, if anyone. The latter, however, was having other troubles. He touched the side of his head, tapped himself on the chest. "Whoof!" he murmured. "What heartburn! He should live so long, I don't take this up with my lawyer!"

"This is no way," said MacKenzie surlily. "If you had any kind of a case—"

"This is my way," was Hardecker's crackling answer. "I've given the man his choice. He needn't have it this way; he has his alternative. Fourteen minutes. Let me remind you, the longer the antidote's delayed, the more doubtful its efficacy will be. If it's postponed too long, it may miss altogether."

Conscious of a sticking sensation in his stomach, as though a mass of concrete had lodged there, MacKenzie felt a burning sensation shoot out from it. There is such a thing as nervous indigestion, he knew, but…He eyed the silver goblet reflectively.

But they were all doing that almost incessantly. Prendergast had raised his head again, but it remained a woebegone mask of infantile fretfulness. Megaffin was green in the face and kept moistening his lips. Kenshaw was the most self-controlled of the lot; he had folded his arms and just sat there, as though waiting to see which one of the others would reach for the salvation in the silver container.

MacKenzie could feel a painful pulsing under his solar plexus now, he was in acute discomfort that verged on cramp. The thought of what this might be was bringing out sweat on his forehead.

Lambert reached out abruptly, and they all quit breathing for a minute. But his hand dodged the silver tureen, plunged into a box of perfectos to one side of it. He grabbed up two, stuck one in his breast pocket, the other between his teeth. “On you,” he remarked resentfully to Hardecker.

Somebody gave a strained laugh at the false alarm they had all had. Kenshaw took off his glasses, wiped them ruefully, as though disappointed it hadn’t been the payoff after all.

MacKenzie said, “You’re alienating whatever sympathy’s due you, by pulling a stunt like this.”

“I’m not asking for sympathy,” was Hardecker’s coldly ferocious answer. “It’s atonement I want. Three lives were taken from me: my only son, my daughter-in-law, their prematurely born child. I demand payment for that!”

Lambert said aloud, for his own benefit, “Jennie won’t believe this when I tell her.”

Prendergast clutched his throat all at once, whimpered: “I can’t breathe! He’s done it to *me*, so help me!”

MacKenzie, hostile now to Hardecker, tried to steady him just on general principle. “Gas around the heart, maybe. Don’t fall for it if you’re not sure.”

“Don’t fall for it,” was the ungrateful yelp, “and if I drop dead are *you* gonna bring me back?”

“He ought to be arrested for this,” said Kenshaw, displaying emotion for the first time. His glasses had clouded over, giving him a peculiarly sightless look.

“Arrested?” snapped Lambert. He wagged his head from side to side. “He’s going to be sued like no one was ever sued before! When I get through with him he’ll go on relief.”

Hardecker threw him a contemptuous look. “About ten minutes,” he said. “He seems to prefer the more certain way. Stubborn, eh? He’d rather die than admit it.”

MacKenzie gripped the seat of his chair, his churning insides heaving. He thought, “If this is the McCoy that I’m

feeling now, I'm going to bash his head in with a chair before I go. I'll give him something to poison innocent people about!"

Megaffin was starting to swear at their tormentor, in a whining, guttural singsong.

"*Mazzeltov*," seconded Lambert, with a formal nod of approval. "Your breath, but my ideas."

"Five minutes. It will almost certainly fail if it's not downed within the next thirty seconds." Hardecker pocketed his watch, as though there were no further need for consulting it.

MacKenzie gagged, hauled at the knot of his tie, undid his collar button. A needle of suffocating pain had just splintered into his heart.

Only the whites of Prendergast's eyes showed, he was going off into some fit or fainting spell. Even Lambert quit pulling at his cigar, as though it sickened him. Kenshaw took off his glasses for the third time in five minutes, to clear them.

A pair of arms suddenly shot out, grasped the silver bowl, swung it. It was uptilted over someone's face and there was a hollow, metallic groaning coming from behind it, infinitely gruesome to hear. It had happened so quickly, MacKenzie couldn't be sure who it was for a minute, long as he had been sitting at the macabre table with all of them. He had to do it by a quick process of elimination. Man sitting beside Lambert—Kenshaw, the scholarly-looking one, the man who had had least to say since the ordeal had begun! He was gulping with a convulsive rising and falling of his Adam's apple, visible in the shadow just below the lower rim of the bowl.

Then suddenly he flung it aside, his face was visible again, the drained receptacle clanged against the wall where he'd cast it, dropped heavily to the floor. He couldn't talk for a minute or two, and neither could anyone else, except

possibly Hardecker, and he didn't, just sat staring at the self-confessed culprit with pitiless eyes.

Finally Kenshaw panted, checks twitching, "Will it—will it—save me?"

Hardecker folded his arms, said to the others, but without taking his eyes off Kenshaw: "So now you know. So now you see whether I was right or not."

Kenshaw was holding his hands pressed tightly to the sides of his head. A sudden flood of words was unloosed from him, as though he found it a relief to talk now, after the long unbearable tension he'd been through. "Sure you were right, and I'd do it over again! I'm glad he's gone. The rich man's son that had everything. But that wasn't enough for him, was it? He had to show off how good he was—Horatio Alger stuff, paddle your own canoe from riches to more riches! He couldn't take a job with your own firm, could he? No, people might say you were helping him. He had to come to the place *I* worked and ask for a job. Not just anonymously. No, he had to mention whose son he was, to swing the scales in his favor! They were afraid to offend you, they thought maybe they'd get a pull with you, through him. It didn't count that I'd been with them all the best years of my life, that I had someone home too, just like he had, that I couldn't go anywhere else and mention the name of an influential father! They fired me."

His voice rose shrilly. "D'you know what happened to me? D'you know or care how I tramped the streets in the rain, at my age, looking for work? D'you know my wife had to get down on her knees and scrub dirty office corridors? D'you know how I washed dishes, carried sandwich boards through the streets, slept on park benches, all on account of a smart aleck with Rover Boy ideas? Yes, it preyed on my mind, why wouldn't it? I suppose you found the threatening letters I wrote him, that's how you knew."

Hardecker just shook his head slightly in denial.

“Then he got on the elevator that day. He didn’t see me, probably wouldn’t have known me if he had, but I saw him. I knew him. Then we fell—and I hoped he was dead, I hoped he was dead! But he wasn’t. The idea took hold of me slowly, waiting down there in the dark. The torches started making noise, and I grabbed him, I was going to choke him. But he wrenched himself free and took out his gun to defend himself against what I guess he thought was a fear-crazed man. I wasn’t fear-crazed, I was revenge-crazed, I knew what I was doing!

“I grabbed his hand. Not the gun, but the hand that was holding it. I turned it around the other way, into his own heart. He said ‘Elinor, Elinor!’ but that didn’t save him; that was the wrong name, that was *his* wife not mine. I squeezed the finger he had on the trigger with my own, and he fired his own weapon. So the police were right, it was suicide in a way.

“He leaned against me, there wasn’t room enough in there to fall. I flung myself down first under him, so they’d find us that way, and eased him down on top of me. He bled on me a little while and then he quit. And when they came through I pretended I’d fainted.”

Hardecker said, “Murderer. Murderer.” Like drops of ice water. “He didn’t *know* he’d done all that to you; oh, why didn’t you give him a chance at least, why weren’t you a man? Murderer! Murderer!”

Kenshaw started reaching downward to the floor, where he’d dropped his glasses when he had seized the antidote. His face was on a level with the tabletop. He scowled: “No matter what they’ve all heard me say just now, you’ll never be able to prove I did it. Nobody saw me. Only the dark.”

A whisper sounded: “And that’s where you’re going. Into the dark.”

Kenshaw’s head vanished suddenly below the table. The empty back of his chair whirled over sidewise, cracked against the floor.

They were all on their feet now, bending over him. All but Hardecker. MacKenzie got up from his knees. “He’s dead!” he said. “The antidote didn’t work in time!”

Hardecker said, “That wasn’t the antidote, that was the poison itself. He hadn’t been given any until he gulped that down. He convicted himself and carried out sentence upon himself with one and the same gesture. I hadn’t known which one of you it was until then. I’d only known it hadn’t been my son’s own doing, because, you see, the noise of those torches wouldn’t have affected him much, he was partly deaf from birth.”

He pushed his chair back and stood up. “I didn’t summon you here under false pretenses; his estate will be divided in equal parts among the four of you that are left. And now I’m ready to take my own medicine. Call the police, let them and their prosecutors and their courts of law decide whether I killed him or his own guilty conscience did!”

JANE BROWN’S BODY

I

Three o’clock in the morning. The highway is empty, under a malignant moon. The oil-drippings make the roadway gleam like a blue-satin ribbon. The night is still but for a humming noise coming up somewhere behind a rise of ground.

Two other, fiercer, whiter moons, set close together, suddenly top the rise, shoot a fan of blinding platinum far down ahead of them. Headlights. The humming burgeons into a roar. The touring car is going so fast it sways from side to side. The road is straight. The way is long. The night is short.

The man hunched at the wheel is tense; his eyes are fixed unblinkingly on the hem of the black curtain that the headlights roll up before him. His eyes are like two little lumps of coal. His face is brown; his hair is white. His figure is gaunt, but there is power in the bony wrists that grip the wheel, and power in the locked jaws that show white with their own tension.

The speedometer needle flickers a little above eighty . . .

The rear-view mirror shows a very tired young woman napping on the back seat. Her legs are tucked up under her, and the laprobe has been swathed around her from the waist down. One black-gloved hand is twisted in the looped

cord dangling from the side of the car; it hangs there even as she sleeps, of its own weight. She sways with a limpness, a lack of reflex-resistance, that almost suggests an absence of life.

She has on a tiny pillbox-hat with a fine-meshed veil flaring out all around below it. The wind keeps pushing it back like a film across her face. The contact of her nose makes a funny little knob on it. It should billow out at that point with her breathing, at such close contact. It doesn't, just caves in as though she were sucking it through parted lips. She sleeps with her mouth slightly open.

The moon is the only thing that keeps up with this careening car, grinning down derisively on it all the way, mile after mile, as though to say, "I'm on to you!"

A scattering of pinpoint lights shows up in the blackness ahead. A town or village straddling the highway. The indicator on the speedometer begins to lose ground. The man glances in his mirror at the girl, a little anxiously as if this oncoming town were some kind of test to be met.

An illuminated road-sign flashes by.

CAUTION!
Main Street Ahead—Slow Up

The man nods grimly, as if agreeing with that first word. But not in the way it is meant.

The lights grow bigger, spread out on either side. Street lights peer out here and there among the trees. The highway suddenly sprouts a plank sidewalk on each side of it. Dark store-windows glide by.

With an instinctive gesture, the man dims his lights from blinding platinum to just a pale wash. A lunch-room window drifts by.

The lights of a big bus going his way wink just ahead. He makes ready to swerve out and get past it. And then there is an unlooked-for complication. A railroad right-of-way

bisects the main street here. Perhaps no train has passed all night until now. Perhaps no other will pass until morning. Five minutes sooner, five minutes later, and he could have avoided the delay. But just as car and lighted bus approach, side by side, a bell starts ringing, zebra-striped barriers weighted with red lanterns are slowly lowered, and the road is blocked off. The two cars are forced to halt abreast while a slow procession of freight cars files endlessly by. Almost simultaneously, a large milk-truck has turned in behind him from the side road, sealing him in.

The lights of the bus shine into the car and fall on the sleeping woman. There is only one passenger in the bus, but he is on the near side, and he looks idly out the window into the neighboring machine. His eye drops to the sleeping woman and remains there, as any man's would.

There is a terrible rigidity about the man at the wheel now. White shows over his knuckles. His eyes are glued on the mirror, in which he can see the bus-passenger gazing casually into the rear of his car. A shiny thread starts down his face, catches in one of its leathery furrows. Sweat. A second one follows. His chest is rising and falling under his coat and he breathes as if he has been running.

The man at the bus window keeps looking at the woman, looking at her. He doesn't mean anything by it, probably. There's nothing else for him to look at. Why shouldn't he look at a woman, even a sleeping one? She must be beautiful under that veil. Some men are born starers-at-women, anyway.

But as the endless freight cars click by ahead, as the long scrutiny keeps up, one of the white-knuckled hands on the wheel is moving. It leaves the polished wooden rim, drops to its owner's lap. The whiteness goes out of it. It starts crawling up under his coat, buries itself between the buttoned halves, comes out again, white over the knuckles again, gripping an automatic.

His eyes have never once left the rear-view mirror, never once left the reflection of the bus-passenger's face. He acts as if he is waiting for some expression to come into it. Some certain, telltale expression. He acts as if, then, he will do something with that gun on his lap.

But the caboose has finally terminated the endless chain of freight cars, the bell stops ringing, the barriers slowly rise. The bus-driver unlimbers his clutch, the line of lighted windows start to edge forward. The gun vanishes, the hand that held it returns to the wheel empty. A moment later bus, and passenger, and face have all spurted ahead. The touring car hangs back a moment, to give it a good start. The milk-truck signals impatiently for clearance, then cuts out around the obstacle, lurches ahead.

The leathery-faced man at the wheel has his under lip thrust out, expelling hot breath of relief up past his own face. He touches the two liquid threads the drops of sweat left on his face, blots them.

He goes on into the night, along the arrow-straight highway, under the peering moon. The lady sways and dreams, and puckers her veil in.

A long slow rise begins, and now the car starts to buck when he gives it the accelerator. He looks at the gauge; his gas is dwindling fast. The tan washes out of his face for a moment. He's on a main road, after all. All he has to do is pull over, wait for a tow-line, if he runs out of gas. Why that fleeting panic on his face?

He nurses the car forward on the dregs of gas remaining. Zigzags it from side to side of the highway, to lessen the incline that might defeat it. It goes by fits and starts, slower all the time, but he's near the crest now. If he can only reach it, he can coast down the dip on the other side without an engine.

The car creeps up over the rise, hesitates, about to stall. Before him the road dips downward under the moon for miles. In the distance a white glow marks a filling station.

He maneuvers the wheel desperately in and out, the momentum of the descent catches at the machine, and a moment later it's coasting along at increasing speed.

The filling station blazes nearer, an aurora borealis in the middle of the dark countryside. He dare not go past, yet he's very tense as the car rolls within the all-revealing light. He glances anxiously in the mirror. He wonders about the window-shades, but leaves them the way they are. There's nothing that draws the human eye quicker than a suggestively lowered shade.

He turns aside, inches up the runway, brakes to a stop. An attendant jumps over.

"Five," he says, and sits there watching the man hook up the pipeline. Watching him with utter absorption. The gun is in his lap again, bedded under the hem of his coat.

The grease monkey approaches the front window. "Wash your windows, chief?"

The driver stretches his lips into a grin. "Leave 'em."

The monkey grins back, and his eyes wander on past the driver to the girl in the back of the car, rest there for a minute.

"Dead tired," the man at the wheel says. "Here's your money; keep the change." The car moves out of the yellow radiance into the sheltering gloom again. Secrecy wells up into its interior once more, like India ink.

The flabbergasted attendant is shouting something after him. "Hey, mister, that's a twenty-dollar bill you—"

The car is racing along again now. The man at the wheel tenses. What's that peppering sound coming up behind him? A small, single beam of light is seesawing after him. If the man was frightened by the bus and by the filling station, what word can describe the look on his face now, as his mirror shows him a state policeman on his tail? Teeth bared in a skull-like flash, he fights down an impulse to open up, to try to race for it. He pulls over to the side, slows, stops. Again the gun comes out, and again it is bedded under his

thigh with the butt protruding in readiness on the side away from the window. Then he sits grinding his fist into the hollow of his other hand.

The motorcycle flashes by, loops awkwardly around, comes back. The rider gets off, walks over, planks his foot down heavily on the runningboard. He ducks his head, leers in at him, beetle-browed.

“What’s your hurry, fellow? I clocked you at eighty.”

“Eighty-four,” corrects the leathery-faced man, with a dangerous quietness that cannot be mistaken for humility.

“Well, fifty’s the limit around here. Lemme see your license.”

The driver takes out his license with his left hand; the right is lying idly beside his right thigh, on cold black metal.

The state cop reads by the dashboard-light, leaning even further in to do so. His own weapon is way out behind at his hip; the window frame would block his elbow in a sudden reach. “Anton Denholt. Doctor, eh? I’m surprised at you, all the more reason you oughta have more sense! Next state, too, huh? You people are the ones give us the most trouble. Well, you’re in my state now, get that; you didn’t quite make that state-line marker down there—”

Denholt glances along the road as if he hadn’t seen the marker before. “I didn’t try to,” he says in that same toneless voice.

The cop nods thoughtfully. “I guess you could have at that,” he admits. “What were you doing eighty-four for—?”

Perhaps Denholt can’t stand waiting for the man to discover the girl sleeper in back, perhaps his nerves are so frayed by now that he’d rather call attention to her himself and get it over with. He jerks his head toward the back seat. “On her account,” he says. “Every minute counts.”

The cop peers back. “She sick, Doc?” he asks, a little more considerately. Denholt says, “It’s a matter of life and death.” And again he is speaking the absolute truth, far more than the trooper can guess.

The cop begins to look apologetic. “Why didn’t you say so? There’s a good hospital at Rawling. You must have passed by there an hour ago. Why didn’t you take her there?”

“No. I can make it where I’m going, if you’ll only let me be on my way. I want to get her home before the baby—”

The cop gives a low whistle. “No wonder you were burning up the road!”

He slaps his book closed, hands Denholt back his license. “You want an escort? You’ll make better time. My beat ends at that marker down there, but I can put in a call for you—”

“No, thanks,” says Denholt blandly. “I haven’t much further to go.”

The touring car glides off. There is a sort of fatalism in Denholt’s attitude now, as he urges the car back to high speed. What else can happen to him, after what just did? What else is there to be afraid of—now?

Less than forty miles past the state line, he leaves the great transcontinental highway and turns off into a side-road, a “feeder.” Presently it begins to take a steady upgrade, into the foothills of a chain of mountains. The countryside changes, becomes wilder, lonelier. Trees multiply to the thickness of woodlands. The handiwork of man, all but the roadway itself, slowly disappears.

He changes his course a second time, leaves the feeder for what is little better than an earth-packed trail, sharply tilted, seldom used. The climb is steady. Through occasional breaks in the trees of the thickly wooded slopes that support the trail, he can see the low country he has left below, the ribbon of the trunkroad he was on, an occasional winking light like a glowworm toiling slowly along it. There are hairpin turns; overhanging branches sway back with a hiss as he forces his way through. He has to go much slower here, but he seems to know the way.

A barbed-wire fence leaps suddenly out from nowhere, begins to parallel the miserable road. Four rungs high, each

rung three strands in thickness, viciously spined, defying penetration by anything but the smallest animals. Strange, to want privacy that badly in such an out-of-the-way place. A double gate sidles along in it, double-padlocked, and stops abreast of him as his car comes to a halt. A placard beside it reads in the diamond-brightness of the headlights: “Private Property. Keep Out.” A common-enough warning, but strange to find it here in this mountain fastness. Even, somehow, sinister.

He gets out, opens both padlocks, edges the freed halves of the gate inward with his shoe. Instantly a jarring, jangling sound explodes from one of the trees nearby. An alarm bell, wired to the gate. Its clang is frightening in this dark silence. It too spells lack of normality, seems the precaution of a fanatic.

The car drives through, stops while the man closes and fastens the prickly gate behind it. The bell shuts off; the stillness is deafening by contrast. The car goes on until the outline of a house suddenly uptilts the searching head-light-beams, log-built, sprawling, resembling a hunting-lodge. But there’s no friendliness to it. There is something ominous and forbidding about its look, so dark, so forgotten, so secretive-looking. The kind of a house that has a maw to swallow with—a one-way house, that you feel will never disgorge any living thing that enters it. Leprous in the moonlight festering on its roof. And the two round sworls of light played by the heads of the car against its side, intersecting, form a pear-shaped oval that resembles a gleaming skull.

The man leaves the car again, jumps up under a sort of a shed-arrangement sheltering the main entrance. Metal clashes and a black opening yawns. He vanishes through it, while pulsing bright-beamed car and sleeping lady wait obediently outside.

Light springs up within—the yellow-green wanness of coal-oil, shining out through the door to make the coal-

black tree-trunks outside seem even blacker. The place looks eerier than ever now.

Homecoming?

The man’s shadow lengthens, blacks out the doorway, and he’s ready to receive the patient lady. He kills the engine, opens the rear door and reaches in for her with outstretched arms. He disengages her dangling wrist , from the intertwined support-strap, brushes off the laprobe, cradles her body in upturned arms, and waddles inside with her, like someone carrying something very precious. The door bangs shut behind him at a backward thrust of his heel, and darkness swallows up the world outside.

II

He carries her through the building into an extension hidden from view from the outside. There is a distinct difference between it and the rest of the rambling structure. Its walls are not log, but brick, covered with plaster, that must have been hauled to this inaccessible place at great trouble and expense. It’s wired for electricity, current supplied by a homemade generator. Dazzling, clinical-white light beats down from above in here. And there are no chairs here, no rough-hewn tables, anything like that. Instead, retorts and bunsen-burners. A zinc operating table. Solution pans. A glass case of instruments. And across one entire side of the room, a double tier of mesh cages, each containing a rabbit.

He comes in swiftly with his burden, puts her down on the zinc table. She never stirs. He turns back and closes the door, bolts it both at top and at bottom. He strips off coat and shirt and undershirt, slips into a surgeon’s white jacket. He takes a hypodermic needle out of the instrument-case,

drops it into a pan of antiseptic solution, lights a flame under it. Then he goes back to the table.

The girl's figure has retained the doubled-up position it held all during the long ride; it lies on her side, legs tucked-up under her as they were on the car-seat, arm thrust out, wrist dangling just as the strap held it. Denholt seems to have expected this, yet he frowns just a little. He tries to straighten out the stiffened limbs; they resist him. Not all his strength can force them into a straight line with the torso. He begins to do what he has to do with frantic haste, as if every moment was both an obstacle and a challenge.

This is so. For rigor is setting in; the sleeping lady has been dead the better part of the night . . .

Denholt tears her things off arm over arm, with motions like an overhand swimmer. Hat and veil, black dress, shoes, hosiery, fall about the floor.

The girl was evidently pretty; she must have been quite young too. The rouge she put on in life still frames her parted lips. Her figure is slim and shapely, unmarred by wounds. There is no blood on her at all. That is important. Denholt races up with a jar of alcohol, douses it all over her with a great slapping splash.

He seizes the hypo from the scalding pan, hurriedly fills the barrel at a retort of colorless liquid, turns the huddled dripping figure over on its face, sweeps the nape-hair out of the way with one hand. He poises the needle at the base of the skull, looks briefly at the whitewashed ceiling as though in prayer, presses the plunger home.

He stands back, lets the hypo fall with a clash. It breaks, but that doesn't matter; if it has failed, he never wants to use one again.

The needle's tiny puncture doesn't close up as it would in living tissue; it remains a visible, tiny, black pore. He takes a wad of cotton, holds it pressed there, to keep the substance just injected from trickling out again. He is trembling all over. And the seconds tick into minutes.

Outside it must be dawn, but no light penetrates the sealed-up laboratory. It must be dawn, and the last breath went out of this body on the table—how long before? Irretrievably gone from this world, as dead as though she had lived a thousand years ago. Men have cut the Isthmus of Panama and joined the two oceans; they have bored tunnels that run below rivers; built aluminum planes that fly from Frisco to Manila; sent music over the air and photographs over wires; but never, when the heart-beat of their own kind has once stopped, never when the spark of life has fled, have they been able to reanimate the mortal clay with that commonest yet most mysterious of all processes: the vital force. And this man thinks he can—this man alone, out of all the world's teeming billions!

Five minutes that are centuries have gone by. There has been no change in her face or body. He lifts the wad of cotton now because his thumb and forefinger ache from holding it so steadily. And then—

The black puncture has vanished. The indented skin has closed up to erase it. Denholt tries to tell himself that this is due to the moisture of the serum itself or to the pressure of his fingers; but he knows that only life can do that—neither moisture nor pressure if there isn't life. Shrinking from facing disappointment, he whispers aloud: "It's still there; I don't see it, that's all. My eyes aren't sharp enough."

Tottering, he moves around the zinc table, picks up a small mirror, comes back with it. He turns her head slightly, holds the glass to the rigid mouth. Something wavers across it, too nebulous for the eye to discern at first. It comes again, stronger. Like a flurry. The glass mists, then clears. Then it mists once more, unmistakably now.

"The nervous exudation of my own fingers, holding it," he whispers. But he knows better. He drops the mirror as he did the needle. It clashes and shivers into pieces. But it has told him all it could.

There remains the heart to go by. If breath has done that to the glass, the heart will show it. Without the heart, no breath.

He turns her over completely now, on her back once more. His hand slowly descends to her chest, like a frightened bird spiraling to rest. It leaps up again spasmodically, as though it has received a galvanic shock at what it felt. Not alone a vibration, but warmth. Warmth slowly diffusing around the region of the heart; a lessening of the stone-coldness that grips the body elsewhere. The whole chest-cavern is slowly rising and falling. The heart is alive, has come back to life, in a dead body. And life is spreading, catching on!

Awed almost beyond endurance—even though he has given up his whole life for this, believing he *could* accomplish it, believing some day it *would* happen—he collapses to his knees, buries his head against the side of the table, sobs broken-heartedly. For extreme joy and extreme sorrow are indistinguishable beyond a certain point. Denholt is a very humble, a very terrified man, at the moment, almost regretting what he has done—he has set God’s law at bay, and he knows it. Pride, triumph, the overweening egotism that spells complete insanity will come later.

He rouses himself presently. She still needs help, attention, or he may lose her again. How often that happened with the rabbits until he learned what to do. The warm radiations from the heart have spread all over the body now, and it is a greater warmth than that of his own body. A ruddy flush, a fever-redness, has replaced the dead-white hue, especially over the heart and on the face and throat. It needs a furnace-temperature like this to cause the once-stagnant blood to circulate anew. He snatches up a thermometer, applies it. One hundred and five degrees, high enough to kill her all over again a second time. But

death must be burned out and new life infused at molten heat, for this is not biological birth—but pure chemistry.

He must work fast.

He opens the door of the electric refrigerator, removes a pail of finely chopped ice he had prepared. The fearful heat of almost-boiling blood must be offset or it will destroy her before she has begun again to live. He wraps a rubber sheet around her, packs her body with the chopped ice, rolls her tightly up in it. He tests her temperature repeatedly. Within five minutes it has gone down considerably. The ice has all melted, as if placed on a hot stove. As he opens the sheet streams of water trickle out of the four corners. But the heart and the lungs are still going, the first danger has been met and overcome, the process of revivification has not in itself destroyed her. A delirious groan escaping her lips is the first sound she makes in this second life of hers; a feverish tossing from side to side the first movement. She is in full delirium. But delirium is the antithesis of death; it is the body's struggle to survive.

The laboratory has done all it can for her; from now on it is a matter of routine medical care, nursing, as in an ordinary illness. He wraps her in a thick blanket, unbolts the door, removes her from the cold zinc table and carries her to a bed in a room in another part of the house.

All through the long hours of the day he sits by her, as a mother sits by her only child in mortal illness, counting each breath she takes, feeling her pulse, helping her heart-action with a little digitalis, pouring a little warm milk and brandy down her parched throat from time to time. Watching, waiting, for the second great mystery to unfold itself. A mystery as great or greater than the one he has already witnessed. Will reason return full-panoplied, or will the brain remain dead or crippled in an otherwise living body? Will she be some inarticulate, idiot thing better left unrevived? Or will she remember who she was, what went before—be the first human to bridge the gap of death, to

tell the living what awaits them on the other side of the shadowy border?

All through the day the fever-reaction induced by the serum continues—and unconsciousness with it—but she lives. Undeniably she lives! At nightfall the fever increases a little, but then all fevers do; any doctor knows that. At midnight of this second night, a full twenty-four hours after she died, there is a sudden, unexpected break in her heavy breathing, and before the watcher has quite realized it, her eyes are wide open for the first time. She has regained consciousness! For the first time he sees the color of her eyes—blue—as the lids go up. Blue eyes, that have seen death, now looking into his. Calmly, undilated, unfrightened, peaceful.

He hastily takes her temperature. Normal. The serum has at last been accepted by her system. All that remains now is the answer to the second mystery. In medieval terms, has he saved her soul as well as her body? In modern scientific ones, have the accumulated memories of the past existence been carried over into this one, or were her brain cells damaged beyond repair?

The blue eyes fix themselves on him, stare unblinkingly. He says softly, almost afraid of the sound of his own voice, “Good evening.” The blue eyes continue to stare. He waits, trembling. He knows that she was an American, knew the language. He whispers it over again, “Good evening, young lady.”

A change is coming over her face. The staring blue eyes fill with tears that presently overflow and stream down her face. The eyes themselves narrow in a squint. The lips that knew rouge, cigarettes, and men’s kisses, pucker into infant’s whimper. A feeble bleating cry, the wail of a new-born child, escapes from her. The wordless, pitiful sound that any nursery knows.

The shock, the disappointment, is terrific; his gaunt face pales, he clutches his chair to keep from slumping off it, lets

out a long sighing breath. Then presently, somewhat recovered, he takes out a shiny gold watch from his pocket, dangles it before her eyes. The light flashes from it. The tears stop, the wailing breaks off short. Her eyes sparkle with interest. She reaches toward it with ten fingers whose nails still bear adult nail-lacquer; her mouth wreathes in an infantile grin. She says, “Da!” and crows with pleasure. Reason is back—at least in its primary stages. For if she were a newborn infant, this would be a highly precocious reaction. Her faculties are intact. It is not as bad as he thought.

He will have to teach her to speak, to walk all over again, as one does any child, that is all. Intelligence has returned, but not memory. Her memory went into the grave. He murmurs to himself, “Her body is twenty-two, but she is in the infancy of a second life. I will call her Nova, the New One.” He rubs his hand over his eyes.

Exhausted by his long vigil he slumps to the floor beside the bed, goes to sleep with his head resting against its edge. Above him the resurrected woman’s hands stray gropingly to his thick white hair, clutch playfully at it like a child in its crib . . .

III

The plane is a hopeless wreck, and even in the act of crawling out into the blinding rain, Penny O’Shaughnessy wonders dazedly why he’s still alive. Dazedly, but briefly. O’Shaughnessy is not the kind to waste time wondering. Just one more lucky break, he supposes. His whole adult life has been an unbroken succession of them. His given nickname itself is a token of this, dating from the time he was sighted flying in from the open Caribbean after a

particularly devastating hurricane had turned half the Lesser Antilles upside down.

“I just went up over it and waited till it went by below,” he explained, alighting midst the splinters of the airport-hangar.

“A bad penny always turns up,” someone muttered incredulously.

Who else had ever met the business-end of a bolt of lightning in mid-flight, as he had just now, flying blind through a storm, lost a wing, managed to come down still alive even if it is on a wooded mountainside, to cut the contact at the moment of crashing so that he wasn’t roasted alive, and crawl out with just a wrenched shoulder and a lot of cuts and bruises? He couldn’t bail out because he was flying too low, hoping for a break through the clouds through which to spot something flat enough to come down on; he doesn’t like bailing out anyway, hates to throw away a good plane.

This one lying all over the side of the mountain around him is not so good any more, he has to admit. The first thing he does is feel in his pocket, haul out a rabbit’s foot, and stroke it twice. Then he straightens up, hobbles a short distance further from the wreck, turns to survey it. Almost instantly the lightning, which already stunned him once in the air, strikes a nearby tree with a bang and a shower of sparks. It cracks, comes down with a propeller-like whirr of foliage, and flattens what’s left of his engine into the ground.

“All right, you don’t like my crate,” O’Shaughnessy grumbles, with a back-arm swing at the elements in general. “I believed you the first time!”

He trudges off, neck bowed against the rain, which forms a solid curtain around him. He hasn’t the faintest idea where he is, because he was flying blind a full forty minutes before the crash. There is no visibility to speak of, just a pall of rain and mist, with the black silhouettes of trees peering

through all around. The sharp slant of the ground tells him he’s on a mountainside. He takes the downgrade; people, houses, are more often to be found in valleys than on mountains.

The ground is muddy soup around him; he doesn’t walk as much as skid on his heels from tree trunk to tree trunk, using them as brakes to prevent a headlong fall. Rain water gets in between clothes and skin; the cuts and welts tingle; the wrenched shoulder pounds, and the thickening of the gloom around him tells him it is night.

“All set,” he mutters, “to spend a quiet evening at home!”

The tree trunks blend into the surrounding darkness, and it gets harder to aim for them each time; he has to ski-jump blindly and coast with outspread arms, hoping one will stop him before he lands flat on his face. He misses one altogether—or else it isn’t there in the first place—goes skittering down in axle-grease mud, wildly spiraling with his arms to keep his balance, and finally flattens into something that rasps and stings. A barbed-wire fence.

All the air has been knocked out of his stomach, and one of the wicked spines just missed his left eye, taking a gouge at his brow instead. But more than that, the jar he has thrown into the thing has set off an electric alarm-bell somewhere up in one of the trees nearby. Its clamor blasts through the steady whine and slap of the rain.

His clothing has caught in ten different places, and skin with it in half of them. As he pulls himself free, swearing, and the vibrations of the obstacle lessen, the alarm breaks off. He kicks the fence vengefully with his foot, and this elicits an added spasm or two from the bell-battery, then once more it stops.

He is too preoccupied for a minute rubbing his gashes with his bare hands and wincing, to proceed with an investigation of this inhospitable barrier. Suddenly a rain-washed glow of murky light is wavering toward him on the

other side of the fence, zigzagging uncertainly as though its bearer were picking his way.

"What the—" Somebody living up here in this forsaken place?

The light stops flush against the fence directly opposite where he is standing and behind it he can make out a hooded, cloaked figure. O'Shaughnessy must be practically invisible behind the rain-mist and darkness.

"That yours?" he growls, balling a fist at the fence. "Look what it did to me! Come out here and I'll—!"

A musical voice from below the hood speaks softly: "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"A girl!" O'Shaughnessy gasps, and the anger leaves his voice. "Sorry, I couldn't make you out. Didn't mean to tear loose that way, but I'm clawed up." He stares at her for a long minute. Twenty-three, pretty, he can see that much. Blue eyes gaze levelly back at him from under the hood she is wearing as he steps up closer to the fence. "I cracked up further back along the mountain, the plane came down—"

"What's a plane?" she asks, round-eyed.

His jaw drops slightly and he stares at her with disapproval, thinks she is trying to be cute or something. He keeps waiting for the invitation to shelter that a dog would be given, in such weather, at such an out-of-the-way place as this. It isn't forthcoming.

"Got a house back there?" he says finally.

She nods, and drops of rain fly off her hood. "Yes, straight back there." Just that, answered as asked.

He says with growing impatience, "Well, won't you let me in a few minutes? I won't bite you!" The reason he thinks she's playing a part, knows better, is that her voice is city-bred, not like a mountain girl's.

She says helplessly, "It's locked and *he* has the keys. No one ever came here before, so I don't know what to do. I can't ask him because he's in the laboratory, and I'm not allowed to disturb him when he's in there."

“Well, haven’t you got a telephone I can use at least?”

“What’s a telephone?” she wants to know, without a trace of mockery. This time O’Shaughnessy flares up. Enough is enough. “What kind of a person are you anyway? All right, keep your shelter. I’m not going to stand here begging. Would it be too much to tell me which direction the nearest road or farmhouse is from here, or would you rather not do that either?”

“I don’t know,” she answers. “I’ve never been outside this”—indicating the fence—“never been out there where you’re standing.”

It’s beginning to dawn on him that she’s not trying to make fun of him. He senses some mystery about her, and this whole place, but what it is he can’t imagine. “Who lives here with you?” he asks curiously.

“Papa,” she answers simply.

She’s already been missed, for a voice shouts alarmedly: “Nova! Nova, where are you?” And a second lantern looms toward them, zigzagging hurriedly through the mist. A blurred figure emerges, stops short in fright at sight of the man outside the barrier, nearly drops the lantern. “Who’s that? Who are You? How’d you get here?” The questions are almost panic-stricken.

“Papa,” thinks O’Shaughnessy, “doesn’t like company. Wonder why?” He explains his situation in a few brief words.

The man comes closer, motions the girl back as though O’Shaughnessy were some dangerous animal in a zoo-cage. “Are you alone?” he asks, peering furtively around.

O’Shaughnessy has never lacked self-assertiveness with other men, quite the reverse. “Who’d you think I had with me, the Lafayette Escadrille?” he says bluntly. “Why so cagy, mister? Got a guilty conscience about something? Or are you making mash back there? Did you ever hear of giving a stranger shelter?” He swipes accumulated raindrops off his jaw and flicks them disgustedly down.

The hooded girl is hovering there in the background, looking uncertainly from one to the other. The man with the lantern gives a forced laugh. “We’re not trying to hide anything. We’re not afraid of anything. You’re mistaken,” he protests. A protest that rings about as true as a lead quarter to O’Shaughnessy’s experienced ears. “I wouldn’t for the world want you to—er, go away from here spreading stories that there’s anything strange about this place—you know how folks talk, first thing you know they’ll be coming around snooping—”

“So that’s it,” says O’Shaughnessy within his chest.

The man on the other side of the fence has taken a key out, is jabbing

it hurriedly at the padlocks. So hurriedly that now he almost seems afraid O’Shaughnessy will get away before he can get the gate open. “Er—won’t they send out and look for you, when they find out you’re overdue at the airport?”

O’Shaughnessy snaps briefly, “I wasn’t expected anywhere. I was flying my own time; the crate belonged to me. What d’ye think, I’m somebody’s errand-boy, or one of these passenger-plane pilots?” He expectorates to show his contempt, his independence.

The black shoe-button eyes opposite him gleam, as though this is an eminently satisfactory situation, as though he couldn’t ask for a better one. He swings the gate-halves apart. “Come in,” he urges with belated insistence. “Come in by all means! Get back in the house, Nova, you’ll get soaked—and see that you close *that* door! I’m Doctor Denholt, sir, and please don’t think there’s anything strange about us here.”

“I do already,” says O’Shaughnessy, bluntly, as he steps through the enclosure. He cocks his head at the renewed blare of the alarm-bell.

Denholt hastily closes and refastens the gate, shutting off the clangor. “Just an ordinary precaution, we’re so cut off here,” he explains.

O’Shaughnessy refrains from further comment; he is on this man’s domain now. He has one iron-clad rule, like an Arab: Never abuse hospitality. “I’m O’Shaughnessy,” he says. They shake hands briefly. The doctor’s hand is slender and flexible, that of a skilled surgeon. But it is soft, too, and there is a warning of treachery in that pliability.

He leads his uninvited guest into the lamp-lighted house, which looks mighty good to O’Shaughnessy, warm and dry and cheerful in spite of its ugly, rustic furniture. The girl has discarded her cape and hood; O’Shaughnessy glimpses her in the main room, crouched before the clay-brick fireplace readying a fire, as Denholt ushers him into his own bedroom. Her hair, he sees now, is long and golden; her feet are stockingless in homemade deerskin moccasins, her figure slim and childlike in a cheap little calico dress.

At the rear of the room is a door tightly closed. The flyer’s trained eyes, as they flicker past it, notice two things. It is metal, specially constructed, unlike the crude plank-panels of the rest of the house. A thread of platinum-bright light outlines it on three sides, too intense to be anything but high-voltage electricity. Electricity in there, coal-oil out here.

He hears the girl: “He’s in the laboratory, I’m not allowed to disturb him when he’s in there.”

He hears the man: “See that you close *that* door.”

He says to himself: “I wonder what’s in back of there.”

In Denholt’s sleeping-quarters he peels off his drenched things, reveals a bodyful of livid welts, barbed-wire lacerations, and black grease-smudges. His host purses his lips in long-forgotten professional inspection. “You *are* pretty badly scraped up! Better let me fix up some of those cuts for you, that barbed—wire’s liable to be rusty. Just stand there where you are a minute.” He takes the water-logged clothing outside to the girl.

O’Shaughnessy crooks a knowing eyebrow at himself, waiting there. “Why not in the laboratory, where he keeps

all his stuff and the light's better? See no evil, think no evil, I guess."

Denholt hurries back with hot water, dressings, antiseptic. O'Shaughnessy flinches at the searing touch of it, grins shamefacedly even as he does so, "Can't take it any more, I guess. In Shanghai once I had to have a bad tooth pulled by a local dentist; his idea of an anaesthetic was to have his daughter wave a fan at me while he hit it out with a mallet and steel bar."

"Did you yell?"

"Naw. Ashamed to in front of a girl."

He catches Denholt staring with a peculiar intentness at his bared torso and muscular shoulders. "Pretty husky, aren't you?" the doctor remarks, offhandedly. But something chilly passes down the flyer's back at the look that goes with the words. O'Shaughnessy wonders what it means. Or do all doctors look at you that way, sort of calculatingly, as though you'd do nicely for some experiment they had in mind?

"Yep," he answers almost challengingly, "I guess I can take care of myself all right if I have to."

Denholt just looks at him with veiled guile.

IV

Outside afterward, at the rough pine-board table set in the cheerful glow of the blazing hearth, Denholt's borrowed clothes on him, he has a better chance to study the girl at closer range. There is nothing strange about her in the least; she is all youthful animation, her face flushed with the excitement of having a stranger at their board; sits there devouring him with her eyes, as if she never saw an outsider before. But in her talk and in her movements there

is perfect rhythm, harmony, coordination, balance, call it what you will; she is an utterly normal young girl.

The old man on the other hand—O'Shaughnessy characterizes him mentally thus—the old man has this brooding light in his eyes, is spasmodic and disconnected in his talk and gestures. The isolation, the years of loneliness, have done that to him perhaps, O'Shaughnessy thinks.

"All right," he says to himself, "that's his own business. But why does he keep a lovely kid like that cooped up here? Never heard of a plane, a telephone. What's he trying to do to her? Darned shame!"

Denholt catches him watching the girl. "Eat," he urges, "eat up, man. You need strength after what you went through."

The flyer grins, obeys. Yet something about the way it was said, the appraising look that went with it, makes him feel like a fowl being fattened for slaughter. He shakes his head baffledly.

Lightning keeps flaring like flashlight-powder outside the windowpanes every half-minute or so; there is an incessant roll of celestial drums all up and down the mountainside, so deep that O'Shaughnessy can feel it in his chest at times; the rain on the roof sounds like a steak frying.

Denholt is staring abstractedly into his plate, fingers drumming soundlessly on the table. O'Shaughnessy turns to the girl, to break the silence. "Have you lived here long?"

"Two years."

His eyebrows move a little, upward. She doesn't know what a plane is, a phone? "Where'd you live before then?"

"I was born here," she answers shyly.

He thinks she's misunderstood. "You look older than two to me," he says with a laugh.

The point seems to baffle her too, as if it has never occurred to her before, "That's as far back as I can remember," she says slowly. "Last spring, and the spring

before, when I was learning to talk and walk—that's two years, isn't it? How long ago did you learn to talk?"

He can't answer; a chunk of rabbit has gone down whole; he's lucky he doesn't choke. But it isn't the bolted rabbit that stiffens the hairs on the back of his neck, puts a needle of fear through his heart.

"That'll do, Nova," says Denholt sharply. There's a strain around the eyes. His fork drops with a clash, as if he has just had a fright. "You'll find—er, some cigarettes in a drawer in my bedroom for iMr. O'Shaughnessy." And as soon as she's left the table, he leans forward confidentially toward the flyer. "I'd better give you a word of explanation. She's not quite—right." He touches his own head. "That's why—the fence and all that.

I keep her secluded up here with me, it's more humane you know. Don't take anything she says too seriously."

O'Shaughnessy won't commit himself on this point, not even by a monosyllable. Just looks at his host, keeps his own counsel. It sounds reasonable enough, Lord knows, but he can't forget the girl's clear, sane eyes, nor Denholt's hungry, probing, almost gloating, stare. If anyone is crazy in this house—the little chill plays on his spine once more, and his flesh crawls under the borrowed clothes.

They have very little to say to one another, after that, while they sit there puffing away and the fire in the hearth slowly dies down into itself.

The girl is in the adjoining room, washing the dishes. The waning fire throws the two men's shadows on the walls, long and wavering. Denholt's, in particular, looks like that of a monster breathing smoke out of its nostrils. O'Shaughnessy grins a little at the idea.

He crushes out his cigarette. "Well," he says, "looks like the storm'll keep up all night. Guess I better make a break for it."

Denholt stiffens, then smiles. "You're not thinking of leaving *now?* You'll spend the rest of the night wandering

around in circles out there in the dark! Wait till daylight at least, maybe it'll let up by then. There's an extra room back there, you won't be any trouble at all."

The girl says from the doorway, almost frightenedly, "Oh, please, don't go yet, Mr. O'Shaughnessy! It's so nice having you."

She waits for his answer.

O'Shaughnessy gives them both a long look in turn. Then he uncrosses his long legs, recrosses them the other way around. "I'm staying, then," he says quietly.

Denholt gets up. "I've a little work to finish—something I was in the midst of when—er, your arrival interrupted me. If you'll excuse me for a few minutes—You can go to bed any time you feel like it." And then, with a covert glance toward the kitchen doorway, "Just bear in mind what I said. Don't take anything she says too seriously."

The girl comes in after the doctor has gone, sits shyly down on the opposite side of the cleared table. That strange hungry look of hers rests steadily on his face, as if she never had seen anyone like him before.

"I'm glad you're staying," she murmurs finally. "I wanted you to because—well, maybe if you're here, I won't have to take my injection." O'Shaughnessy droops his lids a little. "What kind of an injection?" he says with almost somnolent slowness.

She turns her hand up, down again. "I don't know, I only know I have to take them. About once a month. He says it's bad for me if I miss any. Tomorrow would be the day, if you hadn't come." She screws up her eyes at him pathetically. "I don't like them, because they hurt so, and they make me feel so ill afterward. Once I tried to run away, but I couldn't get through the fence."

There's something a little flinty in O'Shaughnessy's eyes that wasn't there before. "And what'd he do when he caught you?" His own hand on the table flexes a little.

“Oh nothing. Just talked to me, told me I had to have them whether I liked it or not. He said it was for my own sake he gives them to me. He said if I went too long without getting one—”

“What would happen?”

“He didn’t say. Just said something pretty awful.”

O’Shaughnessy growls to himself deep in his throat. Drugging, eh? Maybe that’s why she can’t remember further back than two years, and why she says such weird things from time to time. But on second thought, it can’t be that, either. The infrequency of the injections argue against it. There wouldn’t be pain, if it were some kind of a drug. And if it were something able to affect her memory of the far past, why not the recent past as well? O’Shaughnessy’s no medical man, but he’s knocked around enough to know a little something; in the Orient and South America he’s seen the telltale traces of almost every known narcotic under the sun. There is absolutely no sign of it about Nova. She is as fresh as that rain falling from the sky outside.

He only asks her one question, to make sure. “Do you dream—dream about pretty things—after you’ve had one of these shots?”

“No,” she shudders, “I feel like I’m all on fire. I woke up once and there was all ice around me—”

Not a drug, then. Maybe he has Denholt all wrong; maybe she really does need these treatments—vaccine or serum it sounds like—maybe she had some ghastly illness that robbed her of her memory, the use of her limbs, two years ago, and these injections are to speed her recovery, guard her against a relapse. Still, Denholt did try to pass her off as mentally unbalanced, when she isn’t at all. No, there’s something the man is up to—something secret and—and ugly. The barbed-wire fence, the alarm-bell show that too. Why bring her way up here when she could have far better care and attention—*if* she needs any—at a hospital in one of the big cities?

“Did you really mean what you said about only learning to walk and talk the spring before last?”

“Yes,” she says. “I’ll show you one of the copy-books he taught me out of.” She comes back with a dog-eared primer.

He thumbs through it. “C is for Cat. Does-the-Cat-see-the-Rat?” He closes it, more at sea than ever.

“Were you as big as now when he taught you to walk?”

“Yes. I wore this same dress I have on now, that’s how I can tell. I learned by myself, mostly. He used to put me down on the floor over there by the wall, and then put a lump of sugar on a chair all the way across the room, and coax me to walk over to get it. If I crawled on my hands and knees, he wouldn’t let me have the sugar. After awhile I got so I could stand up straight—”

“Stop!” he says, with a sudden sharp intake of breath. “It’s enough to make a person go crazy just trying to figure out! There’s—there’s craziness in it somewhere! And I know on whose part. Not yours! God knows what he did to you the first twenty years of your life to make you forget everything you should have known—”

She doesn’t answer. She can’t seem to understand what he means. But her eyes show fright at the force of his speech. He sees he may do more harm than good by telling her other people aren’t like she is. She’s grown up, and she’s been held here in some kind of mental thralldom—that’s the closest he can get to the answer. And the man that would do that to another human being is a monster and a maniac.

His voice hoarse with pity and anger, he says, “Tell me now, did you ever see any other man but me and the doctor before in your life?”

“No,” she breathes, “that’s why I like you so much.”

“Didn’t you even ever see another girl—have someone like yourself around you to talk with?”

“No,” she murmurs again. “Only him. No one else at all.”

He rises as if he can’t stand any more of it, takes three quick turns around his chair, raises it, bangs it down again.

She watches him timidly, not speaking, with just that fright in her eyes. He slumps down in his chair again, looks at her broodingly. Somehow he knows he’s going to take her with him when he leaves, and he wonders if he has any right to. What’ll he do with her afterward—turn her loose like a lamb among wolves? Drag her around with him from bar to cantina to bistro, when he’s not up in the air risking his neck for some Chinese war lord or Nicaraguan outlaw? His kind of a life—At least she has peace here, and a sort of security.

The bolts shoot back behind the laboratory door. He sees her glance past him, but doesn’t turn his head to look. On the wall opposite Denholt’s long wavering silhouette appears more ominous now than before. Madman, criminal, Samaritan—which? Playing the role of God to this girl—in some obscure way that O’Shaughnessy cannot fathom even yet—which he has no right to do. Better the cantinas and the tropical hell-holes of his own life. If she has anything in her, she’ll rise above them; this way she hasn’t even a chance to do that.

Her quick whisper reaches him while Denholt is in the act of closing the door after him. “Don’t let him give me another injection. Maybe if *you* ask him not to he’ll listen to you!”

“You’ve had your last!” O’Shaughnessy says, decisively.

Denholt approaches the table, looks suspiciously from one to the other. Then a smile crosses his face. “Still up, eh? How about a nice hot toddy for both of us before we turn in?” Nova makes a move to leave her chair and he quickly forestalls her. “I’ll fix it myself.”

O’Shaughnessy doesn’t miss that. He stares up into the other’s face, takes his time about answering. “Why not?” he says, finally, jutting out his chin.

Denholt goes into the kitchen. O'Shaughnessy can see him pouring whiskey into two tumblers, spooning sugar, from where he is. The doctor keeps looking obliquely out at him from time to time, with a sort of smirk of satisfaction on his face.

O'Shaughnessy says quietly to the girl, sitting there feasting her eyes on him with a doglike devotion: "Go over there to my coat, hanging up over the fireplace. You'll find an oil-silk packet in the inside pocket, full of papers and things. Take the papers out and just bring me the folder. Don't let him see you."

He thrusts the moisture-proof oblong down just under the collar of his shirt, buttons the neck over it, stretches the collarband out as far as it will go, to create a gap. Then he bends forward a little, sticks his elbows on the table, rests his chin on his hands. His upthrust arms obscure his chest and neck. He drawls something she doesn't understand—one more of the many incomprehensible things he is always saying: "I can smell a Mickey a mile away."

Denholt comes in with the two toddies, says to her, "You'd better go to your room now, Nova, it's getting late, and you're going to need all your strength. *Tomorrow*, you know."

She shivers when she hears that, slowly withdraws under the compulsion of Denholt's stare, sending appealing looks at O'Shaughnessy. A door closes after her somewhere in the back.

Denholt has noticed the telegraphic communication between them. "I don't know what my ward has been telling you—" he begins.

O'Shaughnessy is not showing his cards yet. "Not a thing, Doc," he says. "Not a thing. Why? Is there something she *could* tell?"

"No, no, of course not," Denholt covers up hastily. "Only—er, she gets delusions about injections and things. That's why I don't allow her in the laboratory any more. She

caught me giving a rabbit an injection one day, and she'd be perfectly capable of telling you that it was *she* I gave it to, and what's more, believing it herself. Let's drink up, shall we?"

He hands his guest one of the two glasses. O'Shaughnessy takes it with one hand, keeps the other cupped along the line of his jaw. He hoists it an eighth of an inch. "Here's to *tomorrow*."

Denholt's piercing gaze transfixes him for a minute. Then he relaxes into a slow, derisive smile. "Here's to *tonight* he contradicts, "tomorrow will take care of itself."

O'Shaughnessy thrusts the rim of his glass up under his lower lip, slowly levels it until it is horizontal—and empty. The forked hand supporting his chin is between it and Denholt. He's a sloppy drinker, the collar of his shirt gets a little wet . . .

The yellow-green of the doctor's oil-lamp recedes waveringly from the doorway of the bedroom O'Shaughnessy is to occupy. Pitch-blackness wells up all around, cut by an occasional calcium-flare of lightning outside the high, small window. The flashes are less frequent now and the rain has let up.

O'Shaughnessy is lying flat on his back, on the rickety cot. He has left on his trousers and shirt. Denholt said, perhaps with ghastly double meaning, "I'm sure you'll be dead to the world in no time at all!" as he went out just now. The first thing the flyer does, as the waning lamp-glow finally snuffs out altogether and a door closes somewhere in the distance, is to take out the bulging waterlogged oil-silk envelope from his shirt and let its contents trickle silently onto the floor.

The rustle of the slackening rain outside begins to lull his senses before he knows it. The ache of his wrenched shoulder lessens, is erased by oncoming sleep. The lids of

his eyes droop closed. He catches them the first time, holds them open by sheer will-power. Not a sound, not a whisper comes to help him keep awake. The lonely mountain-house is deathly still; only the rain and the far-off thunder sound outside. The girl's story begins to take on a dream-like quality, unreal, remote, fantastic—

The muffled creak of a pine wood floor-board, somewhere just beyond the open door of his room, jerks his senses awake. At first he thinks he's still at the stick of his plane, makes vague motions to keep from going into a tailspin . . . Then he remembers where he is.

Twenty minutes, half an hour, an hour maybe, since Denholt's murky lamp-glow flickered away from the door. Maybe even more than that. O'Shaughnessy swears at himself mentally for fading out like this. But it's all right; if this is it now—

It must be deep in the night. There's no rain now any more, just the plink of loose drops as they detach themselves one by one from the eaves. A pale silver radiance, little more than a phantom glint, is coming through the window up over him. Dawn? No, a late moon, veiled by the last of the storm clouds.

The creak is repeated, closer at hand, a little more distinct this time. He can hear breathing with it. Outstretched there on the cot, he begins drawing up his knees closer to his body, tensing himself for the spring. What'll *he* have—a knife, a gun, some viciously-keen surgical instrument? O'Shaughnessy widens his arms, into a sort of simulation of a welcoming embrace. The dark hides the great fists, the menacing grin at his mouth.

Something comes over the threshold. O'Shaughnessy can *sense* the stirring of air at its furtive passage, rather than see or hear anything. There's a whispered footfall within the room itself. A blur of motion glides momentarily through the wan silvery light, which isn't strong enough to focus it clearly, into the concealing dark on his side of it.

There’s a clang from the bucked cot-frame, the upward fling of a body, a choked sound of fright as a pair of arms lash out in a bear-hug. In the soft purring tones of a tea-kettle O’Shaughnessy’s voice pours out unprintable maledictions.

Her softness warns him just in time, before he’s done more than pinion her arms fast and drive all the breath out of her body. “Don’t,” she pants, “it’s me.” His arms drop away, he blows out breath like a steam-valve, the reaction staggers him back a step to the wall, off balance. “You! Why didn’t you whisper a warning? I was—”

“I was afraid he’d hear me. He’s in the laboratory. He left the door open behind him and I’ve been watching him from outside in the dark—”

“What’s he think he’s going to do, give you one of them shots again?”

“No, it’s you—he’s going to do something to you, I don’t know what! He took your coat in there, and took all the papers in it and burned them. Then he—he lit flames under all those big glass things, and put a needle in a pan to soak, like he does with me. But this time he has a silk cord in there with him, and he made a big loop in it and measured it round his own neck first, then took it off again and practiced throwing it and pulling it tight. He’s got a big black thing in there too, you hold it this way and point it—”

“A gun,” says O’Shaughnessy softly, mockingly. “He’s not missing any bets, is he? Knockout drops, a noose, a positive. How’s he fixed for hand-grenades?”

She puts the flats of her hands against his chest. “Don’t stay, please!

I don’t want—things like that to happen to you! Go before he gets through! He’s awfully quick and strong, you ought to see how he ran after me that time when I tried to get to the fence! Maybe you can sneak by outside the door without his seeing you, or get out one of the windows—Don’t stand there without moving like that! Please don’t wait. That’s

why I came in here to you. There's steam coming from the pan the needle's in already. I saw it!" And then, in a low heartbroken wail, "Aren't you going to go?"

Instead he sits down on the edge of the cot, leisurely puts on the soiled canvas shoes Denholt has lent him. Reaches toward her, draws her over, and stands her before him.

"Nova, d'you like me?" he says.

"I like you very much."

He rubs his hair awry with one hand, as though at his wits' end. "Don't be givin' me any blarney now. D'you want to marry me?"

"What's marry?"

"I ought to be shot," he says softly to himself. "Well—d'you want to be with me always, go wherever I go, tell me how good I am when I'm good, buck me up when I'm down in the dumps—and one of these days, pretty soon, wear black for me?"

"Yes," she says softly, "I want to be near you. If that's to marry, then that's what I want."

He puts out his hand at her. "Shake, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy! Now let's get out of here." He goes over to the door, looks out at the distant bar of light escaping across their path from the open laboratory-door. "Got anything you want to bring with you? You're standing in the middle of your wardrobe right now, I guess. Got any idea where he keeps that key?"

"The one to the padlock on the gate outside? In the pockets of his coat, I guess; he always seems to reach in there for it. He hasn't got it on, though; he's got on that white thing he wears in the laboratory. It must be in the room where he sleeps."

"Okay, we'll try lifting it. I wouldn't mind roughing that bird up, only I don't want anything to happen to you. He's probably got an aim, with that gun of his, like a cockeyed nervewreck with palsy. Stick close behind me."

V

They glide through the velvety dark, O'Shaughnessy in the lead, the girl behind him, keeping contact with her fingers resting lightly against the back of his shoulder. The vague outline of the room-doorway seems to move toward them, not they toward it, to come abreast, to slip past. Ahead there is just that bar sinister of bleaching whiteness, falling across the floor of the main room and leaping up one wall.

"Gotta watch these boards," he breathes across his shoulder, "you woke me up getting in here, and you don't weigh what I do." The touch of her fingers against his back tells him she's shaking all over. "It's all right. You're with me now."

A board whimpers a little, and he gets off it with catlike litheness before it goes into a full-bodied creak. The gash of laboratory whiteness comes slowly nearer, outlining the angles of things even beyond its own radius. This house, he thinks, is as black physically as it is in spirit. Little tinkering, puttering sounds become audible from the still-distant laboratory, magnified in the stillness. Mania at its preparations.

She signals with her fingertips, abreast of an open door. "In here?" he whispers. They turn aside and glide through. "Stand here right beside the door where I can find you again. I'll see if I can locate his coat."

He does after a lot of cautious circling and navigation; it is hanging from a peg in the wall. He finds the key very quickly, though to her it must seem forever that he's standing there fumbling with the coat. He slips back to her, jaunty with his own peculiar jauntiness even in this eerie situation. "Got it. Now here we go."

Outside again. Step by step through the silence and the blackness, the triangular wedge of white ahead the only visible thing. A board barks treacherously under him, this

time before he can withdraw his foot. They stand rigid, while the echoes move into the night. The tinkering has stopped abruptly. Questioning silence from the laboratory now. O'Shaughnessy nudges her with his elbow, and they draw in against the wall.

Not a sound from the laboratory. The bar of escaping light, narrow as a candlestick until now, slowly, insinuatingly, broadens out fan-shaped as the door behind it silently widens. A silhouette bisects it, Denholt's outline thrown before him over the floor and up the wall, rigid, standing just within the opening, listening.

The grin has come back to O'Shaughnessy's face; he reaches behind him and squeezes her throbbing wrist reassuringly. It seems so long ago that he was last afraid of anything. Seventeen, was he then? Eighteen? Sometimes he thinks he's missing a lot by being like this—fear gives life a fillip. He wonders how it is he lost it all, and what there is —if anything—ever to bring it back.

One thing's sure, she's being afraid for the both of them, and plenty left over; her pulse is a whipcord under the thumb that is holding her wrist.

The silhouette moves at last, begins to recede within the lighted room. The noise that conjured it up, like a genie out of a bottle, hasn't been repeated. The tinkerings and drippings resume where they left off. Only the path of light remains wider than before, a ticklish gap to bridge undiscovered. When they are almost abreast of it and can hear Denholt's breathing inside, O'Shaughnessy stops, gropes behind him, draws Nova around in front of him. He transfers the padlock key to her palm, closes her fingers over it. "I want to be sure you make that gate, no matter what. Take a deep breath and get across that lighted place. Don't be afraid, I'm right here backing you up."

She edges forward, cranes her neck toward the open door. Apparently Denholt's back is toward it. She takes a quick soundless sidestep, with instinctive feminine deftness,

and is on the other side of the luminous barrier. He can see her there anxiously waiting for him to join her.

A moment later he is beside her again, bringing with him a quick bird's-eye glimpse of a white-coated form bent over, laboriously pouring something from a retort into a hypodermic-barrel. In the background a pair of operating tables, not just one. One an improvised one—planks bridging two chairs, with a rubber sheet draped over them. "Double-header coming up," thinks O'Shaughnessy. "Rain—no game."

She is tugging insistently at his arm, but he is suddenly resistant, immobile. She turns her face up toward his. "O'Shaughnessy, come on! Any minute he's—"

"My rabbit's foot. He's got it in there with him, in my coat. I couldn't go without it—"

"O'Shaughnessy, he'll kill you."

"Him and what sextet? Get over there to the door, kid, and start working on it. I want you in the clear in case that gun of his starts going boom. I've got to go in after my lucky paw, no two ways about it." He has to jog her, push her slightly, to get her to tear herself away from him. Finally she slips off in the dark with a little whimper of protest. He waits there until a faint clicking comes from the main door. Then a bolt grates miserably as she clears it, and there is sudden, startled silence from within the gleaming laboratory.

O'Shaughnessy, muscles taut as wires, rounds the angle of the doorframe, unhurried, casual. Digs a thumb at the man in the white jacket who has just whirled to face the door. "My coat, Doc. I'm leaving."

Denholt has just finished putting down the loaded needle he was preparing. The gun the girl mentioned is on the table, but under his hand already.

"So you think you're leaving? You're very foolish, my friend. It would have been easier to sleep, the way I meant

you to. No fright, no last-minute agony. You would not have seen your own death."

"No fright, no agony this way either." O'Shaughnessy calmly reaches for his coat, extracts the charm, stuffs it into his trouser-pocket. "Don't be so handy burning my identification papers next time," he says, "or I'll slap your head all the way around your neck—"

The gun is up now, level with his chest.

Behind them in the darkness the heavy outer door swings open with a grinding whirr. Denholt takes a quick step forward. O'Shaughnessy doesn't move from before him, blocking his way. He's flexing his wrists slightly, in and out.

A patter of quick, light footsteps recedes outside in the open, flying over the clayey rain-wet ground.

"Who's that?"

"Who should it be? That's the girl. I'm taking her with me."

Denholt's face is a sudden mask of dismay. "You can't!" he cries shrilly. "You don't know what it means, you fool! You can't take her out into the world with you! She's got to stay here, she needs *me!*" He raises his voice to a frenzied shout. "Nova! Come back here!"

"That's your story and you're stuck with it." O'Shaughnessy raises his own voice, in a bull-rumble. He shifts dead-center in front of the leveled gun, to keep Denholt from snaking past around him.

"Get out of my way, or I'll shoot you dead. I didn't want to puncture your skin, damage any vital organ, but if I have to, you're the loser! Nothing can bring you back then, do you hear me, nothing can bring you back! You'll *stay* dead!"

O'Shaughnessy just stands, crouched a little, measuring him with his eyes. O'Shaughnessy is a gambler; he senses a reluctance on Denholt's part to shoot him, and he plays on it for what it's worth. Instead of giving ground before the weapon, he takes a sidling step in, and another.

The alarm-bell begins ringing somewhere off in the dripping trees . . . She's got the last barrier open, she's made it.

A sudden taut cord down the side of Denholt's neck reveals to O'Shaughnessy the muscular signal sent down to his unseen trigger-finger. He swerves like a drunk. A foreshortened bar of orange, like a tube-light, seems to solder the two of them together for a second. Noise and smoke come later. O'Shaughnessy isn't aware of pain, only knows that he's been hit somewhere and mustn't be hit any more. He has the gun-hand in his own now, ten fingers obeying two different brains, clutching a single weapon. It goes off again, and again, and again—four, five, six times.

O'Shaughnessy is hitting Denholt on the side of his head with his free arm, great, walloping, pile-driver blows. The two of them stagger together, like partners in a crazy dance. Glass is breaking all around them. Gray smoke from the six shots, pink-and-white dust from the chipped brick-and-plaster walls, swirl around them in a rainbow haze. Something vividly green flares up from one of the overturned retorts, goes right out again. O'Shaughnessy tears the emptied gun away, flings it off somewhere. More breaking glass, and this time a tart pungent smell that makes the nostrils sting. The crunch of pulverized tube-glass underfoot makes it sound as if they were scuffling in sand or hard-packed snow.

O'Shaughnessy can't hit with his left arm, he notices; the shoulder blocks off the brain-message each time. He just uses that arm to hold Denholt where his right-hand blows can find him. He has lost track of the other's left hand for a moment, it comes back again around his body from somewhere, with a warning flash to it. Scalpel or something.

O'Shaughnessy dives, breaks, puts space between them. A downward hiss misses his chest-barrel, he pounces, traps the arm before it can come up again, vises it between his

own arm and upthrust thigh, starts forcing it out of joint. The thing drops with a musical ting! He scuffs it aside, takes a quick step back to get driving-force, sends a shattering haymaker in. Denholt topples, skids through broken tube-glass, lies there stunned, tilted on one elbow.

O'Shaughnessy, his shoulder throbbing with pain like a bass drum, pants grimly: "Now—got it through your head I'm taking her?" He turns and shuffles unsteadily toward the door.

Denholt is trying to struggle up, gabbling: "You're taking her to her death!"

The alarm-bell keeps pealing, waiting. O'Shaughnessy stumbles out of the laboratory, on through the darkness toward the front door. Cool, dank, before-dawn air swirls about him. He turns and sees Denholt outlined there behind him in the lighted doorway, where he has dragged himself, hanging weakly onto the frame, holding up one arm in imprecation—or in warning.

"Remember what I'm saying. You're dooming her. This is the thirtieth of June—remember this date, remember it well! You'll know, you'll know soon enough! You'll come crawling back to me—with her—begging me to help you! You'll get down on your bended knees to me, you'll grovel at my feet—that'll be my hour!"

"Have another shot—on me," O'Shaughnessy growls back from the darkness under the trees.

"You're not taking her out to life, you're taking her out to her death—the most awful death a human being ever experienced!"

The shrieking, maddened voice dwindles away behind him in the house, and he can make out Nova waiting tremblingly for him at the opened barbed-wire barrier. He stumbles to her through the mud of the storm-wrack, holding his bullet-seared shoulder. He grins and drawls in that quiet way of his above the slackening noise of the

exhausted alarm-bell: “H’lo, Mrs. O’Shaughnessy. Shall we go now?”

He takes her arm.

VI

O’Shaughnessy, dickering with a man named Tereshko at the bar of the Palmer House, Chicago, excuses himself, steps into a booth to call his North Side flat.

“Why not have your wife join us for dinner?” Tereshko says. “Say, at the Chez Paree. We can talk business to music just as well as here.”

“Great,” says O’Shaughnessy. Business after all is a form of warfare; you bring all your available weapons to bear. If you don’t you’re a fool. You could call Nova O’Shaughnessy’s illuminating beauty that of a star-shell. If he uses it to help dazzle this wary gentleman he is trying to dent, it doesn’t mean he values it any the less himself.

So he says into the phone: “Nova, I want you to meet me at Chez Paree. I’ve got a man with me. He’s looking for a pilot, and he’s talking big money, so be as beautiful as you can. Take a cab, honey.” Nova is still new to the city streets. “Just one thing. Any offer under seventy-five hundred and you give me a look, much as to say, ‘Isn’t he funny?’ Get it? And not a word about—that place on the mountain, of course.”

At the Paree they order a table for three. They’ve been drinking a good deal, and Tereshko is beginning to show it. He isn’t drunk but he loses some of his caginess. Loosens up, so to speak.

“You had much experience locating mining claims from the air?” he resumes.

“No, just flying. But as I understand it, all you want is to be piloted up there, so you can look them over yourself. I can guarantee to do that for you. All I need’s the general direction and plenty of gas.”

It’s obvious that money isn’t the hitch. This Tereshko has that written all over him, in a flashy uncouth sort of way. His hesitancy—and O’Shaughnessy is a good judge of men’s motives—seems to stem from caution, as though he wants to make sure whom he’s dealing with first before he puts all his cards on the table. He can’t doubt by now that O’Shaughnessy’s an experienced enough flier to get him anywhere he wants to go, after the clippings and documents he’s been showing him all afternoon long.

“Of course,” Tereshko feels his way, offering the applicant a cigarette out of a platinum case with an emerald catch, “what I’m mainly interested in is to see that the whole undertaking is kept strictly between ourselves. I don’t want known to anyone what its object or destination is. No one at all, is that clear? Not even after it’s been wound up.”

“I can give you a guarantee on that too. I’m no loudspeaker.”

“No, you seem like the sort that minds his own business—that’s why I approached you in the first place.” He—very unwisely—signals for another drink.

Tereshko relaxes still further. “I don’t mind telling you,” he admits, “that that whole mine-location business was just camouflage. What I’m looking for is already mined and minted, only it was put back in the ground. And it’s all the way around the compass from where I said. Not British Columbia at all, but in one of the Florida keys, we think. Maybe one of the Bahamas. I suppose that gives you the clue. Well, it looks like you’re our man, so there’s no harm in your knowing.”

“Pirate stuff, eh?”

“Yes and no,” says Tereshko. “Certainly was a pirate all right, but he dates from prohibition days and not Captain

Kidd's time. Guess you know who I mean now."

O'Shaughnessy doesn't, but it doesn't cost anything to let the other think so.

"He won't get out until, let's see—" A pecan-sized diamond flames as he figures on his fingers. "1948, or is it '50? Hell, he was a great guy and all that," he goes on by way of self-excuse, "but you can't blame the rest of us. After all, we're getting older every day. He got his, why shouldn't we get ours? He's served two years of his sentence—why should we wait?"

"Then you have no right to it?"

"Any more than he had!" snaps the other. "It's nobody's money. It don't even belong to the saps he got it from, because he gave 'em needle-beer for it at four bits a throw."

"One way of looking at it," says O'Shaughnessy non-committally. "What other way of looking at it is there? Is it doing anybody any good lying where it is in the ground? We wouldn't have to go to all this trouble only—you see banks were no good, nor safe-deposit boxes nor anything else, because his trouble was—Government trouble. He musta seen it coming up. We didn't, but he musta, because we all remember how just before it happened he went off on a cruise down Florida waters in his motor yacht. Just him and a small crew to run the thing for him and, oh yes, some girl he was playing around with at the time. None of *us,* not one of us. We all thought that was funny, too, because he was a guy loved company. Until then he'da caught cold without the bunch of us being around him all the time. Well funnier still, just before turning back they touch at Havana. Him and this dame go ashore and nobody else's allowed to leave the boat. Then, on very sudden orders from him, the yacht leaves Havana—without him and the girl coming back to it. It's supposed to pick them up later at Bimini or something. It was never seen in one piece again. A piece of charred wood was picked up later with its name on it. Must have been destroyed at sea by an explosion, and not a soul

aboard escaped alive. Funny, huh, to send it on ahead like that, when it could have waited right in the harbor for them? They were the only two it had to cater to."

"Tunny is right, but not for laughing," O'Shaughnessy agrees.

"Just when we were getting out our black neckties and armbands, a cable comes from him. 'Hope you're not worried, I'm okay, taking the next plane north, and wasn't that a terrible accident?' Thirty days later to the hour, Uncle Sam jumps on his neck and—" He pinches his fingers together, kisses them, flies them apart. "How much turned up, when the smoke had cleared away? Five grand. Why, he used to carry as much as that around in his pocket for change! Does it look like I'm right, or does it look like I'm right? Every other lead we've had since then has petered out. It took us long enough to tumble, but now I think we've got it added up right. Now, d'you think you can help us swing it?"

O'Shaughnessy shrugs. "What's hard about it? I can taxi you around for a month, two months, as long as it takes you to locate it. An amphibian is the answer, of course. Now there's this: you'll have to stake me to the plane. I banged my own up week before last—that's when I got this busted shoulder. Don't get the idea I can't fly—lightning butted in, that was all."

"We'll provide you with the plane," Tereshko assures him. "You shop around and pick up what you think you'll need, and you can keep it, as an extra bonus, when we get back."

"Just how long will I last after that to enjoy the use of it?" wonders O'Shaughnessy knowingly. But that isn't really a deterrent—people have thought they'd get rid of him, once he's served his purpose, before now—and haven't made a *go* of it. These fellows'll find that out too.

"The wren would come in handy for a guide—did you ever think of contacting her?" he says thoughtfully.

“Did we think?” scoffs the other. “His cell door wasn’t closed behind him yet before we started to put on the pressure. Well we put it on too heavy. We had her figured all wrong. It just happens she was one of those innocent babes, hadn’t known what it was all about until the lid blew off—musta thought he made his dough in stocks and bonds or something.” O’Shaughnessy makes that derisive sound with his lips commonly known as the raspberry.

“No, that’s what we thought too,” Tereshko assures him, “but it was on the level. He used to tell us everything was on the up-and-up between them—you know what I mean, and she wasn’t really his moll . . . He called her his madonna—”

“Machine-gun madonna,” chuckles O’Shaughnessy.

“He was going to marry her. She was only a kid, seventeen or something like that. Well, between the shock of finding out who she’d been mixed up with, and us putting the pressure on her, the poor dame never had a chance. She claimed she didn’t know anything that went on during that cruise. So then we lock her up in a dark garage overnight, to frighten her into talking. We frightened her all right, but not into talking. Just our luck—he’d never let her cut her hair, said she looked like an angel with it long. So she has a hairpin to unlock the engines of all the cars in there—and there was about six of them—and starts them all turning over and breathes the monoxide until she’s gone. With a kitten he gave her still in her arms.”

“Fine note.” O’Shaughnessy scowls sympathetically. Not with them, but with the harried, friendless girl in the garage.

Tereshko grins.

“Yeah, ain’t it? Of all the dirty tricks! We hadda leave her lie in there all next day. Then we sneaked her out after dark, carried her miles away, and planted her somewhere else. I never even read about them finding her. If they did,

they never tumbled to who she was, not a word about it came out in the pa—”

“Here’s my wife,” O’Shaughnessy interrupts, standing up. He’s sighted her across Tereshko’s shoulder as she comes in from the street just then, stands there a second, looks around. She’s something to look at, as she locates them, starts over toward them, with a smile for him on her face.

Tereshko, whose chair is facing the other way, follows him to his feet, turning around to greet her as he does so.

O’Shaughnessy is saying, “Nova, meet Mr. Vincent Tereshko.”

There’s a tinkle as Tereshko’s cocktail glass hits the floor. There’s a peculiar hiss at the same time, like an overheated radiator, or an inner tube deflating. Tereshko sort of reels back, the low top of the chair he has just risen from catches him across the spine, he goes over it, dumping the back of his head onto the soft padded seat, and then he and chair alike roll over sideward to the floor. Instantly he scrambles up again, gives a hoarse cry that sounds like, “No! Get away from me! You’re not real.”

He makes flailing motions with both arms, buffeting the air before him, then turns and runs through the foyer and out into the street.

They come out of their trance after awhile, not right away. “Well, I’ll be a—Did you see that? What bit him? A minute ago he’s sitting here chatting with me, then all at once he goes haywire.”

“It was—me,” she says wonderingly, still staring after Tereshko.

He flips his head impatiently at such an idea. “Nah, how could it have been you? Talk sense. You’re not used to crowds yet, every time anyone looks at you you think something’s the matter.” He can’t, after all, really tell who or what Tereshko saw.

“It was, O’Shaughnessy,” she insists troubledly. “He was looking right at me, right into my face. Something must be

the matter with me! Is there anything wrong with the way I look? Because that's the second time tonight that's happened—"

He turns to her, startled. "Second! What d'you mean?"

"Just now, outside the door. There was a man sitting waiting in a limousine for someone, and as I got out of my cab, he turned around and looked at me, and then he—he gave a yell like this one did, and started off, tearing down the street a mile a minute as if he'd seen a ghost—"

O'Shaughnessy looks puzzled.

"Turn around a minute. Lemme see," he says. Then as she slowly revolves before him: "You're okay from every angle, I don't see anything about you to scare grown men out of their wits. He musta seen somebody or something in back of you that did that to him. The heck with it. Let's go home. It looks like the deal's off, and I'm just as satisfied. It had a bad smell to it from the beginning."

Seventy-two hours go by, the lull before the storm. Then, the third night after that, he happens to come back to the flat earlier than usual. He's down to his last few dollars, and he's been tramping around all day trying to make connections. But free-lance pilots, flying soldiers of fortune, don't seem to be in great demand at the moment. He has her to look after now . . .

He spots her standing at the curb in front of their house, as he rounds the corner. She's looking for a taxi. She signals one, and just as she's on the point of getting in, he shouts: "Hey Nova! What's the idea?" and comes running up just in time.

She seems astonished to see him. Not confused, just astonished.

"I'm sorry it took me so long. I didn't mean to keep you waiting like that. Is that why you changed your mind and came back here instead? You're not sore, are you, O'Shaughnessy?"

He says: "What're you talking about? Sore about what?"

“Why, because I’m half an hour late in meeting you.”

“Who told you to meet me?”

She’s more astonished than ever. “Why, you did! You telephoned me over an hour ago and said to take a taxi and come out and meet you at—” He takes a look around him up and down the street. “Come on upstairs,” he says crisply. “Never mind, driver, we don’t want you.” And upstairs: “What else did I say?”

“You told me to come as quickly as I could, that’s all.”

“Don’t you know my voice on the wire?”

“I’ve never heard anybody else’s but yours, so I thought it was you again. You sounded a little far-off, that’s all.”

“Well it wasn’t me. And I’m wondering who it was. Listen, Nova, honey, don’t go out any more by yourself after this. I’ll give you a password over the phone from now on. Barbed wire, how’ll that be? If you don’t hear me say barbed wire, you’ll know it isn’t me.”

“Yes, O’Shaughnessy.”

The following evening, when he comes back, he has trouble getting in. His latchkey works, but she has something shoved up against the door on the inside, a chair inserted under the knob, maybe. It doesn’t hold him very long, and she’s standing there in the middle of the room shaking like a leaf.

“What’d you do that for?” he asks. “And how’d that hole get in the door, over the lock?”

She runs over and hangs on tight. “They called again. They said it was you, but I knew it wasn’t because they didn’t say barbed wire.”

“They try to get you to come out again?”

“No, they didn’t. They said, ‘We’ve got a message for you from Benny.’ Who’s Benny?”

O’Shaughnessy just looks at her, eyes narrowing

“Then they said, ‘Oh, so your torch went out?’ Then they laughed and they said, ‘Where’d you get hold of the mick?’ What’s a mick?”

“Me,” he says slowly, wondering. “Anything else?”

She shakes her head dazedly. “I couldn’t make head or tail out of it. They said, ‘You sure put one over on us, didn’t you? It was a good gag while it lasted, but it’s run out now. We’ll be seeing you.’ ”

“Then what?”

“Oh, O’Shaughnessy, I was so scared. I didn’t know where to get hold of you, except you were downtown in the Loop somewhere. I locked the door and I hid in the closet, just left it open on a crack. In about half an hour, all of a sudden I could see the doorknob slowly turning, as if someone was out there trying it. Then when that wouldn’t work the bell started to ring, and a voice said thickly, ‘It’s me, babe. Let me in, I forgot my key.’ But I knew it wasn’t you. I got way in the far corner of the closet and pulled all the clothes over me—”

Meanwhile he’s taken his gun out of the valise where he keeps it and is checking it over, his wrists trembling a little with rage. That’s a man’s vital spot, the helpless thing he loves.

She goes on:

“Then something went *polfa* right into the door and came through on this side. I couldn’t stand it any more, I was afraid they’d come in and get me. I ran out of the closet and climbed out that window there onto the fire escape and got into the flat next door and begged the lady to hide me. I told her someone was trying to break into our flat, and she started to call the police, but by that time they’d gone. I could hear feet scuttling down the stairs, a whole lot of them, and a big car driving off outside—”

Walking back and forth, trying to dope it out, tapping the muzzle of his gun against his palm, he says, “Listen kid, I don’t know what we’re up against, it may be just a false alarm, but—Shooting a bullet-hole through your door in broad daylight makes it look like the McCoy. If I could only figure what it was all about! It’s no one in *my* life. I’ve made

enough enemies, heaven knows, but not in this country. Nova, tell me the truth—were you ever in Chicago before?" He stands still and looks at her.

"Never, O'Shaughnessy, never, until we came here two weeks ago. I don't know anyone here but you. I've never spoken to anyone but you the whole time we've been here. You've got to believe me!"

He does, how could he help it?

But then, what is it? What would you call it, anyway? If he had anything, he'd say it had the earmarks of an attempted snatch, for ransom. Mistaken identity? Yes, but who do they take her to be? The whole thing's a maze. He wonders if he ought to give it to the police to handle for him. But then, what can he tell them? Somebody impersonated me on the phone to my wife, somebody tried to break into my flat while I was out. It doesn't stack up to much when you put it that way. And he's an individualist, anyway, used to being on his own. When it comes to anything threatening Nova, he'd rather take care of her himself.

Tereshko rings up unexpectedly that night. "This is Tereshko, O'Shaughnessy," he says. "I'm down on lower State Street. I'd like to conclude that transaction we were talking over. Can you run down and meet me for ten minutes or so?"

"What happened to you the other night? Something seemed to frighten you."

A phony laugh. "Me? Not at all. I got kinda sick all of a sudden, and beat it for the street."

O'Shaughnessy motions Nova over, puts the receiver to her ear and whispers: "This the same voice you heard the other times?"

She listens, shakes her head.

So he says into the phone: "Frankly, the deal's off, count me out."

Tereshko doesn't seem very perturbed, perhaps he doesn't realize how much he revealed that night. "Sorry

you feel that way, but you know best. Come down anyway for a drink, to show there's no hard feeling. Come alone."

O'Shaughnessy decides then and there that he will, to see what this is all about. That first night Tereshko was all for having Nova join them. Tonight he wanted O'Shaughnessy to come down alone. Does Tereshko want Nova left alone in the flat? Is *he* the one behind all this? Nothing like finding out. He says, "Get your hat." And on the street, a couple of blocks away: "You've never been to a movie, have you? Well, you're going to one now."

He buys two seats, takes her in, finds a place for her. "Now don't move from there till I come back and get you!" As if she were a child.

"Yes, O'Shaughnessy."

There is no sign of Tereshko at the taproom where they were supposed to meet. O'Shaughnessy waits ten minutes, leaves, goes back and gets Nova. He fingers the gun in his pocket as they near their flat. "So now," he says to himself grimly, "I think I know *who* Pm up against—if not why."

The flat-door falls back unfastened before them. They give one another a look. "I thought—I saw you lock it after us when we left," she whispers.

"You thought right," he says grimly. He goes in first, gun bared.

No one there. "Must have blown open," he says. "Maybe sneak-thieves."

This alarms her. "My clothes! All the pretty things you gave me!" He grins a little at the woman of it, while she runs to the closet to find out. She comes out again as puzzled as ever.

"Anything missing?"

"No, but—I don't remember *this* being on here before." She's holding one up to show him. A large lily is pinned to the front of it!

"Maybe it came that way and you've forgotten it."

She strokes it with her fingers. “But it’s alive. They don’t put *live* ones on them.”

Even he knows that. He also knows what lilies stand for as a rule. He softly starts to whistle a bar or two. “Chicago, Chicago, I’ll show you around—”

VII

Some church-belfry on the other side of the river bongs twelve times. “Got everything in?” he says quietly. “I’ll carry the bags down. You put out the lights.”

She tiptoes submissively down the stairs after him. “I don’t know how far we can get on five bucks,” he remarks, “but it’s a cinch I can’t leave you up there by yourself any more in the daytime, and I can’t drag you all over town with me either. Maybe we can get a room on the other side of the city—”

Just inside the doorway he puts down the bags, motions her to stand by them a minute. He saunters out ahead, carefully casual. Peers up one way, down the other. Nothing. The street’s dead to the world.

Then suddenly, from nowhere, *ping!* Something flicks off the wall just behind him, flops at his feet like a dead bug. He doesn’t bend down to look closer, he can tell what kind of a bug it is all right. He’s seen that kind of bug before, plenty of times. No flash, no report, to show which direction it came from. Silencer, of course.

He hasn’t moved. *Fsssh!* and a bee or wasp in a hurry strokes by his cheek, tingles, draws a drop of slow blood. Another *polfa!* from the wall, another bug rolling over. The insect-world seems very streamlined, very self-destructive, tonight.

He takes a wary step back, slips inside the doorway again, still facing front. If he could only spot the flash, see where it was coming from, he could send them a few back. Meanwhile he's half-in, half-out of the iron-grilled, thick, glass street-door.

There's an anvil-like sound, and the warped spokes of a wheel show up in the glass, centering in a neat, round hole. Powdery stuff like dandruff dusts his shoulder. Another bug has dropped inside the hallway.

Hands are gripping at his coat, pulling at him from behind. "O'Shaughnessy, don't—you'll kill yourself standing there like that! Think of *me!*"

"Douse that bulb back there, swat it with-your handbag—I want to see if I can catch the flashes."

But she won't do it, and that traps him into going back and doing it himself. Then her arms wind around him when she gets him back there at the far end of the hallway, and she clings for dear life.

"No! No! I won't let you—What good'll you be to me dead? What'll become of me?" He gives in at last—it's either that or drag her bodily after him back to the entrance clinging like a barnacle.

"All right, all right. There must be a back way out of here."

But, at the outlet to the electric-lighted basement passageway, as he emerges in advance of her—there are again winged insects on the loose, spitting off the wall. "Wait a minute!" he says, cutting short her plaintive remonstrances. "I think I caught the flash that time! Along the edge of the roof on that next house. Wait'll it comes again." And cuts his hand at her backhand. "The bulb. The bulb." This time she obeys, blackness inks the passage behind him.

He draws and slowly raises his gun, standing perfectly still, face tilted to the sky. Gambler's odds: his life against the chances of hitting a powder-flash six stories up. His left

thumbnail scrapes past the rabbit foot imbedded in his vest-pocket, half absent-mindedly.

A winking gleam just over the cornice up there, a flare from his own gun as fire draws fire. A chipping of the stonework just over and behind his head, and then something black and gangling falling clumsily down six stories, a blur against the gray-gloom of the walls. A sickening thud against cement, just out of sight behind the eight-foot dividing-fence.

More flashes up there, six in a row, and a sound like hail or gravel down where they are. But O'Shaughnessy's already back inside the sheltering passageway. "It won't work. There's still a second one up there, and we could never get over that eight-foot fence alive. They seem to be doing this up in style. Come on back up to the flat."

She goes up the inner stairs with her hands shielding her face. "That fall. I hope he was dead before—he landed."

"That evens the score a little," he says unsentimentally. "They that live by the sword—"

Night in a Chicago flat. He says: "The door's locked, and I'm here with Buster. You try to get a little sleep, honey, your old man'll look after you."

"But promise me you'll stay up here with me, you won't go down there again."

"I promise."

So, fully dressed, she lies there on the bed, and after awhile she sleeps, while he stands guard at the shade-drawn window, gun in hand, the spark of his cigarette held carefully behind his back.

A milkman comes and never dreams the muzzle of a gun is four inches away from his head on the other side of the door as he stoops to set down a bottle of milk. Nova sleeps on, like a child. Night in a Chicago flat.

Three hours after daylight they're ready to leave. There are enough people on the streets now to give them a chance. If they don't get out now, they never will. This net

that's been meshed loosely around them all night will be pulled tight by the time darkness comes a second time. They want him out of the way, but they want her alive. That much he's sure of.

Just before they go, he murmurs, "There's a cab been standing there ever since dawn, probably all night, just past the next corner. There's no public hack-stand at that spot, either."

"Do you think that's—them?"

"I don't give a hoot whether it is or not, I can't breathe in here any more, I've got to get out in the open! Stick close behind me, and if I tumble, you keep going. I've been shot at before. I'm the bad penny that always turns up again."

But then, as he puts his hand out to the doorknob, a sudden rigidity, as though some indefinable sound has reached him from outside it. "There's someone out there," he breathes.

She winces. "We're too late."

He motions her behind him, shielding her; reaches out and does something to the lock, levels his gun. "It's open," he calls out. "Come in at your own risk."

Nothing for a minute. Then very slowly it starts to fall back toward them.

"Quicker than that or I'll shoot!" He kicks it the rest of the way with the edge of his foot.

The tremblingly upraised arms are the first things they see. And the empty background behind the solitary figure. O'Shaughnessy takes a step backward, propelling her with him, not in retreat but to give himself elbow-room.

The face is Oriental, Chinese. Spectacles and close-cropped hair. Hat fallen off just now at the unexpected welcome.

O'Shaughnessy: "This is the place you wanted?"

"Yes, if you will permit me to mop my forehead—"

"You warm?"

"No, but my reception was."

“All right, close the door behind you. We’ve been a little draughty here all night.”

The visitor bows nervously. “Allow me to introduce myself —”

“You’re on the air.”

“I am Lawrence Lee, American name. I have come to offer you interesting proposition—”

“I just had one, thanks, a couple days ago.”

“I had great trouble finding you—”

“You’re going to have even greater losing me, if this is a come-on.”

“I represent the illustrious Benevolent-Wisdom Yang. His recruiting-agent in United States. He has ordered a shipment of lovely planes, and needs someone who will know how to make them work. Your reputation has reached our ears. Can I offer you post on generalissimo’s staff?” O’Shaughnessy, gun still bared, sticks his left hand in his pocket, pulls it out again, lets the lining trail after it. “You make it sound interesting—up to a point.”

“Five hundred dollars American, a week.”

“I’m no greenhorn, I’ve been in China before. I’m O’Shaughnessy of Winnipeg, he can’t get another like me. The coolies used to bow down and worship in their rice-paddies whenever I passed overhead.” That he can stand and bargain like this, when both their lives are hanging by a thread, is—well, just part of his being O’Shaughnessy.

“Two thousand, p’aps?”

“More like it.” He turns to her, still huddled behind him. “Shall we do it, just for the fun of it?” Then, with a grin to the emissary, “Yang would not, I take it, be interested in a dead pilot?”

The agent, with Oriental lack of humor: “Dead pilot could not handle planes satisfactory.”

“Well, I may have a little trouble getting through alive from here to the Northwest Station. I can’t promise you I will.” She shudders at this point, clings closer. “However,

that’s my look-out. You leave two through tickets for Frisco on tap for us at the ticket-office, and if I don’t show up to claim them, you can always get a refund from the railroad—and another pilot.”

“Today-train agreeable? Shall do. Boat-tickets will be waiting in Frisco at N. Y. K. Line office. And for binder, one thousand advance suitable?” O’Shaughnessy says in Chinese, “I could not wound your generosity by refusing.” Then in English, “Carry your hat in your hand leaving here, so your face can be seen clearly.”

The envoy bows himself out. “Happy comings-down.”

When they’re alone once more, he says to her: “Shanghai-ho. The Coast Limited leaves at eleven, so we’ve got just one hour to make it.”

“But how are we going to get out of here?”

“I don’t know yet, but we are.” He goes back to the window, peers narrowly down through the gap of the drawn shade. “There goes Confucius without anyone stopping him; I guess they didn’t tie him up with me.” Then, “Who’s that fat woman walking up and down out there with a poodle?”

“Oh, that’s the lady in the rear flat I climbed into yesterday. She always airs her dogs like that regularly every morning.”

“Dogs? She’s only got one there.”

“She’s got two in the flat. She has to take them down in relays because they fight.”

“I’ve got it now!” he says. “Wait’ll she comes upstairs again.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You’re going to take the next one down. I’m going to see that you get to the station and safely aboard that train first of all. I’ll stall them off here; you call me back as soon as you get there. Then I’ll make a break for it myself—”

“Leave you—?” she wails.

“I’m giving the orders in this ground-crew. Here she comes now.” He goes to the door, stops her, brings her in

with him. She's globular and baby-faced, with carefully gilded hair under a large cartwheel hat that flops around her face.

"Do you want to do something for us? I've got to get my wife out of the building and I can't do it openly—we're being watched. Will you lend her your hat and coat and dog? Your other dog."

"I'll gladly lend my hat and coat, but Fifi—my little Fifi—who'll bring her back?"

"She'll turn her over to the station-master for you, you can call for her later. I tell you her life's in danger. Do this, won't you?"

"Yes," she says, looking at Nova, "I think I understand. I was sure I'd seen your face somewhere before—in the paper, you know, 'fell me, what was he like? Was he as bad as they said? I heard he used to make people stand with their feet in buckets of cement—"

"Skip it," says O'Shaughnessy, "you've got your wires crossed."

It only takes a couple minutes for the change. The wide-brimmed concealing hat hides everything but Nova's chin. He ties a couple of pillows around her with cord, one in front and one in back, under the coat, apologizing, "No offense," to the woman as he does so.

"That's all right," she sighs. "I know I've filled out."

The fat lady stays up in their flat; she thinks it will be a good idea to give them a glimpse of her passing back and forth behind the windows. Make them think Nova's there. For this purpose they raise the shades once more. He goes down to the lower hall with Nova and the dog. Their parting is a mixture of comedy and tension. "I'll be standing here behind the door covering you with my gun. Don't be frightened. Imitate her waddle. Walk slow and keep your eye on the dog, like she does. Give yourself a good two blocks before you jump for it. And don't drop those pillows to the sidewalk, whatever you do!"

“Oh, O’Shaughnessy, if you don’t show up, I’m going to die.”

“I’ll be there with bells on.”

The bulky, padded figure eases out through the door, minces after the dog, straining at its leash. He edges up slantwise against the door, screened by an abutment of the hall-wall, peering out after her, gun ready, until she passes from his radius of vision. Then quickly chases upstairs where the window will give him a wider perspective.

The dog stops. The figure under the concealing hat-brim stands patiently by. They go on again a few yards. They stop again. “Darn dog!” he chafes, sweating with impatience in the hollows of his hands. Finally, almost imperceptibly, by fits and starts, she’s progressed around the corner and out of sight.

He glues his eyes on the motionless taxi now. That street she just went up is a continuation of the one it’s on. If it makes a move, starts out after her suddenly, he’ll know—

Slow tense minutes. She must be a block away now. The cab’s still standing. She ought to be off the streets by this time, safely installed in a cab, whirling toward the station. They’ve put it over!

He takes a deep breath of released tension, steps back into the room away from the window. The worst’s over, she’s made it. All that’s left now is to sit tight until she calls him to let him know she’s reached the station. Fifteen minutes ought to do the trick, making every allowance for traffic-hitches and lights.

He sits there smoking calmly, waiting. The fat lady is still there in the flat. This, to her, is romance with a capital R. She’s enjoying it more than a box of marshmallows. She’s eating it up.

And then in a flash, before he quite knows how it’s happened, seventeen minutes have passed, and the call is two minutes overdue, and the calmness is going out with every noseful of smoke he’s expelling.

Twenty minutes. He throws down his cigarette, and takes three or four quick turns around the room. “She should have called by now,” he says.

“Yes, she should have,” agrees the fat lady. “It doesn’t take that long to get from here to the Northwest Station.”

Twenty-five minutes, half an hour. “Maybe the phone’s out of order—” But he’s afraid to get on and test it, afraid to block her call. He shakes his fist at it helplessly.

He’s prowling back and forth like a lion with distemper now. There’s a shiny streak down one side of his face. “I shouldn’t have let her go ahead—I ought to be hung! Something’s gone wrong. I can’t stand this any more!” he says with a choked sound. “I’m starting now—”

“But how are you—”

“Spring for it and fire as I go if they try to stop me.” And then as he barges out, the fat lady waddling solicitously after him, “Stay there; take it if she calls—tell her I’m on the way—”

He plunges straight at the street-door from all the way back in the hall, like a fullback headed for a touchdown. That’s the best way. Gun bedded in his pocket, but hand gripping it ready to let fly through lining and all. He slaps the door out of his way without slowing and skitters out along the building, head and shoulders defensively lowered.

It *was* the taxi, you bet. No sound from it, at least not at this distance, just a thin bluish haze slowly spreading out around it that might be gas-fumes if its engine were turning; and at his end a long row of dun-colored spurts—of dust and stone-splinters—following him along the wall of the flat he’s tearing away from. Each succeeding one a half yard too far behind him, smacking into where he was a second ago. And they never catch up.

He rounds the corner unscathed, spins like a dervish on one leg, brakes with the other, snaps a shot back at the cab, mist-haloed now, which is just getting into gear; and slipping out away from the curb. Glass tinkles faintly back

there—he got the windshield maybe—and he sees the cab lurch crazily for a minute, as though more than glass got the bullet.

Then he sprints up the street without waiting to see any more. His own shots make plenty of noise, and the vicinity is coming to shocked life around him. Nothing in sight though that's any good to him—a slow-moving truck, a laundry-wagon. But music somewhere ahead—a cab radio—and he steers toward the sound, locates it just around the next corner, is in and on the way almost between two notes of a single bar. At the wheel herself.

The driver rears up in consternation in the back, holding a handful of pinochle-cards, shrieks, "Hey! what's the—"

"All right, climb around here and take it—I'm in a hurry, got no time to lower the gangplank!"

"What about these other guys?" The back of the cab is alive with shanghaied card-playing cab-drivers.

"They'll have to come along for the ride." Two blocks behind the other cab has showed up, is putting on a burst of speed. O'Shaughnessy warns, as the driver crawls over his lap: "I want you to keep that cab back there where it belongs—zigzag, I don't care what you do—but lose it. It means your back-tires if you don't!"

The rear-view mirror suddenly spatters into crystal confetti.

"See, what'd I tell you? Left, left, get offa here, don't stay in a straight line with 'em!"

The driver says, "What *you* done? I don't like this!" He takes a turn that nearly lands them axle-shafts in air.

A series of two-wheel turns, and a combination of lights in their favor—the rabbit's foot must be working again—closing down after them like portcullises each time. They shake them off.

It's twelve-and-a-half minutes before train-time when he jumps down at the Northwest Station, slaps one of

Lawrence Lee's sawbucks in through the cab window and dives inside.

At the barrier: "Tickets, please!"

"Wasn't one left here for me with you?"

"Nope."

"My wife must have taken them through to the train with her, then. Didn't you see her—pretty blonde, big floppy hat—?"

"All blondes are pretty to me, haven't seen a bad-looking one so far today—"

"Buddy, I'm not interested in your love-life, I wanna get through here to see if I can find her—"

"Hey, come back here!"

The agony of that wild, headlong plunge into car after car, calling: "Nova! Nova!" from the vestibule of each one. No sign of her. Upstairs again at a mile a minute, nearly knocking over the gateman a second time—eight minutes to train-time now.

At the ticket-window, "Two for the Coast—O'Shaughnessy—were they picked up?"

"Nope, here they are waiting for you."

Uncalled for! She never got here, then! Seven minutes to find her, in a city of four million people! Outside again, and looking around him dazed. Dazed—and dangerous—and yet helpless. Ready to give this town something to be tough about, but not knowing where to start in—Instinctively touching the rabbit's foot, that habit of his. And then—like a genie at the summons of Aladdin's lamp—a redcap, haphazardly accosting him in line of duty. One out of the dozens swarming all over the place, but the right one, the right one out of all of them!

"Cab, boss?"

"No. Wait, George—blonde lady, big droopy hat, did you see anyone like that drive up here at all the past half-hour or so?"

"Li'l dog with a haircut 'cepting on its ankles?"

“Yes! Yes!” He grabs the guy by both shoulders. “Hurry up and tell me, for Pete’s sake!”

The redcap show’s his teeth.

“That sho’ was a dirty trick that lady have played on her. She done come away without bringin’ no change fo’ her cab-fare, and the driver he wouldn’t listen to her no-how, he turn around and take her to the police station.”

“Which?”

“Neares’ one, I reckon.”

And there she is when he tears in a couple minutes later, sitting on a bench under the desk-sergeant’s eye, dog and all. Driver, too.

“We’ve been trying to reach you, young fellow.” The sergeant clears his throat meaningly, winks at O’Shaughnessy to show he won’t give him away. Wife starting on a vacation, somebody else answering the phone; *he* understands. “Couldn’t seem to get you.”

“How much is it? We’ve got a train to make.”

“Two dollas and twenny cents,” says the driver.

“Here it is. And here’s a little something extra—” Wham! and the driver nearly brings down the rear wall of the room as he lands into it.

Then he’s outside with her again, minus dog and pillows now, in another machine, tearing back to the station. Three minutes to spare. He doesn’t notice as he jumps down that die cab ahead of theirs, the one that’s just pulled into the driveway before them, has a shattered windshield.

They don’t have to be mind-readers, these others, to figure out where he and she will head for. If they’re on their way out of town, that means one of the stations. They’ve cased the La Salle Street Station first, now this one.

He starts her through the big vaulted place at a quick trot. Then suddenly a shout somewhere behind them, “There they are!” and five men are streaming in after them, one with a bloody bandage over his head.

O’Shaughnessy daren’t shoot; the station’s alive with people crisscrossing the line of fire. His pursuers can’t either; not that the risk of hitting somebody else would deter them, but they’re sprinting after him too fast to stop for aim. A redcap goes keeling over, and one of the rodmen topples over a piece of hand-luggage the porter dropped, goes sliding across the smooth floor on his stomach. And above it all the amplifier blaring out remorselessly, “Coast Limited—Kansas City—Denver—Salt Lake City—San Francisco! ’Board!”

He wedges her through the closing barrier, throws the tickets at the gate-man. A shot, and looking back he can see the uniformed figure at the gate toppling, even while the gateman still tries to wedge it closed. A young riot is taking place back there, shouts, scuffling, station-guards’ clubs swinging. But one figure squeezes through, detaches itself, comes darting after him, gun out. Tereshko.

O’Shaughnessy shoves her into a car vestibule. “Get on, kid. Be right with you.” The train is already giving its first few preliminary hitches—forward.

Tereshko’s gun flames out as he comes on; the shot hits the L of El Dorado, the Pullman’s gold-lettered name, slowly slipping past behind O’Shaughnessy’s back. Tereshko never has a chance for another shot. O’Shaughnessy closes in bare-handed; his fist swings out, meets Tereshko half way as he crashes into it, lands him spread-eagled on the platform. The gun goes flying up in a foreshortened arc, comes down again with a clank, and fires innocuously.

O’Shaughnessy flicks him a derisive salute from over one ear. “I gotta make a train, or I’d stay and do it right!” He turns and catches the handrail of the next-to-the-last vestibule as it glides by, swings himself aboard. Tereshko stands staring blurredly down his own nose at the dwindling observation-platform of the Coast Limited.

O’Shaughnessy sinks wearily down in the seat beside Nova, and as she shrinks into the protective angle of his

outstretched arm, he tells her grimly: “You’re O’Shaughnessy’s girl for keeps. Let ’em try to take you away from me now!”

VIII

O’Shaughnessy, minutes after his Bellanca has kissed the hard-packed earth of the Shanghai municipal airport, is already on one of the airport phones asking for the Broadway Mansions. Seven weeks out of Shanghai, seven weeks back in the red mountains of Szechuan, China’s “wild west” piloting the great General Yang around, dropping a few well-placed bombs for him, and trans-shipping machine-gun parts inland from below Ichang, which is as far as the river boats can go. No commission in Yang’s fighting-forces, nothing like that—just his own crate, his own neck, payment in American gold dollars, and a leave of absence whenever he feels like it, which happens to be right now. Seven weeks is a plenty long time.

He’s still in the crumpled slacks and greasy khaki shirt he left the interior in, but under them a triple-tiered money-belt, twice around the chest and once across the waist, packed with good solid chunky gold eagles, outlawed at home now but as good as ever over here. Fifteen-thousand dollars’ worth; two thousand a week salary, and a thousand bonus for obliterating

a caterpillar-tank that General Yang didn’t like the looks of. Not bad, two thousand a week. But seven weeks is still a long time, any way you look at it.

Her voice comes over the wire throbbing with expectancy; every time it’s rung she’s hoped it was he—and now at last it is.

“O’Shaughnessy.” A love song in one word. She’s never called him by anything but that.

“Just grounded. I’ve brought back fifteen-thousand-worth of red paint with me. Turn the shower on, lay out my dude-clothes, and get ready for a celebration!”

He just lingers long enough to see his plane put to bed properly, then grabs a cab at the airport-gate. “The Settlement,” and forgetting that he’s not inland any more, that Shanghai’s snappier than Chicago, “Chop-chop.”

“Sure, Mike,” grins the slant-eyed driver. “Hop in.”

A change has come over the city since he went away, he can feel that the minute they hit the outskirts, clear the congested native sections, and cross the bridge into the Settlement. Shanghai is already tuning-up for its oncoming doom, without knowing it. A city dancing on the brink of the grave. There’s an electric tension in the air, the place never seemed so gay, so hectic, as tonight; the roads opening off the Bund a welter of blinking, flashing neon lights, in ideographs and Latin letters alike, as far as the eye can see. Traffic hopelessly snarled at every crossing, cops piping on their whistles, packed sidewalks, the blare of saxophones coming from taxi-dance mills, and overhead the feverish Oriental stars competing with intercrossed searchlight-beams from some warships or other on the Whang-poo. Just about the right town and the right night to have fifteen thousand bucks in, all at one time.

He says: “Hold it, Sam,” in front of a jewelry-store on Bubbling Well Road, lopes in, comes out again with a diamond solitaire in his pocket.

The skyscraper Mansions shows up, he vaults out, counts windows up to the tenth floor, three over from the corner. Brightly lighted, waiting for him. Shies a five-dollar bill at the driver.

The elevator seems to crawl up; he feels like getting out and pushing. A pair of Englishmen stare down their noses

at his waste-rag outfit. The rush of her footsteps on one side of the door matches his long stride on the other.

"I'd recognize your step with cotton in my ears!"

"Watch it, you'll get fuel-oil all over you!"

They go in together in a welter of disjointed expressions, such as any pair might utter. "I thought you were never coming back this time!"

"Boy, you certainly made time getting dressed. All set to go, aren't you?" As a matter of fact she isn't, it's her gloves that mislead him. She has on a shimmery silver dress, but no shoes. Her hair is still down too.

He laughs. "What do you do, put on your gloves before your shoes?" A shadow of something passes across her face. Instantly she's smiling again. "Just knowing you were back got me so rattled—"

He takes a quick shower, jumps into his best suit. Comes in on her just as she is struggling into a pair of silver dancing-shoes—just in time to catch the expression of livid agony on her pretty face. She quickly banishes it.

"Matter—too tight? Wear another pair—"

"No, no, it isn't that. They're right for me—my feet got a little swollen wearing those Chinese things all day."

He lets it go. "Come on, where'll it be? Astor House, American Club, Jockey Club?" He laughs again as she drenches herself with expensive perfume, literally empties the bottle over herself. "Incidentally, I think we'll move out of here. Something seems to be the matter with the drains in this apartment, you can notice a peculiar musty odor inside there—decay—"

The haunted look of a doomed thing flickers in her eyes. She takes his arm with desperate urgency. "Let's—let's go. Let's get out into the open, O'Shaughnessy. It's such a lovely night, and you're back, and—life is so short!"

That air of electric tension, of a great city on the edge of an abyss, is more noticeable than ever at the White Russian cabaret called, not inappropriately, "New York." You

wouldn’t know you were in China. An almond-eyed platinum-blonde has just finished wailing, with a Mott Street accent, “You’re gonna lose your gal.”

O’Shaughnessy leads Nova back to the table apologizing. “I knew I wasn’t cut out for dancing, but I didn’t know how bad I was until I got a look at your face just now. All screwed up like you were on the rack. Kid, why didn’t you speak up—”

“It wasn’t you, O’Shaughnessy,” she gasps faintly. “My—my feet are killing me—”

“Well, I’ve got something here that’ll cure that. We don’t get together often, Mrs. O’Shaughnessy, but when we do—the sky’s the limit.” He takes the three-thousand-dollar ring out of his pocket, blows on it, shows it to her. “Take off your glove, honey, and lemme see how this headlight looks on your finger—”

Her face is a white, anguished mask. He reaches toward her right hand. “Go ahead, take the glove off.”

The tense, frightened way she snatches it back out of his reach gives her away. He tumbles. The smile slowly leaves his face. “What’s the matter—don’t you want my ring? You trying to cover up something with those gloves? You fixed your hair with them on, you powdered your nose with them on—What’s under them? Take ’em off, let me see.”

“No, O’Shaughnessy. No!”

His voice changes. “I’m your husband, Nova. Take off those gloves and let me see your hands!”

She looks around her agonized. “Not here, O’Shaughnessy! Oh, not here!”

She sobs deep in her throat, even as she struggles with one glove. Her eyes are wet, pleading. “One more night, give me one more night,” she whispers brokenly. “You’re leaving Shanghai again in such a little while. Don’t ask to see my hands. O’Shaughnessy, if you love me . . .”

The glove comes off, flops loosely over, and there’s suddenly horror beating into his brain, smashing, pounding,

battering. He reels a little in his chair, has to hold onto the edge of the table with both hands, at the impact of it.

A clawlike thing—two of the finger extremities already bare of flesh as far as the second joint; two more with only shriveled, bloodless, rotting remnants of it adhering, only the thumb intact, and that already unhealthy-looking, flabby. A dead hand—the hand of a skeleton—on a still-living body. A body he was dancing with only a few minutes ago.

A rank odor, a smell of decay, of the grave and of the tomb, hovers about the two of them now.

A woman points from the next table, screams. She's seen it, too. She hides her face, cowers against her companion's shoulder, shudders. Then he sees it too. His collar's suddenly too tight for him.

Others see it, one by one. A wave of impalpable horror spreads centrifugally from that thing lying there in the blazing electric light on O'Shaughnessy's table. The skeleton at the feast!

She says forlornly, in the stunned stillness: "You wanted me to wear your ring, O'Shaughnessy—" and slips it over that denuded bone protruding like a knobby spine from her hand. Loosely, like a hoop, it falls down to the base of the thing, hangs there, flashing prismatically, an inconceivable horror. Diamonds for the dead.

The spell breaks; the glitter of the diamond perhaps does it, shattering his hypnosis, freeing him. So lifelike there, so out of place. Not a word has passed between them, but for that one lament of hers. He seizes her to him suddenly, their two chairs go over, their champagne glasses crash to the floor. He pulls out a wing of his coat, wraps it concealingly around the thing that was once her hand, clutches it to him, hurries her out of the place, his arm protectively about her. The flash of a silver dress, a whiff of gardenia, a hint of moldy, overturned earth, as they go by, and the dead has been removed from among the living. The ring drops off the

insufficient bone-sliver that carries it, rolls unheeded across the floor.

"Not so fast, O'Shaughnessy," she pleads brokenly. "My feet too—they're that way. My knees. My side, where the ribs are. It's coming out all over me."

And then, in the cab hurtling them through the mocking constellations that were the Bund an hour ago, she says: "Life was swell, though, while it lasted. Just knowing you has made—well, everything."

He says again what he said before: "No one is going to take you away from me!"

The English doctor says, "Looks rather bad, y'know, old man." O'Shaughnessy, white-lipped, growls out something . . .

The *German* doctor says, "Neffer before haff I such a thing seen. This case will become zenzational—"

"The case will, but what about her, that's what I want to know?"

"My *gut* man—"

"I get it. Send the bill around—!"

The American doctor says, "There's just a slim chance—what you might call a thousand-to-one shot, that chaulmoogra oil might benefit her."

"I thought you said it wasn't leprosy?"

"It isn't. It may be some Chinese disease none of us ever heard of before. She seems to be *dying alive*. Her bodily functions are unimpaired, the X-rays show; whatever it is seems to be striking on the surface. If it continues unchecked—and there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to stop it—the whole skeletal structure will be revealed—you'll have an animated corpse on your hands! And then of course . . . death." The French doctor—the French, they are a very logical race and make good doctors—says: "M'sieu, they have all been on the wrong track—" O'Shaughnessy's wan face lights up. "What can you tell me?"

“I can tell you only this: there is no hope. Your wife is lost to you. If you are a merciful man—I do not give you this advice as doctor, I give it to you as one husband to another—you will go to one of the opium houses of Chapei, buy a quantity sufficient for *two* at least—”

O’Shaughnessy says in a muffled voice, “I’m no quitter. I’ll beat this rap.

There’s pity in the Frenchman’s face. “Go to Chapei, *mon ami*. Go tonight. I say this for the sake of your own sanity. Your mind will crumble at the sight of what it will have to behold in a few more weeks.”

O’Shaughnessy says the name of his Maker twice, puts his arm up swiftly over his face. The doctor’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder. “I can see what led them astray, the others. They sought for disease. There is no disease there. No malady. No infection. It is not that; it is the state of death, itself, that has her. How shall I say? This flesh that rots, drops away, is, paradoxically, healthy tissue. My microscopes do not lie. Just as, let us say, a person who has been shot dead by a bullet is otherwise a healthy person. But he lies in his grave and nature dissolves his flesh. That is what we have here. The effect without the cause—”

O’Shaughnessy raises his head after a while, gets up, moves slowly toward the door. “You, at least,” he says, ‘are a square shooter. All right, medical science tells me she’s as good as dead. I’m not licked yet. There’s a way.” The doctor shrugs gloomily. “How? What way is there? Lourdes, you are thinking of?”

“An awful way,” O’Shaughnessy says, “but a way.”

He stumbles out into the bright sunlight of the Concession, roams around hopelessly. Along the Avenue of the Two Republics, bordering the French Concession, he finds himself beginning to tremble all over, suddenly.

Fear! Fear again, for the first time since his ’teens. Fear, that he thought he would never know any more. Fear that no weapon, no jeopardy, no natural cataclysm, has ever

been able to inspire until now. And now here it is running icily through him in the hot Chinese noon. Fear for the thing he loves, the only fear that can ever wholly cow the reckless and the brave.

Fear of the Way, the Way that he mentioned to the doctor. Fear of the implication involved in it. A mad voice howling in the darkness sounds in his ears again: "You'll come crawling back to me, begging me to help! *That'll be my hour!*" Oh, not that his own life will assuredly be forfeit as part of the bargain, that isn't what makes him tremble. Nor any amount of pain and horror that vindictive mania can devise. He can stand it with a smile, to give her an hour, a day, or a week of added life. It's what will come after, what she must face alone without him, once he's out of the way. The barbed-wire fence—cooped up with a madman; kept trapped like an animal in a cage, after having known the world. Better if he'd left her as he'd found her . . .

But that's the Way, and there is no other. And once his mind's made up, the trembling and aimless walking stops, and he can look doom in the face without flinching.

He has their boat-tickets in his pocket when he goes back to the Mansions. All down the corridor, from the elevator-shaft to their door, there's that cloying odor of perfumery—to conceal another, different one.

She's propped up in bed, a native *amah* sitting by her fanning her. He stops short in surprise. The screwy clock of this bedevilment seems to have spun backward again to that awful night, when he first came out of the interior—and didn't know yet. For she's beautiful there, composed, placid again, expressionless as a wax doll, the stigma of the knowledge of approaching doom erased from her face.

"The mask came," she says through it, in a slightly resonant voice. Her own features, reproduced by a clever Chinese craftsman, at her terrified request—before anything happens to them. Not for herself, this, for the man who stands there looking at her—the man whom life and

love have laughed at, the man to whom life and love and laughter, too, have been denied.

He gestures the Chinese woman out of the room.

When they're alone Nova asks, as tonelessly as though she were asking what the weather was like, "Any hope?"

"Not here." It's not the first time it's been asked and answered that way, so there's no shock to it any more.

He sees a small canvas bag upon the table beside her bed. "What's that?"

"Another agent of Yang was here while you were out. He left this bag of gold, and a thinly veiled threat that your tea will be bitter if you don't report back soon. They think you've run out on them. Better go back, O'Shaughnessy."

"Not a chance, darling. I've sold my plane. We're taking the early morning boat back to the States. I'm taking you back to Denholt."

She is silent for a long minute. He can see her shivering through the thick, brocaded, Chinese jacket, pretty much the way he was, out in the sun-baked streets.

He sits down close beside her. "You've knocked around with me now for almost a year. You've talked to lots of other girls your age. You must have found out by now that none of them learned to walk and talk as late as you did. Something happened to you, and there's only one man alive knows what it was and what's to be done about it. Those injections —can't you see that he was keeping you alive in some way? It's our only chance, we've got to go back there, we've got to get more of his stuff." And bitterly, as he hauls out a valise and tosses up the lid, "O'Shaughnessy wasn't so smart. O'Shaughnessy knows when he's licked . . .

Down the Whangpoo to the Yangtse, and out into the China Sea. A race against time now. A race against death. And the odds are so tall against them. The widest body of water in the world to cross. Then a whole continent afterward from west to east. Three weeks at the very least. Can she hold out that long by sheer will-power? Or have

they waited too long, like fools? Then too, how can he be sure there is help waiting at the end of the long journey, even the help that they both dread so? Suppose Denholt is gone. How to locate him again in time? He may be in a strait jacket at this very moment, unable to tell a serum from a split of White Rock. The odds are pretty steep. But—at least there *are* odds.

She sits in a deck-chair covered up to her chin in a steamer-rug; her beautiful masked face above it never smiles, never frowns, never changes—just the eyes alive and the voice. He haunts the chart that marks their daily progress. Comes back to it a hundred times a day, says prayers before it while it lengthens a pitiful notch at a time, in red ink across the graph.

Kobe. Bad news. A Japanese English-language paper has picked up the story from something that must have come out in Shanghai after they left. Fright sounds through the mask. "It's—it's leaked out already. Here. Beautiful girl stricken with living death. First case of its kind on record. Being rushed home by husband—' "

She makes a small, plaintive sound. "Don't you see? The papers in America will pick it up, follow it through, play it up. And your name's here. *They*, whoever they were, they'll know it means us, they'll find out we're coming back. They'll be waiting for us to land, they'll—we'll never make it. Oh, let's turn back, O'Shaughnessy! Let me die in China—what's the difference where it is? I've brought you enough grief, don't let me be the cause of—"

He takes her in his arms and holds her tight. "You don't seem to think much of my ability to take care of us."

She makes a thoughtless gesture to reach out and clasp his hand understanding^; but she remembers and draws the gloved claw back again.

Days pass. The story has circulated now, and turned the ship into a buzzing beehive of curiosity. People find excuses to go by her on the deck, just so they can turn and stare.

O’Shaughnessy overhears two men bet that she won’t reach Frisco alive. She tries to smoke a cigarette through the lips of the mask one afternoon, to buoy up his spirits a little. Smoke comes out at her hair-line, under her chin, before her ears. A steward drops a loaded bouillon-tray at the sight of her. Nova stays in her cabin after that.

IX

Three thousand years later they’re at Honolulu. Leis and steel-guitars above deck; and below, something that scarcely stirs, that lies still now, saturated with cologne, smothered with fresh-cut flowers as though she were already on her bier. It’s too painful to force the fleshless footbones to support her tottering body any more, even swathed in bandages, except for a few moments at a time. Reporters try to get in to see her; O’Shaughnessy has to swing his fists to get them to keep their distance.

Out to sea again, on the last leg of the trip. Sometimes he bends down, whispers low, like a prizefighter’s second in his corner when the bout’s going against him: “You can make it. Just a little longer, honey. Do it for O’Shaughnessy.” Sometimes, in the depths of night, he goes up on the boatdeck, shakes his fist—at what? The ship, the limitless ocean, the elusive horizon that never comes any nearer, the stars overhead that don’t give a rap?

The rabbit’s paw has hardly been out of his palm the whole way over. All the pelt’s worn off it with his stroking. His thumb has developed an ineradicable habit of turning inward on itself, circling his palm. “You and me,” he says to it grimly. “We’ll do the trick.”

Frisco at last. And as the anchor plunges into the waters of the bay—they’ve made it—! The three of them, he and

she and the rabbit's foot. There's still a voice behind that mask—faltering, weak, but alive. Still living eyes behind those immobile eyeholes with their double tier of lashes—real and artificial.

He's wirelessed ahead from the Islands for a cabin plane, and it's tuned up and waiting at the airport over in Oakland. He gets Nova through the gang of reporters clogging the deck, has her carried down the gangplank on a stretcher while flashlights go off around her like a constellation. Into a car outside the Customs House, while the newsmen like a pack of hounds in full cry swarm around them, yapping. But there's one man who doesn't pepper him with questions, doesn't say a word—just takes a good look at the beautiful graven face being transferred from stretcher to car, and then dives into the nearest phone-booth. O'Shaughnessy isn't near enough to overhear him ask for long-distance . . .

And then the plane, with a relief pilot to spell O'Shaughnessy. Up and due east. "And we don't come down again for snow or rain or fog or engine-trouble until you hit Louisville," says O'Shaughnessy.

All through the day they hurl through space. "You got that Kentucky map I asked you to get hold of?"

He locates the mountain on it finally, draws a big ring around it. "Here's where we come down, inside that circle."

"But on what? How do we know what's there? It'll be dark long before we make it," the relief pilot protests.

"Here's where we come down," is O'Shaughnessy's remorseless answer, "if we splinter into match-wood. Here, right on the perimeter, where this feeder branches off from the trunk-highway on the west and climbs up. That's as close as we can get."

"Radio ahead, contact one of the towns near there to have something waiting for you at that point, otherwise you may be held up for hours."

"Yeah, that's it," nods O'Shaughnessy. He starts calling the county seat.

Nova shakes her head, He bends down close to hear what she wants to say. “That may bring *them* down on us, if you mention the place—tip them off where we’re going to land.”

“How can they beat our time in, unless they’re already somewhere around there?”

“But that’s it, they may be. You wirelessed him from Honolulu and mentioned a chart of this one county. They may have intercepted that message. They’re likely to be within reach of your set, and this’ll bring them right to the exact spot.”

“Then that’ll bring them grief!” is all he says. He fiddles with the dials. “Hello, Wellsville? This is a private chartered plane coming your way, with a desperately ill passenger on board. We need ground transport badly . . .”

“Hello, this is Wellsville. This is Wellsville. There are no facilities here.”

“I’m not asking for hospitalization. All I want is ground transport. I want a car where Route 19 bisects the highway.”

“Well—I dunno—”

“Have you been reading the papers lately?” O’Shaughnessy barks. “This is Penny O’Shaughnessy—Yes, yes, the ‘Dying-Alive Girl,’ if you insist! Now do I get a car at that particular spot?”

“I’ll start out now.”

“We don’t want any publicity. Come alone. We should be there by ten. Tilt your headlights upward to guide us, keep snapping them off and on at two minute intervals, we’re going to have to land in pitch-darkness. If we live through it, be ready to start off at a moment’s notice. Don’t let us down, there’s a human life at stake. This is her last chance.”

Louisville, an hour after dark, is a carpet of gilt thumb-tacks below them, with straight, twinkling lines like strings of beads leading out from it. Southeastward now, toward the Tennessee state-line.

At nine a continuous line of little pinpoints, stretched straight as an arrow, shows up below. They follow it, flying so low now the twinkling lights of an occasional car crawling along it seems to be right under them. Then, in thirty, forty minutes, a firefly down there in the dark fields, going off, on, off, on.

O'Shaughnessy clutches his pilot jubilantly by the shoulder. "See it? Here, gimme the controls—I *couldn't* go wrong, not this late in the game!"

Around and around in a narrowing spiral. Then way out, and around, and in again in a straight swoop that barely seems to skim the roof of the waiting car. "Hold on!" he warns, and slaps the pocket holding the rabbit's foot. The earth comes up flat like a blackboard. A jolt, a rise, a dip, another bump, a short stretch of wobbly taxiing, a shudder, and he cuts off his engine.

The car, waiting off across the field, has lowered its headlights to guide them. Carrying her between them they waver toward it up a thinly-talcumed path of light-motes. A rail fence shows up. "All right, driver! You in the car!" shouts O'Shaughnessy. "Come out here and give us a hand over this!"

A figure jumps out, hurries to meet them on the outside of the fence.

They ease her over the top rail, the newcomer holding her in both arms until O'Shaughnessy can scramble over and relieve him.

They pass her into the back of the car. Then suddenly, a dark motionless outline shows up a little way up the side-road, under shadowing trees that all but blot it out—materializes into a second car, unlighted, stalled, apparently deserted.

The plane pilot, who has been standing off to one side, looking on, cries out: "Hey, there's a guy lying here at the side of the road, out—"

“Take it easy, pal,” an unseen voice purrs. An orange hyphen flicks toward the pilot from somewhere just behind the car. A report shatters the crossroads’ stillness, and the pilot leans over toward the road, as though he saw a coin lying there and was languidly about to pick it up.

O’Shaughnessy doesn’t wait for him to complete the fall. He whirls back toward Nova, flings out his arms to keep her from going into this car that is a trap. The blurred oval of a second face, not that of the man who helped to carry her to it, looms at him in the dark, above her body.

“No you don’t,” a voice says blandly, “she’s coming with us—we’re taking up where we left off that night—and she ain’t fooling us this time!”

A second red-orange spearhead leaps straight at O’Shaughnessy. The whole world seems to stand still. Then the gun behind it crashes, and there’s a cataclysm of pain all over him, and a shock goes through him as if he ran head-on into a stone wall.

A voice from the car says blur redly, while the ground rushes up to meet him, “Finish him up, you guys! I’m getting so I don’t trust their looks no more, no matter how stiff they act!”

Three comets seem to dart down at him as he lies there on the ground. Asphalt-grits fly up beside his skull. A hot wire creases his side while something that feels like a mallet pounds his shoulder. He can feel his mouth opening; he must be trying to say something.

Far away, from some low-flying soundless plane in the skies, a pair of voices reach him. “Did you hear where they were headed for?”

“Yeah, and it sounds like a swell idea—”

High up over him the chattering motor swells into a roar, the air he is trying to breathe is sucked away from him along the ground, grit and road-dust swirl over him. God, they’re flying low! What’re they trying to do—? Looking down his own body he can see a red light poised

momentarily on the toe of his shoe. Then it dips below it, and it's gone. And he's alone there, with the unconscious pilot lying a little way off for company, and some other guy he's never even seen, only spoken to over the radio.

He wants to sleep so badly—dying they call it—and he can't. Something's bothering him to keep him awake. Something that won't let him alone. Not about Nova, not about the still pilot either. Something about this other, strange guy.

And then he remembers. The guy has a car, that's what it is. The guy brought a car here. The guy is dead now, but the car is still standing there, back a little ways under some trees. He saw it himself.

He's got to get into that car. He may be half-dead, but cars don't die; it'll get him wherever he wants to go, good as ever. And where he wants to go is just where Nova is, no matter where.

He rolls over on his face first. And a lot of hot wet stuff comes out on his shoulder and his chest and hip. That makes everything come alive again and hurt like blazes. He starts pulling himself around the other way, with his good arm and shoulder for a propeller, like something maimed that ought to be put out of its misery with a big stick.

Then when he gets all the way around in a half circle, there's the car, with the pilot and the other guy for milestones leading to it. He starts dragging himself toward it. He can tell it's no use trying to get up on his feet.

He comes up to the pilot first, rests full length beside him a minute, reaches out, shakes him a little.

Frazier moans a little—almost a bleat—stirs a little.

O'Shaughnessy inches on toward the car. Like a caterpillar goes, contracting in the middle, expanding again, contracting, expanding. Like a caterpillar someone's stepped on, though. He leaves a moist trail behind him along the asphalt roadbed.

It’s easy to rear up as high as the running-board, but above that there’s a long unbroken stretch of glossy tonneau up to the door-handle. He makes it, on the heels of his hands and the points of his elbows, using them for grips, like vacuumcups. The window’s down, luckily, and a hand on the sill of the frame keeps him up. He falls, sprawling, into the seat.

Light funnels out of the dead headlights again, across the two men on the ground. He jockeys slowly around, then straightens out.

The rush of air through the open windows clears some of the cobwebs from his bullet-stunned mind. He knows where they went, and where to follow. “Did you hear where they were heading for?” the first voice had said. And the second answered, “Sounds like a swell idea.”

The dirt-packed mountain-detour branches off at last, and the new-made treads of the car ahead are plainly visible along it. It’s a hard trail to tackle, with just one good arm to steady the wheel by, and a grade like a loose plank tilted before your face, and obscuring branches and foliage whistling in at you through the windows.

The barbed-wire fence starts up beside him after awhile. He wonders if Denholt still lives behind it. The scooped-out hollows of their ruts are still before him, plain as day, and broken branches hanging down at right-angles. The fence suddenly crumples into the ground, and a big gap torn in it where the gate used to be, where he remembers it, shows him how they got in.

He turns in after them, brakes only when their own car, broad side to him, blocks further progress. Beyond, the house shows palely against his partly-deflected headlights. He gets out, bangs the car door after him out of habit, lurches over to their car, steadies himself against it for a moment. Caution is for the healthy. He laughs sort of crazily and stamps onto the wooden porch. He hangs onto the

door-frame for a minute, then goes on through the unguarded opening.

They haven't even closed the door after them, they're so sure they've left all opposition dead behind them where the highway crosses Route 19. That white light from the laboratory is streaming out to guide him. They're in there, all of them; he can hear their voices as he comes draggingly nearer. One voice, raised above the others, strident, threatening.

"Don't tell us you don't know what we mean! Why the barbed-wire fence and all the trimmings, if it ain't around here somewhere? Why was the Brown girl, here, heading this way so fast with that guy she calls her husband? And a nifty place, if there ever was one! Here we was thinking it was somewhere down in the Florida keys all the time! That's just like the Boss, goes off on a cruise in one direction to cover up, sends the do-re-mi in another. He was always smart that way, always doing things like that. Now *you* be smart."

"There's no money here. I don't know who you are, what brings you here, but there's no money here. Only the—the results of a lifetime of—For God's sake, be careful!"

That's Denholt's voice. Already O'Shaughnessy has reached the threshold by now and stands there looking in at them like an apparition, unnoticed. Their backs are all to him, even Nova's, gripped cruelly between two of them, held upright. Only Denholt is facing his way, at bay against the far wall.

Even from behind, O'Shaughnessy can spot one of those backs, Tereshko.

X

He is standing near a retort filled with colorless fluid; as Denholt's frantic warning singles it out, his elbow has just grazed it, caused it to teeter. The plea has exactly the opposite effect it was intended to; it is something precious to that old crank standing there before him, so his impulse is to destroy it forthwith. He deliberately completes the shove, sweeps it off the trestle it rests on. "Nuts with all this junk y'got here! This is a phony front. Who y'think y'kidding?"

The retort shivers into pieces on the floor. Its contents flood out, spread, dissipate beyond recovery.

Denholt lets out a hoarse, anguished cry. And leaps at the wanton destroyer of his whole life's work. Tereshko's gun raps out almost perfunctorily; smoke blooms between them; Denholt staggers, turns around the other way, then goes down to his knees slowly like a penitent in prayer.

They hear him say, in the brief silence: "Yes, it's better this way—now." Then he falls forward on his face.

O'Shaughnessy's leap for Tereshko crashes through the rear-guard, sends the four behind Tereshko lurching off-balance. Nova released, totters aside, keeps herself from falling against the edge of the operating table. They whirl, see who faces them and forget, in their utter disbelief, to use their guns. Tereshko goes down backward, his neck caught in the grip of O'Shaughnessy's arm, while the Irishman's other fist is pounding, flailing, slashing, into the side of Tereshko's head and ribs.

The struggle doesn't last long; it's too unequal. Their momentary surprise overcome, they close in on him. The well-directed slice of a gun-butt slackens the good arm; it's easy to pry the disabled one from around the racketeer's collar.

Tereshko is trembling with his anger. "Now *him* again!" he protests, as though at an injustice. "All they do is die and then get up and walk around again! What'sa matter, you

guys using spitballs for slugs? No, don't kick at him, that'll never do it—I think the guy has nine lives!"

"Wait!" The mask has spoken, and they turn in awe at the impassive face looking at them. Face that lies now if it never did before—so calm, so untroubled, so serene, at the scene before it. "What is it you want of us—of me? Why do you hound us like this? What have we ever done to you?"

Tereshko sneers, "You're Benedetto's girl, ain't you? You're Jane Brown, ain't you? *You* oughta know what we want of you. We did his dirty work for seven long years, you just come in on the pay-off at the end. Where's the profits of those seven years, when two bits out of every fifty-cent glass of beer drunk east of the Mississippi went into his pockets? Where's the million and a quarter dollars in gold and Federal Reserve notes that dropped from sight when he was arrested?"

"I never saw or knew Benedetto," says the mask slowly.

"You lying tomato! I'm looking right at the face he used to kiss in front of all of us. I'm looking right at the face that stood in a diamond frame on his bureau, every time I went in there to make a report. I'm hearing the voice that used to call him Benny-boy, I'm seeing the eyes that cried when he got sent away—Oh no! You're Jane Brown, all right."

Gloved hands rise from the enfolding cloak, undo tiny straps behind the ears, below the golden hair on top of the head. "Look closer still—and tell me if I'm Benedetto's girl—if I'm Jane Brown!" The face drops off—a shell—and yet repeats itself, identical, still unravaged, only paler, beneath.

They gasp in surprise. And then in the midst of a deep silence, Tereshko says: "All right, that's a mask—so what?" but his voice trembles a little.

Her hands flutter up and down the cloak-fastenings, seize it to throw it open. "Look closer," she says, "and tell me if you know me!"

"No, Nova—don't!" O'Shaughnessy cries from the floor.

She says softly: “Close your eyes, O’Shaughnessy, and keep them closed, if you love me. For no love could survive this—no love in all the world.” Dumbly obedient, he holds his hands there in front of his eyes. A rustle of Nova’s cloak, a swirl of air as it flies back. A choking sound from someone near him. A gun thudding to the floor. Then a wild, terrible scream—a sudden rush of feet, five pairs of them, around and past him and toward the door. A stampede of mortal terror.

“Get away from me! What—are you?”

Above it all, her voice, serene, sepulchral. “Now—am I Benedetto’s girl—am I anyone’s girl any more?”

Across the wooden floor of the front of the house rushes the retreat of scuffling shoe-leather. A door bangs. The motor of their car comes to life—gears clash and scream. The car sound dies away—then suddenly comes a far-off crash carried thinly on the still night. One dim, final cry of pain and death—and dead silence drops at last like a curtain on a play. Within the room, for long minutes, there is no movement.

“They must have gone off the road,” O’Shaughnessy says tautly. His hands fall from before his eyes, and Nova’s cloak is closed again. How close to death she must be, he thinks, to drive the living to their own deaths in wild flight just from the look of her.

A gun, dropped there on the laboratory floor, is all that’s left of them.

O’Shaughnessy toes it aside and it skitters across the room. Painfully, inch by inch, he hauls himself over beside Denholt, lifts the scientist’s head and shoulders in his arms. Denholt’s eyes, still alive, turn toward him.

O’Shaughnessy’s voice rasps like a file. “You’ve got to save her. Got to! Kill me if I’ve wronged you—but I’ve brought her back to you—you’re the only one who can do anything . . . Denholt, can you hear me?”

The dying man nods, points helplessly to the shattered retort, the evaporating stain on the floor.

"Was that it—?" O'Shaughnessy shakes him wildly in his fright. "There must be more. That can't be all! Can't you tell me how to make more?" A sigh filters through the parted lips. "No time."

"Haven't you got it written down?"

A feeble shake of the head. "Afraid to—Jealous someone else would steal it from me—"

O'Shaughnessy's bony hands claw at Denholt's shoulders. "But you can't mean—that she's got to die. That there isn't anything you with your knowledge or I with my love can do for her—anything at all—?" Something, like a cold hand, closes his throat. Something else, like little needles, pricks his eyes until the lashes are moistened. Nova, standing there motionless, slowly droops her head.

A thin tensile hand grips O'Shaughnessy's arm to arrest his attention. A hand that must have been very strong once. "Wait. Lean down closer, so you can hear me—I was filling a hypo—for one of the rabbits—when they broke in. I don't remember what became—Look around, see if you can find it—Enough for one injection, if it's intact—hurry, it's getting dark, I'm going fast."

But before he does look for it, before he makes a move, he remembers to touch that mascot in his pocket, the rabbit's foot. "Help me," he says to her then, "you know what it looks like, you used to see enough of them—" She raises her head, steps aside—and there it is behind her, lying on the operating table. A precious liquid glinting within its transparent barrel.

Then he's down again beside the dying man, holding it before his dimming eyes.

"Yes, that's it. All there is left now. It'll be lost forever in a few more minutes when I go. I'm taking it with me—after what I've seen tonight of human nature, too much power

for evil in it—it's better, for our own sakes, the way Nature ordered it—"

"Shall I lift you up, do you think you can stand long enough to—"

"No time." He motions to Nova, weakly. She draws near. "Recline on the floor here, where I can reach you—" Then to O'Shaughnessy, "Sweep the hair from the base of her head. Hold my arm at the elbow, steady it—"

The needle falls, emptied.

O'Shaughnessy murmurs, staring dully at the floor: "A month more—this'll give her. Maybe I'm a fool to have done it. What torture that month is going to be—knowing now our only chance is gone. Well, maybe that French doctor was right . . .

Again that hand on his arm. "Listen—She will be ill, very ill, for twenty-four hours. The reaction. Keep ice packed around her until the temperature goes down. Then—after that—the injection will arrest it for a while. It can't mend what's already happened—but it will give you that one month. Maybe a little—longer. I am sorry that I can't give you more—or any real hope at all."

Then whatever was human and compassionate in Denholt dies out, and the scientist replaces the man. "I want you to know why I failed. I must tell someone. I brought everything in her to life—but the blood. That was dead, stayed dead. As it circulated in her veins it carried death through her body. The injections I gave her held that flowing decay at bay—no more.

"I didn't realize that—I do now. The chemical composition of the blood changed in death—nothing I have done restored it. It would always defeat the serum—eventually. She was not really alive in her own right; she was being kept alive by a sort of artificial combustion introduced into her system at periodic intervals."

O'Shaughnessy's eyes glare dully. "You had no right," he says. "You had no right to do it. It wasn't fair to her or to me

—or”—and he smiles ruefully—“even to those fear-crazy gunmen who are smeared all over your mountainside right now. You tried to bring life, Denholt—and you’ve got nothing but death on your hands.”

The pale, almost lifeless lips flicker in a ghastly smile. “My death, too,” he whispers. He struggles to rise in O’Shaughnessy’s arms. And there is a pitiful attempt at self-justification. “If you hadn’t come along, O’Shaughnessy—who can say? None of this—would have been. And yet, you rep resented the human element—the thing I didn’t reckon on. Yes. It was the blood that defeated me—the passionate warm blood of men and women, hungry and greedy and alive—the blood I couldn’t put into Jane Brown’s body . . .

O’Shaughnessy’s shoulder still throbs with pain and there is blood trickling down the arm inside the sleeve, coming out below the cuff, oozing over his wrist and his hands. O’Shaughnessy stares at it dully and remembers Denholt’s last words; and then suddenly strength comes to him to do the thing he must do. There is a car outside and down below a plane waiting. And there is Nova, her pale face flushed and hectic with the fever, her eyes flickering closed, her breathing labored. And here—here, you crazy gods of Fate, is O’Shaughnessy, the man who hasn’t been afraid, not for himself anyway, since he was eighteen. Yes, all the pieces of the mosaic are here to hand, and the pattern has just fallen into place in O’Shaughnessy’s mind.

He is a little light-headed, and giddy, but there is a hard core of will in his brain. He can stand now, where before he could only crawl like a snake with its spine crushed. He scoops Nova up in his arms, totters for one step with her, before his walk is firm and steady.

Nova’s head stirs against his shoulder. Her eyes are open. “What are we to do now?” she murmurs, with the fever-heat thickening her tones.

“What does it matter?” O’Shaughnessy says. He doesn’t want to tell her, doesn’t want her to know. “I’m with you,

Jane.”

He says that to show her that he can call her by her right name without feeling, that he doesn’t hold Jane Brown against her. But she won’t let him. That name isn’t hers.

“My name,” she says, childlike, “is Nova. Nova—O’Shaughnessy.”

She doesn’t speak again all the time he is putting her into the car, where she slumps against the cushions like a rag doll, no more than half conscious, or while they are driving down the mountainside, or even while he carries her to the plane that is still standing there.

He goes, a little more unsteadily now, to kneel beside the wounded pilot.

“How you feeling?” O’Shaughnessy’s words are jerky.

The pilot nods. “I’m okay, I guess. Feels like just a nick.”

“That’s all right, then,” O’Shaughnessy say s. He pushes a wad of bills into Frazier’s hand, helps the man to sit up. “I’m going to take your plane. I’m glad you’re feeling okay, because I’d have to take the plane anyway—only it’s nice that I don’t have to leave you here dying. You can use the car there.”

Wrinkles of worry blossom at the corners of the relief pilot’s eyes. “You sound kinda crazy to me—what happened up there? What’s this money for?”

“That’s to square you for the plane—in case . . . Well, just in case.”

Then he is gone, weaving across the uneven ground. Frazier gets up and wobbles after him. “Hi, wait a minute. The propeller—”

In a few minutes, his hands are on the blades and from inside the plane-cabin O’Shaughnessy’s voice is calling, “Contact,” and Frazier yanks, the propeller spins. Frazier falls back and the plane taxis jerkily with a sputtering roar of the engine.

O’Shaughnessy somehow negotiates a take-off from an impossibly tip-tilted angle, and Frazier stands there

watching, jaw dropped, until the black of the sky and the distance have inked out the tiny plane-lights. “Screwball/’ he mutters and paws the sweat from his face. O’Shaughnessy’s hard-knuckled hands grasp the stick hard. Thunder rumbles above the roar of the motor; lightning stabs the darkness. Rain begins to slash down around the plane.

O’Shaughnessy remembers another storm, another plane, another night; and he glances at the girl beside him. She seems to sense his gaze upon her, her eyes open; her lips would speak but the fever that is burning through her won’t let the words come. They are in her eyes, though, as plain as any words could be, and her whole heart is with them. No question there at all, just courage and confidence.

“I brought you into this,” he says—to those eyes. “Now I’m taking you out of it. There’s no place in it for us any longer.”

Her fingers inside the glove tighten on his hand convulsively as if to say: “Alone, O’Shaughnessy? Must I go alone?”

At least that’s the way he figures it, for he says quickly: “With me, honey. Together.”

The pressure of the fingers relaxes, then tightens, but more steadily this time, reassured and reassuring. That’s her way of saying:

“All right, O’Shaughnessy. It’s all right with me.”

Her face blurs in O’Shaughnessy’s eyes; he begins to whistle a silly tune that even he can’t hear, and somehow it is comforting. Lightning again and a louder crash of thunder. A gust of wind rocks the plane. The black bulk of a granite ridge that looks like a giant comber whipped up by a typhoon and frozen by the hands of God shows up ahead and a little below.

O’Shaughnessy’s hand blunders out to take Nova’s gloved one in his own. She whimpers a little, and stirs. O’Shaughnessy slides the stick forward, the plane tilts

sharply down; the mountainside, rocky and desolate, seems to be reaching up for them, but in these seconds they are alone, the two of them, with the sky and the storm.

It takes will power and nerve to hold the stick that way, to keep his eyes open and watch the rocky face of the cliff, pine-bearded, rush up at them. O'Shaughnessy's mouth flattens, his face goes white. And then in that final fraction of a moment, he laughs, a little crazily—a laugh of defiance, of mocking farewell, and, somehow, of conquest.

"Here we go, baby!" he shouts, teeth bared. "Now I'm going to find out what it really feels like to fly into the side of a mountain! . . ."

There is only the storm to hear the smash of the plane as it splinters itself against the rock—and the storm drowns the sound out with thunder, just as the lightning turns pale the flame that rises, like a hungry tongue, from the wreckage.

MAMIE ‘n’ ME

She kept reading about it all through the meal. She even cried a little, thinking about it. On account of our own, I guess. She got up twice and went in to look, to see if ours was all right, sleeping in there in the dark. She came back and said, “I’m going to lock the door good and tight, after you go to work.”

“It wouldn’t happen to people like us,” I tried to point out. “It’s only when you’ve got a lot of money they do that to you.”

“I don’t care, money or no money, it’s the most unforgivable crime there is, Terry.” Her eyes got all bright blue and blazing, like they do whenever she gets good and sore about something. “I could forgive anything quicker than that. I could understand a man robbing a bank, or even taking another man’s life, but to take a poor helpless little mite like that from its mother! I keep thinking what she must be feeling all day today, since she first went in to look at it this morning and found it gone.”

I sort of hung my head. It did get you. It was lousy. It was the lowest thing under God’s sun to do to anyone. I wasn’t trying to say it wasn’t. I was only trying to say there was nothing poor devils like us could do about it.

“And it’ll die on their hands, poor little thing!” she went on. She slapped at the newspaper. “Look there! It’s got to have a special diet. It’s got to have that new kind of milk with codliver oil in it. She’s asked the papers to print that,

hoping it'll catch their eye. As though *they* care, or know enough to look after it!"

It was nearly midnight on the alarm, and I had to go. I felt bad as she did, but I had one of my own to provide for. I stuck my hand in the sugar bowl and couldn't get it out again. That cheered her up a little. She laughed. "That Mamie, always eating me out of house and home!" Then when I got it out and started filling my pockets, she cracked my hand one. "Two's enough now!" she said, and put the lid back on the bowl.

"I like her better than I do you," I said, picking up my cap. "She's my real girl."

"Why didn't you marry her, then?" she snapped. She held her face up to me at the door.

"Don't keep thinking about the Ellerton case," I said. "Try to get some sleep. See you in the morning."

But I heard her turn the lock and put on the safety catch after the door was closed.

It was a swell night, clear and crisp, and all the stars were out. I took the subway to the division stable. Everybody in the car was reading about it. "No Word Yet," one scarehead said. I heard one man say to another, "They'll be afraid to bring it back now, even after they get the money; afraid of their own precious skins. It'll be the same thing over again, like so many times before."

I thought, pumping the china ring I was holding back and forth, "I'd like to get my hands on 'em!" A million other guys like me must have been saying that all over the city tonight. Day dreams.

* * * *

Mamie was sure glad to see me when I got to the stable. She whinnied and pawed and her little ears stuck up straight. I said, "How's my best girl? Lemme see if I got something for my best girl." I pretended I couldn't find

anything, and she stuck her head down to my pocket and snuffled. She knew where I carried the sugar all right.

I harnessed her myself. I always did; she liked me to better than the stableman, although he was around her more than me. But I was her best beau, I took her out stepping. We rolled out of the stable and down to the plant, and got on line back of the loading-platforms to wait our turn at filling-up.

All the guys were talking about it too. Michaelman said, “Just the same it’s a great boost for our Sun-Ray milk, her mentioning the kid has to have it, in all the papers like that. Wait’ll you see the calls that start to come in for it.”

We all gave him cold looks, like he was out of order. Somebody said, “The firm don’t need business that bad, if it’s got to be built up on somebody’s grief,” and I wished it had been me. I’d been thinking that, but I hadn’t been able to put the words together right.

I left Mamie on line and went to take a look in my orderdrawer in the office. New orders and cancellations, you know. Once in awhile extras too, but mostly those are asked for by note outside the customer’s door. There wasn’t very much doing and it kind of worried me. Part of the job is to get new customers, see. Not by direct soliciting, like a salesman, but just sort of intangibly, by the kind of service you give your old ones. Promotion depends on three things in my line: getting new orders, getting the old ones paid up on time, and the number of empties you collect and turn in.

I went back shaking my head to myself; not a new order in the drawer. As soon as I got my load stowed aboard and checked, Mamie and me started out. She knew the way down to where the route began, I just held the reins on one finger and let her take her own head. There was no one much but us on the streets any more, no lights to stop for; and her hoofbeats rang out clear and loud on the quiet air. They had a soothing sound to me, but I guess everyone’s different; I wasn’t in bed trying to get some sleep. When we

got there she swung into the first route-block and stopped dead in front of the right door, of her own accord.

I only had a two-block route, most of them are short like that in the built-up parts of town, but it wasn't the cream of the bottle by any means. Deliveries were swiped right and left, and it was a tough neighborhood to make collections in. I always expected to be held up, even in the daytime, before I got back to the office with my receipts.

I loaded up my trays, gave Mamie her second piece of sugar, and climbed up five flights. You work walk-ups from the top down, elevator-buildings from the bottom up. Don't ask me why. There wasn't an elevator on my whole route.

The Flannery girl on the fourth floor had been out with the young fellow her Ma didn't like again, and was getting it laced into her while she undressed. You could hear it all up and down the hall.

"I'm telling ye for the last time, he'll nivver amount to nothing, you mark my words, young lady! Barney I can't get ye to go out with, no, it's always a headache ye've got, but this goodfor-nothing ye'll gallivant with until al' hours of the night!"

And then a plaintive little whine, "But Ma, if you could only see how he does the Big Apple—"

* * * *

I came out again, and Mamie had moved down one door without being told and was waiting for me to catch up with her. I filled up again and went in the second house. There was a fellow sleeping on the stairs between the third and fourth, all huddled up in a knot. I thought he was a drunk at first, and stepped over him without disturbing him, which is no cinch carrying fifty pounds of loaded baskets. But when I came down again, he woke up and looked at me kind of scared. He was just a kid, eighteen or nineteen, and he looked all in.

"What's matter, got no place to sleep?" I asked him.

“No,” he admitted, sort of frightened, as though he thought I was going to turn him over to a cop or something. “I been walking around all day and—”

I went on down a couple of steps, then I stopped and looked back at him again. I caught him looking at my tray and kind of swallowing hard. “When’d you eat last?” I said curtly.

He seemed to have a hard time remembering for a minute. “Yesterday morning,” he faltered finally.

“Here, wrap yourself around this,” I said. I passed him a pint I happened to have on my tray. It was only a dime out of my own pocket, anyway. He started to pull at the hinge cap like he couldn’t get it off fast enough. He needed it so bad he even forgot to say thanks, which is needing a thing bad all right.

“Take it easy,” I warned him gruffly, “or you’ll give yourself the bends. Bring me down the empty when you’re through.”

Afterward I watched him meander on up the street away from there. I don’t feel sorry for him, I said to myself, he’s only eighteen or nineteen; couple years from now he’ll be making more than I do myself.

Mamie turned her head around and looked at me, much as to say: You’re telling me?

I ran into a sort of minor commotion on the second floor, half a dozen houses further along. A guy was trying to get in Mrs. Hatchett’s door. He belonged in there, but she wouldn’t let him come in. He was plenty lush.

“I warned you!” her voice came back shrilly from the inside, “I warned you next time you came home in that condition I’d lock you out!”

He heard me going by on my way up, and took me into his confidence a hall-length away. “ ‘S a disgrashe, tha’s what it is! Her own husband!”

“Sure,” I said inattentively. “Sure,” and went on up.

When I came down again, he was very quiet all of a sudden, and I thought the light on the hall walls looked different, kind of flickering. I dropped my trays with a bang and sprinted down to him. He'd hauled some newspapers up against the doorseam and put a match to them. I stiff-armed him away and he toppled over into a sitting position. I stamped them out, and then I hammered good and businesslike on the door myself. She seemed to know the difference right away, she came back again.

"You better take him inside with you, lady, before he burns the building down!" I said.

"Oh, so tha's the kind of a guy you are!" he said offendedly. "Well now I don't wanna go in no more, how do you like that?"

She opened the door, cracked a whiplike "Get in here!" at him, that brought him submissively to his feet and made him sidle cringingly by her without a word. She only came up to his shoulders.

"Sometimes," I told Mamie downstairs, "I don't think I appreciate you half enough."

I'd never liked the next house over. It was as old as all the others, but had been done over to comply with the housing regulations. That only made it worse, it attracted a lot of fly-bynights who weren't bound by leases, here today and gone tomorrow; they were always skipping out and gypping me out of my collections. I'd been held up in here once too, six months before, and I hadn't forgotten it.

I only needed one tray for this house; most of the tenants weren't great milk-drinkers. I only had one customer on the whole top floor and she was three weeks overdue on her bill. I delivered her order, and a note with it. "No doubt it has escaped your attention—" Like hell it had. You couldn't get her to answer her doorbell on collection days; she lay low in there. At least she hadn't moved out, that was something.

On the floor below, the fifth, I had a new customer, dating from the previous week. When I went over to the door, they'd left a note out for me—in the neck of a beer-bottle!

Lieve us a bottle of your Sun-Ray milk, we would like to try it out.
E-5.

While I was standing there puzzling out the scrawl—and it took plenty of puzzling out the way it was written—I could hear the faint wail of a kid coming from inside the flat. Like a kitten left out in the rain, that weak and thin.

It was a sad sort of sound; made me feel sorta blue.

I hadn't really expected any orders for Sun-Ray, not around this district. It cost twenty-two a quart, pretty steep for these kind of people. I'd brought just one bottle along with me in the wagon, in case I needed it. I went downstairs again to get it. I thought: Michaelman was right, they are starting to call for it, like he said. Starting early—

That reminded me of the Ellerton case. The photostat of the ransom note she'd found this morning in the kid's bed, which all the papers had shown, came before me again like when Mil had shown it to me. "Lieve the money—" These people upstairs didn't know how to spell that word either. Such an easy word, too, you wouldn't think anyone would trip over it. And here were two different note-writers, both in the same day, doing it.

Two *different* note-writers—?

That started a new train of thought, and my jaw sagged.

I looked up at the windows from the sidewalk. One was lit up, with the shade down all the way, but the other was dark. I was thinking. Funny, there was no kid around when I was in there Monday collecting for the first week. Now they've got one all of a sudden, just like that! And even if it was out being aired when I was up there, there would have been some of its clothes or something around, and there weren't

any. Ours always has its—those whaddye-call-it three-cornered things—hanging all around the place. And then I was remembering something else, even stranger. When she left me for a minute to get the change to pay me, I spotted all the milk I'd delivered up to then, five bottles of it, standing untouched under the sink. If they didn't use it, why did they order it and pay for it? Unless they expected ahead of time to need some milk in the place, but didn't know just when it was going to be, and wanted to be ready with it when the time came.

There was something sort of chilly about that thought.

* * * *

I went upstairs again with the delivery they'd asked for. The wailing was still going on, until I got right opposite the door. Then I heard a woman's voice say, "Close that door, it drives me nuts!" and the sound died down, you couldn't hear it any more. So the kid wasn't in the same room with them.

That diet that Mrs. Ellerton had asked the papers to print for her, it had something else in it too. Oh yeah, oranges. A lot of orange juice.

There was an incinerator door down the hall. I went down there and opened it quietly and looked in. The kind of people that lived here were too lazy to throw the stuff down the chute, just chucked it in behind the door. There was a bag in the corner that had split open from its own fall; it had half-a-dozen orange rinds in it.

I went downstairs again. I felt nervous and spooky, and wished I knew what to do. I wondered if I was making a fool out of myself, and half of me said I was, and the other half of me said I wasn't.

It was the kind of a toss-up that makes a man pretty darned uncomfortable.

Mamie started to amble down to the next stop when she saw me. I said, "Whoa," and she stayed where she was, but

turned to look around at me kind of questioningly, as if to say, “What’s taking you so long in there tonight?”

I lit a cigarette and stared inside of my wagon, without seeing anything, if you know what I mean. All of a sudden I’d thrown the cigarette down and was going inside a third time, without exactly knowing how it happened. My feet seemed to carry me along of their own accord. I’d left my trays outside.

I went all the way up to the roof this time. The roof-door was only held by a hook on the inside. I got out through it without any trouble. I tiptoed across the tar and gravel and started climbing down the fire escape that served the front windows of the house. I had to go real slow, I wasn’t much used to fire escapes. I thought, “If a cop comes along and looks up and sees me—” but I kept going down anyway.

When I got down level with the fifth floor, I couldn’t see in the lighted window, the shade was fitted to it skin-tight. I was scared stiff the thing would creak under me. I crept over to the dark one next to it. I put the edge of my hands up against the pane and tried to squint through them. All I could make out was a couple of white shapes like beds. But the window was open a couple of inches from the top, and I could hear that same faint wail out here like I had in the hall.

I saw myself landed in jail, with my job gone and Mu worried sick, but somehow I went ahead and started inching the lower pane up from the bottom. It was like something had hold of me that was beyond my control, wouldn’t let me quit. I think it was that wailing, that seemed to keep asking for help and nobody listened.

It was making me feel sorta crazy. I had to stop it, somehow . . .

When I had the lower pane even with the top, I eased across onto the floor, but careful where I put my feet. You could see an orange line along the floor where the door to

the next room was, and you could hear their voices clear and loud every once in awhile, like they were playing cards.

One bed was empty but the other had a bundle of old clothes on it. The wailing was coming right from the middle of them. I shifted my body between them and the room door, and lit a match, and held it covered by my hands so it wouldn't glow much. There was a little bit of a crinkled red face staring up at me from the middle of all the blankets and things. The top one was pinned down on both sides so it couldn't fall off the bed. It had a pale-blue initial down in the corner of it; E.

Their name, here, was supposed to be Harris; I had it on my order slip. E. Ellerton began with E. Something tickled my forehead for a minute, and it was a drop of sweat.

* * * *

I don't think I'd have had the nerve to go ahead and do it, if they'd kept quiet. I think I'd have backed out again the way I came in, and maybe just gone looking for the cop on the beat and told him what I suspected. Because if I took it out of here without being sure, it meant I was just doing to them what somebody else had done to the Ellertons. Lots of people give their kids oranges and special milk, and the blanket could have been borrowed from a relative.

But all of a sudden a man's voice said real irritable in the next room, "Can't you do something to shut it up? I'm going wacky! Go out and see if the milkman left that bilge you ast for, maybe that'll quiet it." I kind of lost my head altogether when I heard her footsteps tap-tap down the hall to the front-door. I knew I had to get out in a hurry, couldn't stand there trying to make up my mind any more, and it took all my presence of mind away. Before I knew what I was doing I started unfastening the safety-pins; I never knew how tricky they were to open until then, it seemed to take me a week to get rid of them.

Then I grabbed up the whole bundle of blankets, kid and all, and backed out the window with them.

It was shorter to go back up to the roof with it than to try to climb all the way down the front of the building to the street. I went up the tricky iron slats fast this time, noise or no noise, and across, and down the inside stairs. I had to get down past their floor before they came out and cut me off.

I just made it. I could hear the commotion, hear the woman yelp, “It’s gone!” as I flashed down and around the landing, but they hadn’t opened their door yet. It was wailing the whole time, but in broken snatches now, not one long stretch, like it liked the hurry and shaking I was giving it.

I ran faster.

I tore out to the wagon with it and shoved it in. It had to go right on the ice, where the butter and stuff was, and I knew that wasn’t going to be good for it, but it couldn’t be helped. Maybe the cold would take awhile to work through all those layers of blankets.

They came racing out right at my heels. All I had time to do was go, “Chk chk” to Mamie and get her to start on with it, reach down to pick up my trays, when they were standing all around me. There were three of them and they were still all in their shirt sleeves. One of them had a gun out in his hand and didn’t care who saw it.

He snarled, “Hey, you! Did anybody just come out of that door?”

He had a real ugly look to him. “Well, did they or didn’t they?” he said again.

When he put it that way, why should I say no? “Yeah,” I said, “a fellow just came out ahead of you, carrying some laundry. He went up that way.” I pointed to the opposite direction from Mamie. The clop-clop of her hoofs and the creak of the wheels drowned out the wailing, from where we were standing. She was starting to slow again, at the

next house down, so I went, “Chk chk” again. She turned and looked back at me, as if to say: “Are you crazy, skipping our next stop like this?” but she went on toward the corner.

I didn’t think they’d believe me, Mil says she can always tell when I’m lying, but I guess they didn’t know me as well as she does.

“Laundry, eh?” the one with the gun said viciously, and they turned and went streaming up toward where I’d pointed, one behind the other. “Hijacked right under our noses!” I heard one of them mutter.

The other one cursed back over his shoulder as they ran.

The woman came out just as they started off. She wasn’t crying or anything, she just looked sore and mean. “I’m not staying up there to hold the bag!” she said, and went skittering after them.

* * * *

I picked up my trays and started after Mamie and the wagon, but I kept going, “Chk chk” so she wouldn’t stop and uncover that wailing sound. A minute after they’d gone around that upper corner I heard a shot ring out. Maybe they’d run into the cop on the beat, and he didn’t like people to come around corners with guns in their hands at that hour. But by that time I’d caught up to the wagon and climbed up behind Mamie. I didn’t hang around waiting to find out what it was, I passed up all the rest of my deliveries and lit out.

Mamie put on speed willingly enough, but I had a hard time with her. She kept trying to head back to the division stable, like other nights when we got through. The papers had said the Ellertons lived at 75 Mount Pleasant Drive. I didn’t have any trouble remembering that, it had been repeated over and over. It was on the outskirts of the city, along Jorgensen’s route.

The nearer I got to it, the more scared I got. I was more scared now than even when I took it out of the room and up

the fire-escape with me. Suppose—suppose it wasn't the one? That was why I didn't stop and turn it over to a cop on the way; he wouldn't know any more than I did, Mrs. Ellerton was the only one would know for sure, and I wanted to get the suspense over with as quickly as I could.

A block away from where they lived I remembered to take it up off the ice. I laid it across my lap on the driver's seat and kept it from falling off with one hand. The outside blanket was kind of cold already, but the inside ones were still warm. It quit wailing and looked up at me with its weazened little face, like it enjoyed riding like that. I grinned at it and it kind of opened its mouth and grinned back, only it didn't have any teeth.

Their place was all lit up when I got there, with a bunch of cars lined up in front of it. I found a place for Mamie to pull up in, and got down and carried it up to the house with me under one arm. I noticed it was facing upside down, so I stopped a minute and turned it right side up so they wouldn't get sore.

A man opened the door the minute I rang the bell, like he'd been standing there waiting all night. I started, "Will you ask Mrs. Ellerton if this is her baby—?" but I never got any further than that. He snatched it away from me before I knew what happened. So fast, in fact, that the whole outside blanket fell off it onto the floor.

There were a lot of people in the room behind him, and they all started to get very excited. A man started to call someone's name in a thick, choked voice, and a lady in a pink dressing gown came flying down the stairs so fast it's a wonder she didn't trip.

She never said from first to last whether it was hers or not, all she did was grab it up and hold it to her and sort of waltz around with it, so I guess it was.

A couple of the men there, detectives I guess, were standing in the doorway asking me where I found it and all about it, when suddenly she came rushing over to me, and

before I could stop her grabbed up my hand and started to kiss it. “Aw, don’t, lady,” I said. “I haven’t washed ‘em since I left home to go to work.”

I couldn’t get away until long after the sun came up. I kept trying to tell them I still had some deliveries to make, and all they kept saying was couldn’t they do something for me? Well, when they put it that way, why should I be bashful?

“Sure,” I said finally, “if it’s no trouble, you could let me have a couple pieces of sugar for Mamie, this part of town is off her route and she probably feels pretty strange out there.”

They all stood there looking at me like I’d said something wonderful. I don’t see anything wonderful about that, do you?

MYSTERY IN ROOM 913

They thought it was the Depression the first time it happened. The guy had checked in one night in the black March of 33, in the middle of the memorable bank holiday. He was well-dressed and respectable-looking. He had baggage with him, plenty of it, so he wasn't asked to pay in advance. Everyone was short of ready cash that week. Besides, he'd asked for the weekly rate.

He signed the register *James Hopper, Schenectady*, and Dennison, eyeing the red vacancy-tags in the pigeonholes, pulled out the one in 913 at random and gave him that. Not the vacancy-tag, the room. The guest went up, okayed the room, and George the bellhop was sent up with his bags. George came down and reported a dime without resentment; it was '33, after all.

Striker had sized him up, of course. That was part of his duties, and the house detective found nothing either for him or against him. Striker had been with the St. Anselm two years at that time. He'd had his salary cut in '31, and then again in '32, but so had everyone else on the staff. He didn't look much like a house dick, which was why he was good for the job. He was a tall, lean, casual-moving guy, without that annoying habit most hotel dicks have of staring people out of countenance. He used finesse about it; got the same results, but with sort of a blank, idle expression as though he were thinking of something else. He also lacked the usual paunch, in spite of his sedentary life, and never wore

a hard hat. He had a little radio in his top-floor cubbyhole and a stack of vintage “fantastics,” pulp magazines dealing with super-science and the supernatural, and that seemed to be all he asked of life.

The newcomer who had signed as Hopper came down again in about half an hour and asked Dennison if there were any good movies nearby. The clerk recommended one and the guest went to it. This was about eight p.m. He came back at eleven, picked up his key, and went up to his room. Dennison and Striker both heard him whistling lightly under his breath as he stepped into the elevator. Nothing on his mind but a good night’s rest, apparently.

Striker turned in himself at twelve. He was subject to call twenty-four hours a day. There was no one to relieve him.

The St. Anselm was on the downgrade, and had stopped having an assistant house dick about a year before.

He was still awake, reading in bed, about an hour later when the deskman rang him. “Better get down here quick, Strike! Nine-thirteen’s just fallen out!” The clerk’s voice was taut, frightened.

Striker threw on coat and pants over his pajamas and got down as fast as the creaky old-fashioned elevator would let him. He went out to the street, around to the side under the 13-line.

Hopper was lying there dead, the torn leg of his pajamas rippling in the bitter March night wind. There wasn’t anyone else around at that hour except the night porter, the policeman he’d called, and who had called his precinct house in turn, and a taxi driver or two. Maxon, the midnight-to-morning clerk (Dennison went off at eleven-thirty), had to remain at his post for obvious reasons. They were just standing there waiting for the morgue ambulance; there wasn’t anything they could do.

Bob, the night porter, was saying: “I thought it was a pillow someone drap out the window. I come up the basement way, see a thick white thing lying there, flappin’

in th’ wind. I go over, fix to kick it with my foot—” He broke off. “Golly, man!”

One of the drivers said, “I seen him comin’ down.” No one disputed the point, but he insisted, “No kidding, I seen him coming down! I was just cruisin’ past, one block over, and I look this way, and I see—whisht *ungh*—like a pancake!”

The other cab driver, who hadn’t seen him coming down, said: “I seen you head down this way, so I thought you spotted a fare, and I chased after you.”

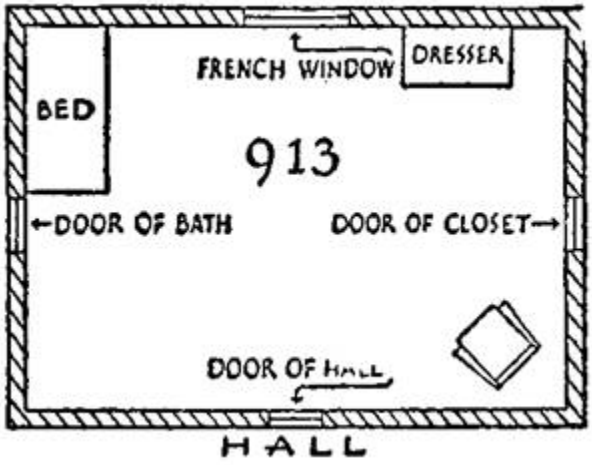
They got into a wrangle above the distorted form. “Yeah, you’re always chiselin’ in on my hails. Follyn’ me around. Can’t ye get none o’ your own?”

Striker crossed the street, teeth chattering, and turned and looked up the face of the building. Half the French window of 913 was open, and the room was lit up. All the rest of the line was dark, from the top floor down.

He crossed back to where the little group stood shivering and stamping their feet miserably. “He sure picked a night for it!” winced the cop. The cab driver opened his mouth a couple of seconds ahead of saying something, which was his speed, and the cop turned on him irritably. “Yeah, we know! You seen him coming down. Go home, will ya!”

Striker went in, rode up, and used his passkey on 913. The light was on, as he had ascertained from the street. He stood there in the doorway and looked around. Each of the 13 s, in the St. Anselm, was a small room with private bath. There was an opening on each of the four sides of these rooms: the tall, narrow, old-fashioned room door leading in from the hall; in the wall to the left of that, the door to the bath, of identical proportions; in the wall to the right of the hall door, a door giving into the clothes closet, again of similar measurements. These three panels were in the style of the Nineties, not your squat modern aperture. Directly opposite the room door was a pair of French windows looking out onto the street. Each of them matched the door

measurements. Dark blue roller-shades covered the glass on the inside.



But Striker wasn’t thinking about all that particularly, just then. He was interested only in what the condition of the room could tell him: whether it had been suicide or an accident. The only thing disturbed in the room was the bed, but that was not violently disturbed as by a struggle, simply normally disarranged as by someone sleeping. Striker, for some reason or other, tested the sheets with the back of his hand for a minute. They were still warm from recent occupancy. Hopper’s trousers were neatly folded across the seat of a chair. His shirt and underclothes were draped over the back of it. His shoes stood under it, toe to toe and heel to heel. He was evidently a very neat person.

He had unpacked. He must have intended to occupy the room for the full week he had bargained for. In the closet, when Striker opened it, were his hat, overcoat, jacket and vest, the latter three on separate hangers. The dresser drawers held his shirts and other linen. On top of the dresser was a white-gold wristwatch, a handful of change, and two folded squares of paper. One was a glossy handbill from the show the guest had evidently attended only two hours ago. *Saturday through Tuesday—the laugh riot, funniest, most tuneful picture of the year, “Hips Hips*

Hooray!" Also "Popeye the Sailor." Nothing in that to depress anyone.

The other was a note on hotel stationery—Hotel Management: Sorry to do this here, but I had to do it somewhere.

It was unsigned. So it was suicide after all. One of the two window halves, the one to the right stood inward to the room. The one he had gone through.

"You the houseman?" a voice asked from the doorway.

Striker turned and a precinct detective came in. You could tell he was that. He couldn't have looked at a dandelion without congenital suspicion or asked the time of day without making it a leading question. "Find anything?"

Striker handed over the note without comment.

Perry, the manager, had come up with him, in trousers and bathrobe. He was a stout, jovial-looking man ordinarily, but right now he was only stout. "He hadn't paid yet, either," he said ruefully to the empty room. He twisted the cord of his robe around one way, then he undid it and twisted it around the other way. He was very unhappy. He picked the wristwatch up gingerly by the end of its strap and dangled it close to his ear, as if to ascertain whether or not it had a good movement.

The precinct dick went to the window and looked down, opened the bath door and looked in, the closet door and looked in. He gave the impression of doing this just to give the customers their money's worth; in other words, as far as he was concerned, the note had clinched the case.

"It's the old suey, all right," he said and, bending over at the dresser, read aloud what he was jotting down. "James Hopper, Skun-Skunnect—"

Striker objected peevishly. "Why did he go to bed first, then get up and go do it? They don't usually do that. He took the room for a week, too."

The precinct man raised his voice, to show he was a police detective talking to a mere hotel dick, someone who

in his estimation wasn't a detective at all. "I don't care if he took it for six months! He left this note and hit the sidewalk, didn't he? Whaddaya trying to do, make it into something it ain't?

The manager said, "Ssh! if you don't mind," and eased the door to, to keep other guests from overhearing. He sided with the precinct man, the wish being father to the thought. If there's one thing that a hotel man likes less than a suicide, it's a murder. "I don't think there's any doubt of it."

The police dick stooped to reasoning with Striker. "You were the first one up here. Was there anything wrong with the door? Was it forced open or anything?"

Striker had to admit it had been properly shut; the late occupant's key lay on the dresser where it belonged, at that very moment.

The police dick spread his hands, as if to say: "There you are, what more do you want?"

He took a last look around, decided the room had nothing more to tell him. Nor could Striker argue with him on this point. The room had nothing more to tell anyone. The dick gathered up Hopper's watch, change and identification papers, to turn them over to the police property-clerk, until they were claimed by his nearest of kin. His baggage was left in there temporarily; the room was darkened and locked up.

Riding down to the lobby, the dick rubbed it in a little. "Here's how those things go," he said patronizingly. "No one got in there or went near him, so it wasn't murder. He left a note, so it wasn't an accident. The word they got for this is suicide. Now y'got it?"

Striker held his palm up and fluttered it slightly. "Teacher, can I leave the room?" he murmured poignantly.

The stout manager, Perry, had a distrait, slightly anticipatory expression on his moon face now; in his mind it was the next day, he had already sold the room to someone

else, and had the two dollars in the till. Heaven, to him, was a houseful of full rooms.

The body had already been removed from the street outside. Somewhere, across a coffee counter, a cab driver was saying: “I seen him coming down.”

The city dick took his departure from the hotel, with the magnanimous assurance: “It’s the depresh. They’re poppin’ off like popcorn all over the country this week. I ain’t been able to cash my paycheck since Monday.”

Perry returned to his own quarters, with the typical managerial admonition, to Maxon and Striker, “Soft pedal, now, you two. Don’t let this get around the house.” He yawned with a sound like air brakes, going up in the elevator. You could still hear it echoing down the shaft after his feet had gone up out of sight.

“Just the same, “ Striker said finally, unasked, to the night clerk, “I don’t care what that know-it-all says, Hopper didn’t have suicide on his mind when he checked in here at seven-thirty. He saw a show that was full of laughs, and even came home whistling one of the tunes from it. We both heard him. He unpacked all his shirts and things into the bureau drawers. He intended staying. He went to bed first; I felt the covers, they were warm. Then he popped up all of a sudden and took this standing broad jump.”

“Maybe he had a bad dream,” Maxon suggested facetiously. His was a hard-boiled racket. He yawned, muscularly magnetized by his boss’ recent gape, and opened a big ledger. “Some of ‘em put on a fake front until the last minute—whistle, go to a show, too proud to take the world into their confidence, and then—bang—they’ve crumpled.” And on that note it ended. As Maxon said, there was no accounting for human nature. Striker caught the sleepiness from the other two, widened his jaws terrifyingly, brought them together again with a click. And yet somehow, to him, this suicide hadn’t run true to form.

He went back up to his own room again with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, that wasn't strong enough to do anything about, and yet that he couldn't altogether throw off. Like the feeling you get when you're working out a crossword puzzle and one of the words fills up the space satisfactorily, but doesn't seem to have the required meaning called for in the solution.

The St. Anselm went back to sleep again, the small part of it that had been awake. The case was closed.

People came and went from 913 and the incident faded into the limbo of half-forgotten things. Then in the early fall of '34 the room came to specific attention again.

A young fellow in his early twenties, a college type, arrived in a roadster with just enough baggage for overnight. No reservation or anything. He signed in as Allan Hastings, Princeton, New Jersey. He didn't have to ask the desk if there were any shows. He knew his own way around. They were kind of full-up that weekend. The only red vacancy-tag in any of the pigeonholes was 913. Dennison gave him that—had no choice.

The guest admitted he'd been turned away from two hotels already. They all had the S.R.O. sign out. "It's the Big Game, I guess," he said.

"What Big Game?" Striker was incautious enough to ask.

"Where've you been all your life?" he grinned.

Some football game or other, the house dick supposed. Personally a crackling good super-science story still had the edge on twenty-two huskies squabbling over a pig's inflated hide, as far as he was concerned.

Hastings came back from the game still sober. Or if he'd had a drink it didn't show. "We lost," he said casually at the desk on his way up, but it didn't seem to depress him any. His phone, the operator reported later, rang six times in the next quarter of an hour, all feminine voices. He was apparently getting booked up solid for the rest of the weekend.

Two girls and a fellow, in evening clothes, called for him about nine. Striker saw them sitting waiting for him in the lobby, chirping and laughing their heads off. He came down in about five minutes, all rigged up for the merry-merry, even down to a white carnation in his lapel.

Striker watched them go, half-wistfully. “That’s the life,” he said to the man behind the desk.

“May as well enjoy it while you can,” said Dennison philosophically. “Here today and gone tomorrow.”

Hastings hadn’t come back yet by the time Striker went up and turned in. Not that Striker was thinking about him particularly, but he just hadn’t seen him. He read a swell story about mermaids kidnapping a deep-sea diver, and dropped off to sleep.

The call came through to his room at about four-thirty in the morning. It took him a minute or two to come out of the deep sleep he’d been in.

“Hurry it up, will you, Strike?” Maxon was whining impatiently. “The young guy in nine-thirteen has taken a flier out his window.”

Striker hung up, thinking blurredly, “Where’ve I heard that before—nine-thirteen?” Then he remembered—last year, from the very same room.

He filled the hollow of his hand with cold water from the washstand, dashed it into his eyes, shrugged into some clothing, and ran down the fire stairs at one side of the elevator shaft. That was quicker than waiting for the venerable mechanism to crawl up for him, then limp down again.

Maxon, who was a reformed drunk, gave him a look eloquent of disgust as Striker chased by the desk. “I’m getting off the wagon again if this keeps up—then I’ll have some fun out of all these bum jolts.”

There was more of a crowd this time. The weather was milder and there were more night owls in the vicinity to collect around him and gape morbidly. The kid had fallen

farther out into the street than Hopper—he didn't weigh as much, maybe. He was lying there face down in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross. He hadn't undressed yet, either. Only his shoes and dinner jacket had been taken off. One strap of his black suspenders had torn off, due to the bodily contortion of the descent or from the impact itself. The white of his shirt was pretty badly changed by now, except the sleeves. He'd had a good-looking face; that was all gone too. They were turning him over as Striker came up.

The same cop was there. He was saying to a man who had been on his way home to read the after-midnight edition of the coming morning's newspaper: "Lemme have your paper, Mac, will you?"

The man demurred, "I ain't read it myself yet. I just now bought it."

The cop said, "You can buy another. We can't leave him lying like this."

The thing that had been Hastings was in pretty bad shape. The cop spread the paper, separating the sheets, and made a long paper-covered mound.

The same precinct dick showed up in answer to the routine notification that had been phoned in. His greeting to Striker was as to the dirt under his feet. "You still on the face of the earth?"

"Should I have asked your permission?" answered the hotel man drily.

Eddie Courlander—that, it seemed, was the police dick's tag—squatted down, looked under the pall of newspapers, shifted around, looked under from the other side.

"Peek-a-boo!" somebody in the small crowd said irreverently.

Courlander looked up threateningly. "Who said that? Gawan, get outa here, wise guys! If it happened to one of youse, you wouldn't feel so funny."

Somebody's night-bound coup6 tried to get through, honked imperiously for clearance, not knowing what the

obstruction was. The cop went up to it, said: “Get back! Take the next street over. There’s a guy fell out of a window here.”

The coup£ drew over to the curb instead, and its occupants got out and joined the onlookers. One was a girl carrying a night-club favor, a long stick topped with paper streamers. She squealed, “Ooou, *ooou-ooou*,” in a way you couldn’t tell if she was delighted or horrified.

Courlander straightened, nodded toward Striker. “What room’d he have? C’mon in.”

He didn’t remember that it was the same one. Striker could tell that by the startled way he said, “Oh, yeah, that’s right too!” when he mentioned the coincidence to him.

Perry and the night porter were waiting outside the room door. “I wouldn’t go in until you got here,” the manager whispered virtuously to the cop, “I know you people don’t like anything touched.” Striker, however, had a hunch there was a little superstitious fear at the back of this as well, like a kid shying away from a dark room.

“You’re thinking of murder cases,” remarked Courlander contemptuously. “Open ‘er up.”

The light was on again, like the previous time. But there was a great difference in the condition of the room. Young Hastings obviously hadn’t had Hopper’s personal neatness. Or else he’d been slightly lit up when he came in. The daytime clothes he’d discarded after coming back from the game were still strewn around, some on chairs, some on the floor. The St. Anselm didn’t employ maids to straighten the rooms after five in the evening. His patent-leathers lay yards apart as though they had been kicked off into the air and left lying where they had come down. His bat-wing tie was a black snake across the carpet. There was a depression and creases on the counterpane on top of the bed, but it hadn’t been turned down. He had therefore lain down on the bed, but not in it.

On the dresser top stood a glittering little pouch, obviously a woman's evening bag. Also his carnation, in a glass of water. Under that was the note. Possibly one of the shortest suicide notes on record. Three words. *What's the use?*

Courlander read it, nodded, showed it to them. "Well," he said, "that tells the story."

He shrugged.

In the silence that followed the remark, the phone rang sharply, unexpectedly. They all jolted a little, even Courlander. Although there was no body in the room and never had been, it was a dead man's room. There was something macabre to the peal, like a desecration. The police dick halted Striker and the manager with a gesture.

"May be somebody for him," he said, and went over and took it. He said, "Hello?" in a wary, noncommittal voice. Then he changed to his own voice, said: "Oh. Have you told her yet? Well, send her up here. I'd like to talk to her."

He hung up, explained: "Girl he was out with tonight is down at the desk, came back to get her bag. He must have been carrying it for her. It has her latchkey in it and she couldn't get into her own home."

Perry turned almost unconsciously and looked into the dresser mirror to see if he needed a shave. Then he fastidiously narrowed the neck opening of his dressing gown and smoothed the hair around the back of his head.

The dick shoved Hastings' discarded clothes out of sight on the closet floor. This was definitely not a murder case, so there was no reason to shock the person he was about to question, by the presence of the clothes.

There was a short tense wait while she was coming up on the slow-motion elevator. Coming up to see someone that wasn't there at all. Striker said rebukingly, "This is giving it to her awful sudden, if she was at all fond of the guy." Courlander unwittingly gave an insight into his own

character when he said callously, “These girls nowadays can take it better than we can—don’t worry.”

The elevator panel ticked open, and then she came into the square of light thrown across the hall by the open doorway. She was a very pretty girl of about twenty-one or-two, tall and slim, with dark red hair, in a long white satin evening gown. Her eyes were wide with startled inquiry, at the sight of the three of them, but not frightened yet. Striker had seen her once before, when she was waiting for Hastings in the lobby earlier that evening. The other man of the original quartette had come up with her, no doubt for propriety’s sake, and was standing behind her. They had evidently seen the second girl home before coming back here. And the side street where he had fallen was around the corner from the main entrance to the hotel.

She crossed the threshold, asked anxiously, “Is Allan—Is Mr. Hastings ill or something? The desk man said there’s been a little trouble up here.”

Courlander said gently, “Yes, there has.” But he couldn’t make anything sound gentle.

She looked around. She was starting to get frightened now. She said, “What’s happened to him? Where is he?” Then she saw the right half of the window standing open. Striker, who was closest to it, raised his arm and pushed it slowly closed. Then he just looked at her.

She understood, and whimpered across her shoulder, “Oh, Marty!” and the man behind her put an arm around her shoulder to support her.

They sat down. She didn’t cry much—just sat with her head bent looking over at the floor. Her escort stood behind her chair, hands on her shoulders, bucking her up. Courlander gave her a minute or two to pull herself together, then he started questioning. He asked them who they were. She gave her name. The man with her was her brother; he was Hastings’ classmate at Princeton.

He asked if Hastings had had much to drink.

“He had a few drinks,” she admitted, “but he wasn’t drunk. Mart and I had the same number he did, and we’re not drunk.” They obviously weren’t.

“Do you know of any reason, either one of you, why he should have done this?”

The thing had swamped them with its inexplicability, it was easy to see that. They just shook their heads dazedly.

“Financial trouble?”

The girl’s brother just laughed—mirthlessly. “He had a banking business to inherit, some day—if he’d lived.”

“Ill health? Did he study too hard, maybe?”

He laughed again, dismally. “He was captain of the hockey team, he was on the baseball team, he was the bright hope of the swimming team. Why should he worry about studying? Star athletes are never allowed to flunk.”

“Love affair?” the tactless flatfoot blundered on.

The brother flinched at that. This time it was the girl who answered. She raised her head in wounded pride, thrust out her left hand.

“He asked me to marry him tonight. He gave me this ring. That was the reason for the party. Am I so hard to take?”

The police dick got red. She stood up without waiting to ask whether she could go or not. “Take me home, Mart,” she said in a muffled voice. “I’ve got some back crying to catch up on.”

Striker called the brother back again for a minute, while she went on along toward the elevator; shoved the note before him. “Was that his handwriting?”

He pored over it. “I can’t tell, just on the strength of those three words. I’ve never seen enough of it to know it very well. The only thing I’d know for sure would be his signature—he had a cockeyed way of ending it with a little pretzel twist—and that isn’t on there.” Over his shoulder, as he turned to go once more, he added: “That was a favorite catchword of his, though. ‘What’s the use?’ I’ve often heard him use it. I guess it’s him all right.”

“We can check it by the register,” Striker suggested after they’d gone.

The dick gave him a scathing look. “Is it your idea somebody else wrote his suicide note for him? That’s what I’d call service!”

“Is it your idea he committed suicide the same night he got engaged to a production number like you just saw?”

“Is it your idea he didn’t?”

“Ye-es,” said Striker with heavy emphasis, “but I can’t back it up.”

The register showed a variation between the two specimens of handwriting, but not more than could be ascribed to the tension and nervous excitement of a man about to end his life. There wasn’t enough to the note for a good handwriting expert to have got his teeth into with any degree of certainty.

“How long had he been in when it happened?” Striker asked Maxon.

“Not more than half an hour. Bob took him up a little before four.”

“How’d he act? Down in the mouth, blue?”

“Blue nothing, he was tappin’ out steps there on the mosaic, waitin’ for the car to take him up.”

Bob, the night man-of-all-work, put in his two cents’ worth without being asked: “On the way up he said to me, “Think this thing’ll last till we get up there? I’d hate to have it drop me now. I got engaged tonight.”

Striker flashed the police dick a triumphant look. The latter just stood by with the air of one indulging a precocious child. “Now ya through, little boy?” he demanded. “Why don’t you quit trying to make noise like a homicide dick and stick to your own little racket?

“It’s a suicide, see?” continued the police dick pugnaciously, as though by raising his voice he was deciding the argument. “I’ve cased the room, and I don’t care if he stood on his head or did somersaults before he rode up.” He

waved a little black pocket-notebook under Striker's nose. "Here's my report, and if it don't suit you, why don't you take it up with the Mayor?"

Striker said in a humble, placating voice: "Mind if I ask you something personal?"

"What?" said the precinct man sourly.

"Are you a married man?"

"Sure I'm married. What's that to—?"

"Think hard. The night you became engaged, the night you first proposed to your wife, did you feel like taking your own life afterwards?"

The police dick went "Arrrr!" disgustedly, flung around on his heel, and stalked out, giving the revolving door an exasperated twirl that kept it going long after he was gone.

"They get sore, when you've got 'em pinned down, " Striker remarked wryly.

Perry remonstrated impatiently, "Why are you always trying to make it out worse than it is? Isn't it bad enough without looking for trouble?"

"If there's something phony about his death, isn't it worse if it goes undetected than if it's brought to light?"

Perry said, pointedly thumbing the still-turning door, *"That* was the police we just had with us."

"We were practically alone," muttered his disgruntled operative.

And so they couldn't blame it on the Depression this time. That was starting to clear up now. And besides, Allan Hastings had come from well-to-do people. They couldn't blame it on love either. Perry half-heartedly tried to suggest he hadn't loved the girl he was engaged to, had had somebody else under his skin maybe, so he'd taken this way to get out of it.

"That's a woman's reason, not a man's," Striker said disgustedly. "Men don't kill themselves for love; they go out and get tanked, and hop a train for someplace else,

instead!” The others both nodded, probing deep within their personal memories. So that wouldn’t wash either.

In the end there wasn’t anything they could blame it on but the room itself. “That room’s jinxed,” Maxon drawled slurringly. “That’s two in a row we’ve had in there. I think it’s the thirteen on it. You oughta change the number to nine-twelve and a half or nine-fourteen and a half or something, boss.”

That was how the legend first got started.

Perry immediately jumped on him full-weight. “Now listen, I won’t have any of that nonsense! There’s nothing wrong with that room! First thing you know the whole hotel’ll have a bad name, and then where are we? It’s just a coincidence, I tell you, just a coincidence!”

Dennison sold the room the very second day after to a middle-aged couple on a visit to the city to see the sights. Striker and Maxon sort of held their breaths, without admitting it to each other. Striker even got up out of bed once or twice that first night and took a prowl past the door of nine-thirteen, stopping to listen carefully. All he could hear was a sonorous baritone snore and a silvery soprano one, in peaceful counterpoint.

The hayseed couple left three days later, perfectly unharmed and vowing they’d never enjoyed themselves as much in their lives.

“Looks like the spirits are lying low,” commented the deskman, shoving the red vacancy-tag back into the pigeonhole.

“No,” said Striker, “looks like it only happens to singles. When there’s two in the room nothing ever happens.”

“You never heard of anyone committing suicide in the presence of a second party, did you?” the clerk pointed out not unreasonably. “That’s one thing they gotta have privacy for.”

Maybe it had been, as Perry insisted, just a gruesome coincidence. “But if it happens a third time,” Striker vowed

to himself, “I’m going to get to the bottom of it if I gotta pull the whole place down brick by brick!”

The Legend, meanwhile, had blazed up, high and furious, with the employees; even the slowest-moving among them had a way of hurrying past Room 913 with sidelong glances and fetish mutterings when any duty called them to that particular hallway after dark. Perry raised hell about it, but he was up against the supernatural now; he and his threats of discharge didn’t stack up at all against that. The penalty for repeating the rumor to a guest was instant dismissal if detected by the management. *If.*

Then just when the legend was languishing from lack of any further substantiation to feed upon, and was about to die down altogether, the room came through a third time!

The calendar read Friday, July 12th, 1935, and the thermometers all read 90-plus. He came in mopping his face like everyone else, but with a sort of professional good humor about him that no one else could muster just then. That was one thing that tipped Striker off he was a salesman. Another was the two bulky sample cases he was hauling with him until the bellboy took them over. A third was his ability to crack a joke when most people felt like eggs in a frying pan waiting to be turned over.

“Just rent me a bath without a room,” he told Dennison. I’ll sleep in the tub all night with the cold water running over me.”

“I can give you a nice inside room on the fourth.” There were enough vacancies at the moment to offer a choice, these being the dog days.

The newcomer held up his hand, palm outward. “No thanks, not this kind of weather. I’m willing to pay the difference.”

“Well, I’ve got an outside on the sixth, and a couple on the ninth.”

“The higher the better. More chance to get a little circulation into the air.”

There were two on the ninth, 13 and 19. Dennison's hand paused before 13, strayed on past it to 19, hesitated, came back again. After all, the room had to be sold. This was business, not a kid's goblin story. Even Striker could see that. And it was nine months now since—There'd been singles in the room since then, too. And they'd lived to check out again.

He gave him 913. But after the man had gone up, he couldn't refrain from remarking to Striker: "Keep your fingers crossed. That's the one with the jinx on it." As though Striker didn't know that! "I'm going to do a little more than that," he promised himself privately.

He swung the register around toward him so he could read it. *Amos* J. *Dillberry, City,* was inscribed on it. Meaning this was the salesman's headquarters when he was not on the road, probably. Striker shifted it back again.

He saw the salesman in the hotel dining room at mealtime that evening. He came in freshly showered and laundered, and had a wisecrack for his waiter. That was the salesman in him. The heat certainly hadn't affected his appetite any. The way he stoked.

"If anything happens," thought Striker with gloomy foreboding, "that dick Courlander should show up later and try to tell me this guy was depressed or affected by the heat! He should just try!"

In the early part of the evening the salesman hung around the lobby a while, trying to drum up conversation with this and that sweltering fellow-guest. Striker was in there too, watching him covertly. For once he was not a hotel dick sizing somebody up hostilely; he was a hotel dick sizing somebody up protectively. Not finding anyone particularly receptive, Dillberry went out into the street about ten, in quest of a soul mate.

Striker stood up as soon as he'd gone, and took the opportunity of going up to 913 and inspecting it thoroughly. He went over every square inch of it: got down on his hands

and knees and explored all along the baseboards of the walls; examined the electric outlets; held matches to such slight fissures as there were between the tiles in the bathroom; rolled back one half of the carpet at a time and inspected the floorboards thoroughly; even got up a chair and fiddled with the ceiling light fixture, to see if there was anything tricky about it. He couldn't find a thing wrong. He tested the windows exhaustively, working them back and forth until the hinges threatened to come off. There wasn't anything defective or balky about them, and on a scorching night like this the inmate was bound to leave them wide open and let it go at that, not fiddle around with them in any way during the middle of the night. There wasn't enough breeze, even this high up, to swing a cobweb.

He locked the room behind him, went downstairs again with a helpless dissatisfied feeling of having done everything that was humanly possible—and yet not having done anything at all, really. What was there he could do?

Dillberry reappeared a few minutes before twelve, with a package cradled in his arm that was unmistakably for refreshment purposes up in his room, and a conspiratorial expression on his face that told Striker's experienced eyes what was coming next. The salesman obviously wasn't the solitary drinker type.

Striker saw her drift in about ten minutes later, with the air of a lady on her way to do a little constructive drinking. He couldn't place her on the guest list, and she skipped the desk entirely—so he bracketed her with Dillberry. He did exactly nothing about it—turned his head away as though he hadn't noticed her.

Maxon, who had just come on in time to get a load of this, looked at Striker in surprise. "Aren't you going to do anything about that?" he murmured. "She's not one of our regulars."

"I know what I'm doing," Striker assured him softly. "She don't know it, but she's subbing for night watchman up

there. As long as he's not alone, nothing can happen to him."

"Oh, is that the angle? Using her for a chest protector, eh? But that just postpones the showdown—don't solve it. If you keep using a spare to ward it off, how you gonna know what it is?"

"That," Striker had to admit, "is just the rub. But I hate like the devil to find out at the expense of still another life."

But the precaution was frustrated before he had time to see whether it would work or not. The car came down almost immediately afterwards, and the blonde was still on it, looking extremely annoyed and quenching her unsatisfied thirst by chewing gum with a sound like castanets. Beside her stood Manager Perry, pious determination transforming his face.

"Good night," he said, politely ushering her off the car.

"Y'couldda at least let me have one quick one, neat, you big overstuffed blimp!" quoth the departing lady indignantly. "After I helped him pick out the brand!"

Perry came over to the desk and rebuked his houseman: "Where are your eyes, Striker? How did you let that come about? I happened to spot her out in the hall waiting to be let in. You want to be on your toes, man."

"So it looks like he takes his own chances," murmured Maxon, when the manager had gone up again.

"Then I'm elected, personally," sighed Striker. "Maybe it's just as well. Even if something had happened with her up there, she didn't look like she had brains enough to be able to tell what it was afterwards."

In the car, on the way to his room, he said, "Stop at nine a minute—and wait for me." This was about a quarter to one.

He listened outside 13. He heard a page rustle, knew the salesman wasn't asleep, so he knocked softly. Dillberry opened the door.

"Excuse me for disturbing you. I'm the hotel detective."

“I’ve been quarantined once tonight already,” said the salesman, but his characteristic good humor got the better of him even now. “You can come in and look if you want to, but I know when I’m licked.”

“No, it isn’t about that.” Striker wondered how to put it. In loyalty to his employer he couldn’t very well frighten the man out of the place. “I just wanted to warn you to please be careful of those windows. The guard-rail outside them’s pretty low, and—’’

“No danger,” the salesman chuckled. “I’m not subject to dizzy spells and I don’t walk in my sleep.”

Striker didn’t smile back. “Just bear in mind what I said, though, will you?”

Dillberry was still chortling goodnaturedly. “If he *did* lose his balance during the night and go out,” thought Striker impatiently, “it would be like him still to keep on sniggering all the way down.”

“What are you worried they’ll do—creep up on me and bite me?” kidded the salesman.

“Maybe that’s a little closer to the truth than you realize,” Striker said to himself mordantly. Looking at the black, night-filled aperture across the lighted room from them, he visualized it for the first time as a hungry, predatory maw, with an evil active intelligence of its own, swallowing the living beings that lingered too long within its reach, sucking them through to destruction, like a diabolic vacuum cleaner. It looked like an upright, open black coffin there, against the cream-painted walls; all it needed was a silver handle at each end. Or like a symbolic Egyptian doorway to the land of the dead, with its severe proportions and pitch-black core and the hot, lazy air coming through it from the nether world.

He was beginning to hate it with a personal hate, because it baffled him, it had him licked, had him helpless, and it struck without warning—an unfair adversary.

Dillberry giggled, “You got a look on your face like you tasted poison! I got a bottle here hasn’t been opened yet. How about rinsing it out?”

“No, thanks,” said Striker, turning away. “And it’s none of my business, I know, but just look out for those windows if you’ve got a little something under your belt later.”

“No fear,” the salesman called after him. “It’s no fun drinking alone. Too hot for that, anyway.”

Striker went on up to his own room and turned in. The night air had a heavy, stagnant expectancy to it, as if it were just waiting for something to happen. Probably the heat, and yet he could hardly breathe, the air was so leaden with menace and sinister tension.

He couldn’t put his mind to the “fantastic” magazine he’d taken to bed with him—he flung it across the room finally. “You’d think I knew, ahead of time!” he told himself scoffingly. And yet deny it as he might, he did have a feeling that tonight was going to be one of those times. Heat jangling his nerves, probably. He put out his light—even the weak bulb gave too much warmth for comfort—and lay there in the dark, chain-smoking cigarettes until his tongue prickled.

An hour ticked off, like drops of molten lead. He heard the hour of three strike faintly somewhere in the distance, finally. He lay there, tossing and turning, his mind going around and around the problem. What *could* it have been but two suicides, by coincidence both from the one room? There had been no violence, no signs of anyone having got in from the outside.

He couldn’t get the infernal room off his mind; it was driving him nutty. He sat up abruptly, decided to go down there and take soundings. Anything was better than lying there. He put on shirt and pants, groped his way to the door without bothering with the light—it was too hot for lights—opened the door and started down the hall. He left the door

cracked open behind him, to save himself the trouble of having to work a key on it when he got back.

He'd already rounded the turn of the hall and was at the fire door giving onto the emergency stairs, when he heard a faint trill somewhere behind him. The ding-a-ling of a telephone bell. Could that be his? If it was—He tensed at the implication. It kept on sounding: it must be his, or it would have been answered by now.

He turned and ran back, shoved the door wide open. It was. It burst into full-bodied volume, almost seemed to explode in his face. He found the instrument in the dark, rasped, "Hello?"

"Strike?" There was fear in Maxon's voice now. "It's—it's happened again."

Striker drew in his breath, and that was cold too, in all the heat of the stuffy room. "Nine-thirteen?" he said hoarsely. "Nine-thirteen!"

He hung up without another word. His feet beat a pulsing tattoo, racing down the hall. This time he went straight to the room, not down to the street. He'd seen too often what "they" looked like, down below, after they'd grounded. This time he wanted to see what that hell box, that four-walled coffin, that murder crate of a room looked like. Right after. Not five minutes or even two, but right after—as fast as it was humanly possible to get there. But maybe five minutes had passed, already: must have, by the time it was discovered, and he was summoned, and he got back and answered his phone. Why hadn't he stirred his stumps a few minutes sooner? He'd have been just in time, not only to prevent, but to see what it was—if there was anything to see.

He got down to the ninth, heat or no heat, in thirty seconds flat, and over to the side of the building the room was on. The door was yawning wide open, and the room light was out. "Caught you, have I?" flashed grimly through his mind. He rounded the jamb like a shot, poked the light

switch on, stood crouched, ready to fling himself—Nothing. No living thing, no disturbance.

No note either, this time. He didn't miss any bets. He looked into the closet, the bath, even got down and peered under the bed. He peered cautiously down from the lethal window embrasure, careful where he put his hands, careful where he put his weight.

He couldn't see the street, because the window was too high up, but he could hear voices down there.

He went back to the hall and stood there listening. But it was too late to expect to hear anything, and he knew it. The way he'd come galloping down like a war horse would have drowned out any sounds of surreptitious departure there might have been. And somehow, he couldn't help feeling there hadn't been any, anyway. The evil was implicit in this room itself—didn't come from outside, open door to the contrary.

He left the room just the way he'd found it, went below finally. Maxon straightened up from concealing something under the desk, drew the back of his hand recklessly across his mouth. "Bring on your heebie-jeebies," he said defiantly. "See if I care—now!"

Striker didn't blame him too much at that. He felt pretty shaken himself.

Perry came down one car-trip behind him. "I never heard of anything like it!" he was seething. "What kind of a merry-go-round is this anyway?"

Eddie Courlander had been sent over for the third time. Happened to be the only one on hand, maybe. The whole thing was just a monotonous repetition of the first two times, but too grisly—to Striker, anyway—to be amusing.

"This is getting to be a commutation trip for me," the police dick announced with macabre humor, stalking in. "The desk lieutenant only has to say, 'Suicide at a hotel,' and I say right away, 'The St. Anselm,' before he can tell me."

“Only it isn’t,” said Striker coldly. “There was no note.”

“Are you going to start that again?” growled the city dick. “It’s the same room again, in case you’re interested. Third time in a little over two years. Now, don’t you think that’s rubbing it in a little heavy?”

Courlander didn’t answer, as though he *was* inclined to think that, but—if it meant siding with Striker—hated to have to admit it.

Even Perry’s professional bias for suicide—if the alternative had to be murder, the *bête noire* of hotel men—wavered in the face of this triple assault. “It does look kind of spooky.” He faltered, polishing the center of his bald head. “All the rooms below, on that line, have those same floor-length windows, and it’s never taken place in any of the others.”

“Well, we’re going to do it up brown this time and get to the bottom of it!” Courlander promised.

They got off at the ninth. “Found the door open like this, too,” Striker pointed out. “I stopped off here on my way down.”

Courlander just glanced at him, but still wouldn’t commit himself. He went into the room, stopped dead center and stood there looking around, the other two just behind him. Then he went over to the bed, fumbled a little with the covers. Suddenly he spaded his hand under an edge of the pillow, drew it back again.

“I thought you said there was no note?” he said over his shoulder to Striker.

“You not only thought. I did say that.”

“You still do, huh?” He shoved a piece of stationery at him. “What does this look like—a collar button?”

It was as laconic as the first two. *I’m going to hell, where it’s cool!* Unsigned.

“That wasn’t in here when I looked the place over the first time,” Striker insisted with slow emphasis. “That was planted in here between then and now!”

Courlander flung his head disgustedly. “It’s white, isn’t it? The bedclothes are white too, ain’t they? Why don’t you admit you missed it?”

“Because I know I didn’t! I had my face inches away from that bed, bending down looking under it.”

“Aw, you came in half-asleep and couldn’t even see straight, probably!”

“I’ve been awake all night, wider awake than you are right now!”

“And as for your open door—” Courlander jeered. He bent down, ran his thumbnail under the panel close in to the jamb, jerked something out. He stood up exhibiting a wedge made of a folded-over paper match-cover. “He did that himself, to try to get a little circulation into the air in here.” Striker contented himself with murmuring, “Funny no one else’s door was left open.” But to himself he thought, ruefully, “It’s trying its best to look natural all along the line, like the other times; which only proves it isn’t.”

The city dick answered, “Not funny at all. A woman alone in a room wouldn’t leave her door open for obvious reasons; and a couple in a room wouldn’t, because the wife would be nervous or modest about it. But why shouldn’t a guy rooming by himself do it, once his light was out, and if he didn’t have anything of value in here with him? That’s why his was the only door open like that. The heat drove him wacky; and when he couldn’t get any relief no matter what he did—”

“The heat did nothing of the kind. I spoke to him at twelve and he was cheerful as a robin.”

“Yeah, but a guy’s resistance gets worn down, it frays, and then suddenly it snaps.” Courlander chuckled scornfully. “It’s as plain as day before your eyes.”

“Well,” drawled Striker, “if this is your idea of getting to the bottom of a thing, baby, you’re easily pleased! I’ll admit it’s a little more work to keep digging, than just to write

down ‘suicide’ in your report and let it go at that,” he added stingingly.

“I don’t want any of your insinuations!” Courlander said hotly. “Trying to call me lazy, huh? All right,” he said with the air of doing a big favor, “I’ll play ball with you. We’ll make the rounds giving off noises like a detective, if that’s your idea.”

“You’ll empty my house for me,” Perry whined.

“Your man here seems to think I’m laying down on the job.” Courlander stalked out, hitched his head at them to follow.

“You’ve never played the numbers, have you?” Striker suggested stolidly. “No number ever comes up three times in a row. That’s what they call the law of averages. Three suicides from one room doesn’t conform to the law of averages. And when a thing don’t conform to that law, it’s phony.”

“You forgot your lantern slides, perfessor,” sneered the police dick. He went next door and knuckled 915, first gently, then resoundingly.

The door opened and a man stuck a sleep-puffed face out at them. He said, “What-d’ye want? It takes me half the night to work up a little sleep and then I gotta have it busted on me!” He wasn’t just faking being asleep—it was the real article; anyone could see that. The light hurt his eyes; he kept blinking.

“Sorry, pal, “ Courlander overrode him with a businesslike air, “but we gotta ask a few questions. Can we come in and look around?”

“No, ya can’t! My wife’s in bed!”

“Have her put something over her, then, cause we’re comin’ !”

“I’m leaving the first thing in the morning!” the man threatened angrily. “You can’t come into my room like this without a search warrant!” He thrust himself belligerently into the door opening.

“Just what have you got to hide, Mr. Morris?” suggested Striker mildly.

The remark had an almost magical effect on him. He blinked, digested the implication a moment, then abruptly swept the door wide open, stepped out of the way.

A woman was sitting up in bed struggling into a wrapper. Courlander studied the wall a minute. “Did you hear any rise of any kind from the next room before you fell asleep?” The man shook his head, said: “No.”

“About how long ago did you fall asleep?”

“About an hour ago,” said the man sulkily.

Courlander turned to the manager. “Go back in there a minute, will you, and knock on the wall with your fist from that side. Hit it good.”

The four of them listened in silence; not a sound came through. Perry returned, blowing his breath on his stinging knuckles.

“That’s all,” Courlander said to the occupants. “Sorry to bother you.” He and Striker went out again. Perry lingered a moment to try to smooth their ruffled plumage.

They went down to the other side of the death chamber and tried 911. “This witch,” said Perry, joining them, “has got ears like a dictaphone. If there was anything to hear, she heard it all right! I don’t care whether you disturb her or not. I’ve been trying to get rid of her for years.”

She was hatchet-faced, beady-eyed, and had a cap with a draw-string tied closely about her head. She seemed rather satisfied at finding herself an object of attention, even in the middle of the night, as though she couldn’t get anyone to listen to her most of the time.

“Asleep?” she said almost boastfully. “I should say not! I haven’t closed my eyes all night.” And then, overriding Courlander’s attempt at getting in a question, she went on: “Mr. Perry, I know it’s late, but as long as you’re here, I want to show you something!” She drew back into the

center of the room, crooked her finger at him ominously. “You just come here!”

The three men advanced alertly and jockeyed into position from which they could see.

She swooped down, flung back a corner of the rug, and straightened up again, pointing dramatically. A thin film of dust marked the triangle of flooring that had just been bared. “What do you think of that?” she said accusingly. “Those maids of yours, instead of sweeping the dust *out* of the room, sweep it under the rug.”

The manager threw his hands up over his head, turned, and went out. “The building could be burning,” he fumed “and if we both landed in the same fireman’s net, she’d still roll over and complain to me about the service!”

Striker lingered behind just long enough to ask her: “You say you’ve been awake all night. Did you hear anything from the room next door, nine-thirteen, during the past half-hour or so?”

“Why, no. Not a sound. Is there something wrong in there?” The avid way she asked it was proof enough of her good faith. He got out before she could start questioning him.

Courlander grinned. “I can find a better explanation even than the heat for him jumping, now,” he remarked facetiously. “He musta seen *that* next door to him and got scared to death.”

“That would be beautifully simple, wouldn’t it?” Striker said cuttingly. “Let’s give it one more spin,” he suggested. “No one on either side of the room heard anything. Let’s try the room directly underneath—eight-thirteen. The closet and bath arrangement makes for soundproof side-partitions, but the ceilings are pretty thin here.”

Courlander gave the manager an amused look, as if to say, “Humor him!”

Perry, however, rolled his eyes in dismay. “Good heavens, are you trying to turn my house upside-down, Striker?

Those are the Youngs, our star guests, and you know it!”

“D’you want to wait until it happens a fourth time?” Striker warned him. “It’ll bring on a panic if it does.”

They went down to the hallway below, stopped before 813. “These people are very wealthy,” whispered the manager apprehensively. “They could afford much better quarters. I’ve considered myself lucky that they’ve stayed with us. Please be tactful. I don’t want to lose them.” He tapped apologetically, with just two fingernails.

Courlander sniffed and said, “What’s that I smell?”

“Incense,” breathed the manager.

“*Shhh!* Don’t you talk out of turn now.”

There was a rustling sound behind the door, then it opened and a young Chinese in a silk robe stood looking out at them. Striker knew him, through staff gossip and his own observation, to be not only thoroughly Americanized in both speech and manner but an American by birth as well. He was Chinese only by descent. He was a lawyer and made huge sums looking after the interests of the Chinese businessmen down on Pell and Mott Streets—a considerable part of which he lost again betting on the wrong horses, a pursuit he was no luckier at than his average fellow-citizen. He was married to a radio singer. He wore horn-rimmed glasses.

“Hi!” he said briskly. “The Vigilantes! What’s up, Perry?”

“I’m so sorry to annoy you like this,” the manager began to whine.

“Skip it,” said Young pleasantly. “Who could sleep on a night like this? We’ve been taking turns fanning each other in here. Come on in.”

Even Striker had never been in the room before; the Youngs were quality folk, not to be intruded upon by a mere hotel detective. A doll-like creature was curled up on a sofa languidly fanning herself, and a scowling Pekinese nestled on her lap. The woman wore green silk pajamas. Striker took note of a tank containing tropical fish, also a lacquered

Buddha on a table with a stick of sandalwood burning before it.

Striker and Courlander let Perry put the question, since being tactful was more in his line. “Have you people been disturbed by any sounds coming from over you?”

“Not a blessed thing,” Mrs. Young averred. “Have we, babe? Only that false-alarm mutter of thunder that didn’t live up to its promise. But that came from outside, of course.”

“Thunder?” said Striker, puzzled. “What thunder? How long ago?”

“Oh, it wasn’t a sharp clap,” Young explained affably. “Way off in the distance, low and rolling. You could hardly hear it all. There was a flicker of sheet-lightning at the same time—that’s how we knew what it was.”

“But wait a minute,” Striker said discontentedly. “I was lying awake in my room, and I didn’t hear any thunder, at any time tonight.”

“There he goes again,” Courlander slurred out of the corner of his mouth to Perry.

“But your room’s located in a different part of the building,” Perry interposed diplomatically. “It looks out on a shaft, and that might have muffled the sound.”

“Thunder is thunder. You can hear it down in a cellar, when there is any to hear,” Striker insisted.

The Chinese couple goodnaturedly refused to take offense. “Well, it was very low, just a faint rolling. We probably wouldn’t have noticed it ourselves, only at the same time there was this far-off gleam of lightning, and it seemed to stir up a temporary breeze out there, like when a storm’s due to break. I must admit we didn’t feel any current of air here inside the room, but we both saw a newspaper or rag of some kind go sailing down past the window just then.”

“No, that wasn’t a—” Striker stopped short, drew in his breath, as he understood what it was they must have seen.

Perry was frantically signaling him to shut up and get outside. Striker hung back long enough to ask one more question. “Did your dog bark or anything, about the time this—promise of a storm’ came up?”

“No, Shan’s very well behaved,” Mrs. Young said fondly. “He whined, though,” her husband remembered. “We thought it was the heat.”

Striker narrowed his eyes speculatively. “Was it right at that same time?”

“Just about.”

Perry and Courlander were both hitching their heads at him to come out, before he spilled the beans. When he had joined them finally, the city dick flared up: “What’d you mean by asking that last one? You trying to dig up spooks, maybe?—hinting that their dog could sense something? All it was is, the dog knew more than they did. It knew that wasn’t a newspaper flicked down past their window. That’s why it whined!”

Striker growled stubbornly. “There hasn’t been any thunder or any lightning at any time tonight—I know what I’m saying! I was lying awake in my room, as awake as they were!”

Courlander eyed the manager maliciously. “Just like there wasn’t any farewell note, until I dug it out from under the pillow.”

Striker said challengingly, “You find me *one other person,* in this building or outside of it, that saw and heard that thunder and lightning’ the same as they did, and well call it quits!”

“Fair enough. I’ll take you up on that!” Courlander snapped. “It ought to be easy enough to prove to you that that wasn’t a private preview run off in heaven for the special benefit of the Chinese couple.”

“And when people pay two hundred a month, they don’t lie,” said Perry quaintly.

“Well take that projecting wing that sticks out at right angles,” said the dick. “It ought to have been twice as clear and loud out there as down on the eighth. Or am I stacking the cards?”

“You’re not exactly dealing from a warm deck,” Striker said. “If it was heard below, it could be heard out in the wing, and still have something to do with what went on in 913. Why not pick somebody who was out on the streets at the time and ask him? There’s your real test.”

“Take it or leave it. I’m not running around on the street this hour of the night, asking people ‘Did you hear a growl of thunder thirty minutes ago?’ I’d land in Bellevue in no time!”

“This is the bachelor wing,” Perry explained as they rounded the turn of the hall. “All men. Even so, they’re entitled to a night’s rest as well as anyone else. Must you disturb *everyone* in the house?”

“Not my idea,” Courlander rubbed it in. “That note is still enough for me. I’m giving this guy all the rope he needs, that’s all.”

They stopped outside 909. “Peter the Hermit,” said Perry disgustedly. “Aw, don’t take him. He won’t be any help. He’s nutty. He’ll start telling you all about his gold mines up in Canada.”

But Courlander had already knocked. “He’s not too nutty to know thunder and lightning when he hears it, is he?”

Bedsprings creaked, there was a slither of bare feet, and the door opened.

He was about sixty, with a mane of snow-white hair that fell down to his shoulders, and a long white beard. He had mild blue eyes, with something trusting and childlike about them. You only had to look at them to understand how easy it must have been for the confidence men, or whoever it was, to have swindled him into buying those worthless shafts sunk into the ground up in the backwoods of Ontario.

Striker knew the story well; everyone in the hotel did. But others laughed, while Striker sort of understood—put two and two together. The man wasn't crazy, he was just disappointed in life. The long hair and the beard. Striker suspected, were not due to eccentricity but probably to stubbornness; he'd taken a vow never to cut his hair or shave until those mines paid off. And the fact that he hugged his room day and night, never left it except just once a month to buy a stock of canned goods, was understandable too. He'd been "stung" once, so now he was leery of strangers, avoided people for fear of being "stung" again. And then ridicule probably had something to do with it too. The way that fool Courlander was all but laughing in his face right now, trying to cover it with his hand before his mouth, was characteristic.

The guest was down on the register as Atkinson, but no one ever called him anything but Peter the Hermit. At irregular intervals he left the hotel, to go "prospecting" up to his mine pits, see if there were any signs of ore. Then he'd come back again disappointed, but without having given up hope, to retire again for another six or eight months. He kept the same room while he was away, paying for it just as though he were in it.

"Can we come in, Pops?" the city dick asked, when he'd managed to straighten his face sufficiently.

"Not if you're going to try to sell me any more gold mines."

"Naw, we just want a weather report. You been asleep or awake?"

"I been awake all night, practickly."

"Good. Now tell me just one thing. Did you hear any thunder at all, see anything like heat-lightning flicker outside your window, little while back?"

"Heat-lightning don't go with thunder. You never have the two together," rebuked the patriarch.

“All right, all right,” said Courlander wearily. “Any kind of lightning, plain or fancy, and any kind of thunder?”

“Sure did. Just once, though. Tiny speck of thunder and tiny mite of lightning, no more’n a flash in the pan. Stars were all out and around too. Darnedest thing I ever saw!” Courlander gave the hotel dick a look that should have withered him. But Striker jumped in without waiting. “About this flicker of lightning. Which direction did it seem to come from? Are you sure it came from above and not”—he pointed meaningly downward—”from *below* your window?” This time it was the Hermit who gave him the withering look. “Did you ever hear of lightning coming from below, son? Next thing you’ll be trying to tell me rain falls up from the ground! “ He went over to the open window, beckoned. “I’ll show you right about where it panned out. I was standing here looking out at the time, just happened to catch it.” He pointed in a northeasterly direction. “There. See that tall building up over thattaway? It come from over behind there—miles away, o’course—but from that part of the sky.”

“Much obliged, Pops. That’s all.”

They withdrew just as the hermit was getting into his stride. He rested a finger alongside his nose, trying to hold their attention, said confidentially: “I’m going to be a rich man one of these days, you wait’n see. Those mines o’mine are going to turn into a bonanza.” But they closed the door on him.

Riding down in the car, Courlander snarled at Striker: “Now, eat your words. You said if we found one other person heard and saw that thunder and sheet-lightning—”

“I know what I said,” Striker answered dejectedly. “Funny—private thunder and lightning that some hear and others don’t.”

Courlander swelled with satisfaction. He took out his notebook, flourished it. “Well, here goes, ready or not! You can work yourself up into a lather about it by yourself from

now on. I'm not wasting any more of the city's time—or my own—on anything as self-evident as this!"

"Self-evidence, like beauty," Striker reminded him, "is in the eye of the beholder. It's there for some, and not for others." Courlander stopped by the desk, roughing out his report. Striker, meanwhile, was comparing the note with Dillberry's signature in the book. "Why, this scrawl isn't anything like his John Hancock in the ledger!" he exclaimed.

"You expect a guy gone out of his mind with the heat to sit down and write a nice copybook hand?" scoffed the police dick. "It was in his room, wasn't it?"

This brought up their former bone of contention. "Not the first time I looked."

"I only have your word for that."

"Are you calling me a liar?" flared Striker.

"No, but I think what's biting you is, you got a suppressed desire to be a detective."

"I think," said Striker with deadly irony, "you have too."

"Why, you—!"

Perry hurriedly got between them. "For heaven's sake," he pleaded wearily, "isn't it hot enough and messy enough, without having a fist fight over it?"

Courlander turned and stamped out into the suffocating before-dawn murk. Perry leaned over the desk, holding his head in both hands. "That room's a jinx," he groaned, "a voodoo."

"There's nothing the matter with the room—there can't possibly be," Striker pointed out. "That would be against nature and all natural laws. That room is just plaster and bricks and wooden boards, and they can't hurt anyone—in themselves. Whatever's behind this is some human agency, and I'm going to get to the bottom of it if I gotta sleep in there myself!" He waited a minute, let the idea sink in, take hold of him, then he straightened, snapped his fingers decisively. "That's the next step on the program! I'll be the

guinea pig, the white mouse! That's the only way we can ever hope to clear it up."

Perry gave him a bleak look, as though such foolhardiness would have been totally foreign to his own nature, and he couldn't understand anyone being willing to take such an eerie risk.

"Because I've got a hunch," Striker went on grimly. "It's not over yet. It's going to happen again and yet again, if we don't hurry up and find out what it is."

Now that the official investigation was closed, and there was no outsider present to spread rumors that could give his hotel a bad name, Perry seemed willing enough to agree with Striker that it wasn't normal and natural. Or else the advanced hour of the night was working suggestively on his nerves. "B-but haven't you any idea at all, just as a starting point," he quavered, "as to what it could be—if it is anything? Isn't it better to have some kind of a theory? At least know what to look for, not just shut yourself up in there blindfolded?"

"I could have several, but I can't believe in them myself. It could be extramural hypnosis—that means through the walls, you know. Or it could be fumes that lower the vitality, depress, and bring on suicide mania—such as small quantities of monoxide will do. But this is summertime and there's certainly no heat in the pipes. No, there's only one way to get an idea, and that's to try it out on myself. I'm going to sleep in that room myself tomorrow night, to get the *feel* of it. Have I your okay?"

Perry just wiped his brow, in anticipatory horror. "Go ahead if you've got the nerve," he said limply. "You wouldn't catch me doing it!"

Striker smiled glumly. "I'm curious—that way."

Striker made arrangements as inconspicuously as possible the next day, since there was no telling at which point anonymity ended and hostile observation set in, whether up in the room itself or down at the registration

desk, or somewhere midway between the two. He tried to cover all the externals by which occupancy of the room could be detected without at the same time revealing his identity. Dennison, the day clerk, was left out of it entirely. Outside of Perry himself, he took only Maxon into his confidence. No one else, not even the cleaning help. He waited until the night clerk came on duty at eleven-thirty before he made the final arrangements, so that there was no possibility of foreknowledge.

"When you're sure no one's looking—and not until then," he coached the night clerk, "I want you to take the red vacancy-tag out of the pigeonhole. And sign a phony entry in the register—John Brown, anything at all. We can erase it in the morning. That's in case the leak is down here at this end. I know the book is kept turned facing you, but there *is* a slight possibility someone could read it upside-down while stopping by here for their key. One other important thing: I may come up against something that's too much for me, whether it's physical or narcotic or magnetic. Keep your eye on that telephone switchboard in case I need help in a hurry. If nine-thirteen flashes, don't wait to answer. I mayn't be able to give a message. Just get up there in a hurry."

"That's gonna do you a lot of good," Maxon objected fearfully. "By the time anyone could get up there to the ninth on that squirrel-cage, it would be all over! Why don't you plant Bob or someone out of sight around the turn of the hall?"

"I can't. The hall maybe watched. If it's anything external, and not just atmospheric or telepathic, it comes through the hall. It's got to. That's the only way it can get in. This has got to look *right,* wide open, unsuspecting, or whatever it is won't strike. No, the switchboard'll be my only means of communication. I'm packing a Little Friend with me, anyway, so I won't be exactly helpless up there. Now remember, 'Mr. John Brown' checked in here unseen by the human eye sometime during the evening. Whatever it is, it

can’t be watching the desk *all* the time, twenty-four hours a day. And for Pete’s sake, don’t take any nips tonight. Lock the bottle up in the safe. My life is in your hands. Don’t drop it!”

“Good luck and here’s hoping,” said Maxon sepulchrally, as though he never expected to see Striker alive again.

Striker drifted back into the lounge and lolled conspicuously in his usual vantage-point until twelve struck and Bob began to put the primary lights out. Then he strolled into the hotel drug store and drank two cups of scalding black coffee. Not that he was particularly afraid of not being able to keep awake, tonight of all nights, but there was nothing like making sure. There might be some soporific or sedative substance to overcome, though how it could be administered he failed to see.

He came into the lobby again and went around to the elevator bank, without so much as a wink to Maxon. He gave a carefully studied yawn, tapped his fingers over his mouth. A moment later there was a whiff of some exotic scent behind him and the Youngs had come in, presumably from Mrs. Young’s broadcasting station. She was wearing an embroidered silk shawl and holding the Peke in her arm.

Young said, “Hi, fella.” She bowed slightly. The car door opened.

Young said, “Oh, just a minute—my key,” and stepped over to the desk.

Striker’s eyes followed him relentlessly. The register was turned facing Maxon’s way. The Chinese lawyer glanced down at it, curved his head around slightly as if to read it right side up, then took his key, came back again. They rode up together. The Peke started to whine. Mrs. Young fondled it, crooned: “Sh, Shan, be a good boy.” She explained to Striker, “It always makes him uneasy to ride up in an elevator.”

The couple got off at the eighth. She bowed again. Young said, “G’night.” Striker, of course, had no idea of getting off

at any but his usual floor, the top, even though he was alone in the car. He said in a low voice to Bob: “Does that dog whine other times when you ride it up?”

“No, sir,” the elevator man answered. “It nevah seem’ to mind until tonight. Mus’ be getting ritzy.”

Striker just filed that detail away: it was such a tiny little thing.

He let himself into his little hole-in-the-wall room. He pulled down the shade, even though there was just a blank wall across the shaft from his window. There was a roof ledge farther up. He took his gun out of his valise and packed it in his back pocket. That was all he was taking with him; no “fantastics” tonight. The fantasy was in real life, not on the printed page.

He took off his coat and necktie and hung them over the back of a chair. He took the pillow off his bed and forced it down under the bedclothes so that it made a longish mound. He’d brought a newspaper up with him. He opened this to double-page width and leaned it up against the head of the bed, as though someone were sitting up behind it reading it. It sagged a little, so he took a pin and fastened it to the woodwork. He turned on the shaded reading lamp at his bedside, turned out the room light, so that there was just a diffused glow. Then he edged up to the window sidewise and raised the shade again, but not all the way, just enough to give a view of the lower part of the bed if anyone were looking down from above—from the cornice, for instance. He always had his reading lamp going the first hour or two after he retired other nights. Tonight it was going to burn all night. This was the only feature of the arrangement Perry would have disapproved of, electricity bills being what they were.

That took care of things up here. He edged his door open, made sure the hallway was deserted, and sidled out in vest, trousers, and carrying the .38. He’d done everything humanly possible to make the thing foolproof, but it

occurred to him, as he made his way noiselessly to the emergency staircase, that there was one thing all these precautions would be sterile against, if it was involved in any way, and that was mindreading. The thought itself was enough to send a shudder up his spine, make him want to give up before he'd even gone any further, so he resolutely put it from him. Personally he'd never been much of a believer in that sort of thing, so it wasn't hard for him to discount it. But disbelief in a thing is not always a guarantee that it does not exist or exert influence, and he would have been the first to admit that.

The safety stairs were cement and not carpeted like the hallways, but even so he managed to move down them with a minimum of sound once his senses had done all they could to assure him the whole shaft was empty of life from its top to its bottom.

He eased the hinged fire door on the ninth open a fraction of an inch, and reconnoitered the hall in both directions; forward through the slit before him, rearward through the seam between the hinges. This was the most important part of the undertaking. Everything depended on this step. It was vital to get into that room unseen. Even if he did not know what he was up against, there was no sense letting what he was up against know who he was.

He stood there for a long time like that, without moving, almost without breathing, narrowly studying each and every one of the inscrutably closed doors up and down the hall. Finally he broke for it.

He had his passkey ready before he left the shelter of the fire door. He stabbed it into the lock of 913, turned it, and opened the door with no more than two deft, quick, almost soundless movements. He had to work fast, to get in out of the open. He got behind the door once he was through, got the key out, closed the door—and left the room dark. The whole maneuver, he felt reasonably sure, could not have

been accomplished more subtly by anything except a ghost or wraith.

He took a long deep breath behind the closed door and relaxed—a little. Leaving the room dark around him didn't make for very much peace of mind—there was always the thought that *It* might already be in here with him—but he was determined not to show his face even to the blank walls.

He was now, therefore, Mr. John Brown, Room 913, for the rest of the night, unsuspectingly waiting to be—whatever it was had happened to Hopper, Hastings, Dillberry. He had a slight edge on them because he had a gun in his pocket, but try to shoot a noxious vapor (for instance) with a .38 bullet!

First he made sure of the telephone, his one lifeline to the outside world. He carefully explored the wire in the dark, inch by inch from the base of the instrument down to the box against the wall, to make sure the wire wasn't cut or rendered useless in any way. Then he opened the closet door and examined the inside of that, by sense of touch alone. Nothing in there but a row of empty hangers. Then he cased the bath, still without the aid of light; tried the water faucets, the drains, even the medicine chest. Next he devoted his attention to the bed itself, explored the mattress and the springs, even got down and swept an arm back and forth under it, like an old maid about to retire for the night. The other furniture also got a health examination. He tested the rug with his foot for unevennesses. Finally there remained the window, that mouthway to doom. He didn't go close to it. He stayed well back within the gloom of the room, even though there was nothing, not even a rooftop or water tank, opposite, from which the interior of this room could be seen; the buildings all around were much lower. It couldn't tell him anything; it seemed to be just a window embrasure. If it was more than that, it was one up on him.

Finally he took out his gun, slipped the safety off, laid it down beside the phone on the nightstand. Then he lay back on the bed, shoes and all, crossed his ankles, folded his hands under his head, and lay staring up at the pool of blackness over him that was the ceiling. He couldn't hear a thing, after that, except the whisper of his breathing, and he had to listen close to get even that.

The minutes pulled themselves out into a quarter hour, a half, a whole one, like sticky taffy. All sorts of horrid possibilities occurred to him, lying there in the dark, and made his skin crawl. He remembered the Conan Doyle story, "The Speckled Band," in which a deadly snake had been lowered through a transom night after night in an effort to get it to bite the sleeper. That wouldn't fit this case. He'd come upon the scene too quickly each time. You couldn't juggle a deadly snake—had to take your time handling it. None of his three predecessors had been heard to scream, nor had their broken bodies shown anything but the impact of the fall itself. None of the discoloration or rigidity of snake venom. He'd looked at the bodies at the morgue.

But it was not as much consolation as it should have been, in the dark. He wished he'd been a little braver—one of these absolutely fearless guys. It didn't occur to him that he was being quite brave enough already for one guy, coming up here like this. He'd stretched himself out in here without any certainty he'd ever get up again alive.

He practiced reaching for the phone and for his gun, until he knew just where they both were by heart. They were close enough. He didn't even have to unlimber his elbow. He lit a cigarette, but shielded the match carefully, with his whole body turned toward the wall, so it wouldn't light up his face too much. John Brown could smoke in bed just as well as House Dick Striker.

He kept his eyes on the window more than anything else, almost as if he expected it to sprout a pair of long octopus

arms that would reach out, grab him, and toss him through to destruction.

He asked himself fearfully: “Am I holding it off by lying here awake like this waiting for it? Can it *tell* whether I’m awake or asleep? Is it on me, whatever it is?” He couldn’t help wincing at the implication of the supernatural this argued. A guy could go batty thinking things like that. Still, it couldn’t be denied that the condition of the bed, each time before this, proved that the victims had been asleep and not awake just before it happened.

He thought, “I can pretend I’m asleep, at least, even if I don’t actually go to sleep.” Nothing must be overlooked in this battle of wits, no matter how inane, how childish it seemed at first sight.

He crushed his cigarette out, gave a stage yawn, meant to be heard if it couldn’t be seen, threshed around a little like a man settling himself down for the night, counted ten, and then started to stage-manage his breathing, pumping it slower and heavier, like a real sleeper’s. But under it all he was as alive as a third rail and his heart was ticking away under his ribs like a taximeter.

It was harder to lie waiting for it this way than it had been the other, just normally awake. The strain was almost unbearable. He wanted to leap up, swing out wildly around him in the dark, and yell: “Come on, you! Come on and get it over with!”

Suddenly he tensed more than he was already, if that was possible, and missed a breath. Missed two—forgot all about timing them. Something—what was it?—something was in the air; his nose was warning him, twitching, crinkling, almost like a retriever’s. Sweet, foreign, subtle, something that didn’t belong. He took a deep sniff, held it, while he tried to test the thing, analyze it, differentiate it, like a chemist without apparatus.

Then he got it. If he hadn’t been so worked up in the first place, he would have got it even sooner. Sandalwood.

Sandalwood incense. That meant the Chinese couple, the Youngs, the apartment below. They'd been burning it last night when he was in there, a stick of it in front of that joss of theirs. But how could it get up here? And how could it be harmful, if they were right in the same room with it and it didn't do anything to them?

How did he know they were in the same room with it? A fantastic picture flashed before his mind of the two of them down there right now, wearing gauze masks of filters over their faces, like operating surgeons. Aw, that was ridiculous! They'd been in the room a full five minutes with the stuff—he and Perry and Courlander—without masks and nothing had happened to them.

But he wasn't forgetting how Young's head had swung around a little to scan the reversed register when they came in tonight—nor how their dog had whined, like it had whined when Dillberry's body fell past their window, when—Bob had said—it never whined at other times.

He sat up, pulled off his shoes, and started to move noiselessly around, sniffing like a bloodhound, trying to find out just how and where that odor was getting into the room. It must be at some particular point more than another. It wasn't just *soaking* up through the floor. Maybe it was nothing, then again maybe it was something. It didn't seem to be doing anything to him so far. He could breathe all right, he could think all right. But there was always the possibility that it was simply a sort of smoke-screen or carrier, used to conceal or transport some other gas that was to follow. The sugar-coating for the poison!

He sniffed at the radiator, at the bathroom drains, at the closet door, and in each of the four corners of the room. It was faint, almost unnoticeable in all those places. Then he stopped before the open window. It was much stronger here; it was coming in here!

He edged warily forward, leaned out a little above the low guard-rail, but careful not to shift his balance out of normal,

for this very posture of curiosity might be the crux of the whole thing, the incense a decoy to get them to lean out the window. Sure, it was coming out of their open window, traveling up the face of the building, and—some of it—drifting in through his. That was fairly natural, on a warm, still night like this, without much circulation to the air.

Nothing happened. The window didn't suddenly fold up and throw him or tilt him and pull him after it by sheer optical illusion (for he wasn't touching it in any way). He waited a little longer, tested it a little longer. No other result. It was, then, incense and nothing more.

He went back into the room again, stretched out on the bed once more, conscious for the first time of cold moisture on his brow, which he now wiped off. The aroma became less noticeable presently, as though the stick had burned down. Then finally it was gone. And he was just the way he'd been before.

"So it wasn't that," he dismissed it, and reasoned, "It's because they're Chinese that I was so ready to suspect them. They always seen sinister to the Occidental mind."

There was nothing else after that, just darkness and waiting. Then presently there was a gray line around the window enclosure, and next he could see his hands when he held them out before his face, and then the night bloomed into day and the death watch was over.

He didn't come down to the lobby for another hour, until the sun was up and there was not the slimmest possibility of anything happening any more—this time. He came out of the elevator looking haggard, and yet almost disappointed at the same time.

Maxon eyed him as though he'd never expected to see him again. "Anything?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"Nothing," Striker answered.

Maxon turned without another word, went back to the safe, brought a bottle out to him.

"Yeah, I could use some of that," was all the dick said.

“So I guess this shows,” Maxon suggested hopefully, “that there’s nothing to it after all. I mean about the room being —”

Striker took his time about answering. “It shows,” he said finally, “that whoever it is, is smarter than we gave ‘em credit for. Knew enough not to tip their mitts. Nothing happened because someone knew I was in there, knew who I was, and knew *why* I was in there. And *that* shows it’s somebody in this hotel who’s at the bottom of it.”

“You mean you’re not through yet?”

“Through yet? I haven’t even begun!”

“Well, what’re you going to do next?”

“I’m going to catch up on a night’s sleep, first off,” Striker let him know. “And after that. I’m going to do a little clerical work. Then when that’s through, I’m going to keep my own counsel. No offense, but”—he tapped himself on the forehead—”only this little fellow in here is going to be in on it, not you nor the manager nor anyone else.”

He started his “clerical work” that very evening. Took the old ledgers for March, 1933, and October, 1934, out of the safe, and copied out the full roster of guests from the current one (July, 1935). Then he took the two bulky volumes and the list of present guests up to his room with him and went to work.

First he canceled out all the names on the current list that didn’t appear on either of the former two rosters. That left him with exactly three guests who were residing in the building now and who also had been in it at the time of one of the first two “suicides.” The three were Mr. and Mrs. Young, Atkinson (Peter the Hermit), and Miss Flobelle Heilbron (the cantankerous vixen in 911). Then he canceled those of the above that didn’t appear on *both* of the former lists. There was only one name left uncanceled now. There

was only one guest who had been in occupancy during *each and every one* of the three times that a “suicide” had taken place in 913. Atkinson and Miss Heilbron had been living in the hotel in March, 1933. The Youngs and Miss Heilbron had been living in the building in October, 1934. Atkinson (who must have been away the time before on one of his nomadic “prospecting trips”), the Youngs, and Miss Heilbron were all here now. The one name that recurred triply was Miss Flobelle Heilbron.

So much for his “clerical work.” Now came a little research work.

She didn’t hug her room quite as continuously and tenaciously as Peter the Hermit, but she never strayed very far from it nor stayed away very long at a time—was constantly popping in and out a dozen times a day to feed a cat she kept.

He had a word with Perry the following morning, and soon after lunch the manager, who received complimentary passes to a number of movie theaters in the vicinity, in return for giving them advertising space about his premises, presented her with a matinee pass for that afternoon. She was delighted at this unaccustomed mark of attention, and fell for it like a ton of bricks.

Striker saw her start out at two, and that gave him two full hours. He made a bee-line up there and passkeyed himself in. The cat was out in the middle of the room nibbling at a plate of liver which she’d thoughtfully left behind for it. He started going over the place. He didn’t need two hours. He hit it within ten minutes after he’d come into the room, in one of her bureau drawers, all swathed up in intimate wearing apparel, as though she didn’t want anyone to know she had it.

It was well worn, as though it had been used plenty—kept by her at nights and studied for years. It was entitled *Mesmerism, Self-Taught; How to Impose Your Will on Others.*

But something even more of a giveaway happened while he was standing there holding it in his hand. The cat raised its head from the saucer of liver, looked up at the book, evidently recognized it, and whisked under the bed, ears flat.

"So she's been practicing on you, has she?" Striker murmured. "And you don't like it. Well, I don't either. I wonder who else she's been trying it on?"

He opened the book and thumbed through it. One chapter heading, appropriately enough was, "Experiments at a Distance." He narrowed his eyes, read a few words. "In cases where the subject is out of sight, behind a door or on the other side of a wall, it is better to begin with simple commands, easily transferable. 1—Open the door. 2—Turn around," *etc.*

Well, "jump out of the window" was a simple enough command. Beautifully simple—and final. Was it possible that old crackpot was capable of—? She was domineering enough to be good at it, heaven knows. Perry'd wanted her out of the building years ago, but she was still in it today.

Striker had never believed in such balderdash, but suppose—through some fluke or other—it had worked out with ghastly effect in just this one case?

He summoned the chambermaid and questioned her. She was a lumpy, work-worn old woman, and had as little use for the guest in question as anyone else, so she wasn't inclined to be reticent. "Boss me?" she answered, "Man, she sure do!"

"I don't mean boss you out loud. Did she ever try to get you to do her bidding without, uh, talking?"

She eyed him shrewdly, nodded. "Sure nuff. All the time. How you fine out about it?" She cackled uproariously. "She dippy, Mr. Striker, suh. I *mean!* She stand still like this, look at me *hard,* like this." She placed one hand flat across her forehead as if she had a headache. "So nothing happen', I just mine my business. Then she say: "Whuffo you don't do

what I just tole you?" I say, 'You ain't tole me nothing yet.' She say, 'Ain't you got my message? My sum-conscious done tole you, "Clean up good underneath that chair."

"I say, 'Yo sum-conscious better talk a little louder, den, cause I ain't heard a thing—and I got good ears!"

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Did you ever *feel* anything when she tried that stunt? Feel like doing the things she wanted?"

"Yeah man!" she vigorously asserted. "But not what she wanted! I feel like busting dis yere mop-handle on her haid, dass what I feel!"

He went ahead investigating after he'd dismissed her, but nothing else turned up. He was far from satisfied with what he'd got on Miss Heilbron, incriminating as the book was. It didn't *prove* anything. It wasn't strong enough evidence to base an accusation on.

He cased the Youngs' apartment that same evening, while they were at the wife's broadcasting studio. This, over Perry's almost apoplectic protests. And there, as if to confuse the issue still further, he turned up something that was at least as suspicious in its way as the mesmerism handbook. It was a terrifying grotesque mask of a demon, presumably a prop from the Chinese theater down on Doyer Street. It was hanging at the back of the clothes closet, along with an embroidered Chinese ceremonial robe. It was limned in some kind of luminous or phosphorescent paint that made it visible in the gloom in all its bestiality and horror. He nearly jumped out of his shoes himself at first sight of it. And that only went to show what conceivable effect it could have seeming to swim through the darkness in the middle of the night, for instance, toward the bed of a sleeper in the room above. That the victim would jump out of the window in frenzy would be distinctly possible.

Against this could be stacked the absolute lack of motive, the conclusive proof (two out of three times) that no one

had been in the room with the victim, and the equally conclusive proof that the Youngs hadn't been in the building at all the first time, mask or no mask. In itself, of course, the object had as much right to be in their apartment as the mesmerism book had in Miss Heilbron's room. The wife was in theatrical business, liable to be interested in stage curios of that kind.

Boiled down, it amounted to this: that the Youngs were still very much in the running.

It was a good deal harder to gain access to Peter the Hermit's room without tipping his hand, since the eccentric lived up to his nickname to the fullest. However, he finally managed to work it two days later, with the help of Perry, the hotel exterminator, and a paperful of red ants. He emptied the contents of the latter outside the doorsill, then Perry and the exterminator forced their way in on the pretext of combating the invasion. It took all of Perry's cajolery and persuasiveness to draw the Hermit out of his habitat for even half an hour, but a professed eagerness to hear all about his "gold mines" finally turned the trick, and the old man was led around the turn of the hall. Striker jumped in as soon as the coast was clear and got busy.

It was certainly fuller of unaccountable things than either of the other two had been, but on the other hand there was nothing as glaringly suspicious as the mask or the hypnotism book. Pyramids of hoarded canned goods stacked in the closet, and quantities of tools and utensils used in mining operations: sieves, pans, short-handled picks, a hooded miner's lamp with a reflector, three fishing rods and an assortment of hooks ranging from the smallest to big triple-toothed monsters, plenty of tackle, hip boots, a shotgun, a pair of scales (for assaying the gold that he had never found), little sacks of worthless ore, a mallet for breaking up the ore specimens, and the pair of heavy knapsacks that he took with him each time he set out on his heartbreaking expeditions. It all seemed legitimate enough.

Striker wasn't enough of a mining expert to know for sure. But he was enough of a detective to know there wasn't anything there that could in itself cause the death of anyone two rooms over and at right angles to this.

He had, of necessity, to be rather hasty about it, for the old man could be heard regaling Perry with the story of his mines just out of sight around the turn of the hall the whole time Striker was in there. He cleared out just as the exterminator finally got through killing the last of the "planted" ants.

To sum up: Flobelle Heilbron still had the edge on the other two as chief suspect, both because of the mesmerism handbook and because of her occupancy record. The Chinese couple came next, because of the possibilities inherent in that mask, as well as the penetrative powers of their incense and the whining of their dog. Peter the Hermit ran the others a poor third. Had it not been for his personal eccentricity and the location of his room, Striker would have eliminated him altogether.

On the other hand, he had turned up no real proof yet, and the motive remained as unfathomable as ever. In short, he was really no further than before he'd started. He had tried to solve it circumstantially, by deduction, and that hadn't worked. He had tried to solve it first hand, by personal observation, and that hadn't worked. Only one possible way remained, to try to solve it at *second hand,* through the eyes of the next potential victim, who would at the same time be a material witness—if he survived. To do this it was necessary to anticipate it, *time* it, try to see if it had some sort of spacing or rhythm to it or was just hit-or-miss, in order to know more or less when to expect it to recur. The only way to do this was to take the three dates he had and average them.

Striker took the early part of that evening off. He didn't ask permission for it, just walked out without saying anything to anyone about it. He was determined not to take anyone into his confidence this time.

He hadn't been off the premises a night since he'd first been hired by the hotel, and this wasn't a night off. This was strictly business. He had seventy-five dollars with him that he'd taken out of his hard-earned savings at the bank that afternoon. He didn't go where the lights were bright. He went down to the Bowery.

He strolled around a while looking into various barrooms and "smoke houses" from the outside. Finally he saw something in one that seemed to suit his purpose, went in and ordered two beers.

"Two?" said the barman in surprise. "You mean one after the other?"

"I mean two right together at one time," Striker told him.

He carried them over to the table at the rear, at which he noticed a man slumped with his head in his arms. He wasn't asleep or in a drunken stupor. Striker had already seen him push a despairing hand through his hair once.

He sat down opposite the motionless figure, clinked the glasses together to attract the man's attention.

"This is for you," Striker said, pushing one toward him.

The man just nodded dazedly, as though incapable of thanks any more. Gratitude had rusted on him from lack of use.

"What're your prospects?" Striker asked him bluntly.

"None. Nowhere to go. Not a cent to my name. I've only got one friend left, and I was figgerin' on looking him up long about midnight. If I don't tonight, maybe I will tomorrow night. I surely will one of these nights, soon. His name is the East River."

"I've got a proposition for you. Want to hear it?"

"You're the boss."

“How would you like to have a good suit, a clean shirt on your back for a change? How would you like to sleep in a comfortable bed tonight? In a three dollar room, all to yourself, in a good hotel uptown?”

“Mister,” said the man in a choked voice, “if I could do that once again, just once again, I wouldn’t care if it was my last night on earth! What’s the catch?”

“What you just said. It’s liable to be.” He talked for a while, told the man what there was to know, the little that he himself knew. “It’s not certain, you understand. Maybe nothing’ll happen at all. The odds are about fifty-fifty. If nothing does happen, you keep the clothes, the dough, and I’ll even dig up a porter’s job for you. You’ll be that much ahead. Now I’ve given it to you straight from the shoulder. I’m not concealing anything from you, you know what to expect.”

The man wet his lips reflectively. “Fifty-fifty—that’s not so bad. Those are good enough odds. I used to be a gambler when I was young. And it can’t hurt more than the river filling up your lungs. I’m weary of dragging out my days. What’ve I got to lose? Mister, you’re on.” He held out an unclean hand hesitantly. “I don’t suppose you’d want to—” Striker shook it as he stood up. “I never refuse to shake hands with a brave man. Come on, we’ve got a lot to do. We’ve got to find a barber shop, a men’s clothing store if there are any still open, a luggage shop, and a restaurant.”

An hour and a half later a taxi stopped on the corner diagonally opposite the St. Anselm, with Striker and a spruce, well-dressed individual seated in it side by side. On the floor at their feet were two shiny, brand-new valises, containing their linings and nothing else.

“Now there it is over there, on the other side,” Striker said. “I’m going to get out here, and you go over in the cab and get out by yourself at the entrance. Count out what’s left of the money I gave you.”

His companion did so laboriously. “Forty-nine dollars and fifty cents.”

“Don’t spend another penny of it, get me? I’ve already paid the cab fare and tip. See that you carry your own bags in, so they don’t notice how light they are. Remember, what’s left is all yours if—”

“Yeah, I know,” said the other man unabashedly. “If I’m alive in the morning.”

“Got your instructions straight?”

“I want an outside room. I want a ninth floor outside room. No other floor will do. I want a ninth floor outside room with a bath.”

“That’ll get you the right one by elimination. I happen to know it’s vacant. You won’t have to pay in advance. The two bags and the outfit’ll take care of that. Tell him to sign Harry Kramer for you—that what you said your name was? Now this is your last chance to back out. You can still welsh on me if you want—I won’t do anything to you.”

“No,” the man said doggedly. “This way I’ve got a chance at a job tomorrow. The other way I’ll be back on the beach. I’m glad somebody finally found some use for me.”

Striker averted his head, grasped the other’s scrawny shoulder encouragingly. “Good luck, brother—and God forgive me for doing this, if I don’t see you again.” He swung out of the cab, opened a newspaper in front of his face, and narrowly watched over the top of it until the thin but well-dressed figure had alighted and carried the two bags up the steps and into a doorway from which he might never emerge alive.

He sauntered up to the desk a few minutes later himself, from the other direction, the coffee shop entrance. Maxon was still blotting the ink on the signature.

Striker read, Harry Kramer, New York City—913

He went up to his room at his usual time, but only to get out his gun. Then he came down to the lobby again. Maxon was the only one in sight. Striker stepped in behind the

desk, made his way back to the telephone switchboard, which was screened from sight by the tiers of mailboxes. He sat down before the switchboard and shot his cuffs, like a wireless operator on a ship at sea waiting for an SOS. The St. Anselm didn't employ a night operator. The desk clerk attended to the calls himself after twelve.

"What's the idea?" Maxon wanted to know.

Striker wasn't confiding in anyone this time. "Can't sleep," he said noncommittally. "Why should you object if I give you a hand down here?"

Kramer was to knock the receiver off the hook at the first sign of danger, or even anything that he didn't understand or like the looks of. There was no other way to work it than this, roundabout as it was. Striker was convinced that if he lurked about the ninth floor corridor within sight or earshot of the room, he would simply be banishing the danger, postponing it. He didn't want that. He wanted to know what it was. If he waited in his own room he would be even more cut off. The danger signal would have to be relayed up to him from down here. The last three times had shown him how ineffective that was.

A desultory call or two came through the first hour he was at the board, mostly requests for morning calls. He meticulously jotted them down for the day operator. Nothing from 913.

About two o'clock Maxon finally started to catch on. "You going to work it all night?"

"Yeh," said Striker shortly. "Don't talk to me. Don't let on I'm behind here at all."

At two thirty-five there were footsteps in the lobby, a peculiar sobbing sound like an automobile tire deflating, and a whiff of sandalwood traveled back to Striker after the car had gone up. He called Maxon guardedly back to him. "The Youngs?"

"Yeah, they just came in."

"Was that their dog whining?"

“Yeah, I guess it hadda see another dog about a man.” Maybe a dead man, thought Striker morosely. He raised the plug toward the socket of 913. He ought to call Kramer, make sure he stayed awake. That would be as big a giveaway as pussyfooting around the hall up there, though. He let the plug drop back again.

About three o’clock more footsteps sounded. Heavy ones stamping in from the street. A man’s voice sounded hoarsely. “Hey, desk! One of your people just tumbled out, around on the side of the building!”

The switchboard stool went over with a crack, something blurred streaked across the lobby, and the elevator darted crazily upward. Striker nearly snapped the control lever out of its socket, the way he bore down on it. The car had never traveled so fast before, but he swore horribly all the way up. Too late again!

The door was closed. He needled his passkey at the lock, shouldered the door in. The light was on, the room was empty. The window was wide open, the guy was gone. The fifty-fifty odds had paid off—the wrong way.

Striker’s face was twisted balefully. He got out his gun. He was standing there like that, bitter, defeated, granite eyed, the gun uselessly in his hand, when Perry and Courlander came. It would be Courlander again, too!

“Is he dead?” Striker asked grimly.

“That street ain’t quilted,” was the dick’s dry answer. He eyed the gun scornfully. “What’re you doing? Holding the fort against the Indians, sonny boy?”

“I suggest instead of standing there throwing bouquets,” Striker said, “you phone your precinct house and have a dragnet thrown around this building.” He reached for the phone. Courlander’s arm quickly shot out and barred him. “Not so fast. What would I be doing that for?”

“Because this is murder!”

“Where’ve I heard that before?” He went over for the inevitable note. “What’s this?” He read it aloud. *“Can’t take*

it any more.”

“So you’re still going to trip over those things!”

“And you’re still going to try to hurdle it?”

“It’s a fake like all the others were. I knew that all along. I couldn’t prove it until now. This time I can! Finally.”

“Yeah? How?”

“Because the guy couldn’t write! Couldn’t even write his own name! He even had to have the clerk sign the register for him downstairs. And if that isn’t proof there’s been somebody else in this room, have a look at that.” He pointed to the money Kramer had left neatly piled on the dresser top. “Count that! Four-fifty. Four singles and a four-bit piece. He had forty-nine dollars and fifty cents on him when he came into this room, and he didn’t leave the room. He’s down there in his underwear now. Here’s all his outer clothing up here. What became of that forty-five bucks?”

Courlander looked at him. “How do you know so much about it? How do you know he couldn’t write, and just what dough he had?”

“Because I planted him up here myself!” Striker ground out exasperatedly. “It was a setup! I picked him up, outfitted him, staked him, and brought him in here. He ran away to sea at twelve, never even learned his alphabet. I tested him and found out he was telling the truth. He couldn’t write a word, not even his own name! Are you gonna stand here all night or are you going to do something about it?

Courlander snatched up the phone, called his precinct house. “Courlander. Send over a detail, quick! St. Anselm. That suicide reported here has the earmarks of a murder.”

“Earmarks!” scoffed Striker. “It’s murder from head to foot, with a capital *M!*” He took the phone in turn. “Pardon me if I try to lock the stable door after the nag’s been stolen.

". . . H'lo, Maxon? Anyone left the building since this broke, anyone at all? Sure of that? Well, see that no one does. Call in that cop that's looking after the body. Lock up the secondary exit through the coffee shop. No one's to leave, no one at all, understand?" He threw the phone back at Courlander. "Confirm that for me, will you? Cops don't take orders from me. We've got them! They're still in the building some place! There's no way to get down from the roof. It's seven stories higher than any of the others around it."

But Courlander wasn't taking to cooperation very easily. "All this is based on your say-so that the guy couldn't write and had a certain amount of money on him when he came up here. So far so good. But something a little more definite than that better turn up. Did you mark the bills you gave him?"

"No, I didn't," Striker had to admit. "I wasn't figuring on robbery being the motive. I still don't think it's the primary one, I think it's only incidental. I don't think there is any consistent motive. I think we're up against a maniac."

"If they weren't marked, how do you expect us to trace them? Everyone in this place must have a good deal more than just forty-five dollars to their name! If you did plant somebody, why didn't you back him up, why didn't you look after him right? How did you expect to be able to help him if you stayed all the way downstairs, nine floors below?"

"I couldn't very well hang around outside the room. That would've been tipping my hand. I warned him, put him on his guard. He was to knock the phone over. That's all he had to do. Whatever it was, was too quick even for that."

Two members of the Homicide Squad appeared. "What's all the fuss and feathers? Where're the earmarks you spoke of, Courlander? The body's slated for an autopsy, but the examiner already says it don't look like anything but just the fall killed him."

“The house dick here,” Courlander said, “insists the guy couldn’t write and is short forty-five bucks. He planted him up here because he has an idea those other three cases—the ones I covered, you know—were murder.”

They started to question Striker rigorously as though he himself were the culprit. “What gave you the idea it would happen tonight?”

“I didn’t know it would happen tonight. I took a stab at it, that’s all. I figured it was about due somewhere around now.”

“Was the door open or locked when you got up here?”

“Locked.”

“Where was the key?”

“Where it is now—over there on the dresser.”

“Was the room disturbed in anyway?”

“No, it was just like it is now.”

They took a deep breath in unison, a breath that meant they were being very patient with an outsider. “Then what makes you think somebody besides himself was in here at the time?”

“Because that note is here, and he couldn’t write! Because there’s forty-five dollars—”

“One thing at a time. Can you prove he couldn’t write?”

“He proved it to *me!*”

“Yes, but can you prove it to us?”

Striker caught a tuft of his own hair in his fist, dragged at it, let it go again. “No, because he’s gone now.”

The other one leaned forward, dangerously casual. “You say you warned him what to expect, and yet he was willing to go ahead and chance it, just for the sake of a meal, a suit of clothes, a bed. How do you explain that?”

“He was at the end of his rope. He was about ready to quit anyway.”

Striker saw what was coming.

“Oh, he was? How do you know?”

“Because he told me so. He said he was—thinking of the river.”

“Before you explained your proposition or after?”

“Before,” Striker had to admit.

They blew out their breaths scornfully, eyed one another as though this man’s stupidity was unbelievable. “He brings a guy up from the beach,” one said to the other, “that’s already told him *beforehand* he’s got doing the Dutch on his mind, and then when the guy goes ahead and does it, he tries to make out he’s been murdered.”

Striker knocked his chair over, stood up in exasperation. “But can’t you get it through your concrete domes? What was driving him to it? The simplest reason in the world! *Lack of shelter, lack of food, lack of comfort.* Suddenly he’s given all that at one time. Is it reasonable to suppose he’ll cut his own enjoyment of it short, put an end to it halfway through the night? Tomorrow night, yes, after he’s out of here, back where he was again, after the letdown has set in. But not tonight.”

“Very pretty, but it don’t mean a thing. The swell surroundings only brought it on quicker. He wanted to die in comfort, in style, while he was about it. That’s been known to happen too, don’t forget. About his not being able to write, sorry, but”—they flirted the sheet of notepaper before his eyes—”this evidence shows he *was* able to write. He must have put one over on you. You probably tipped your mitt in giving him your writing test. He caught on you were looking for someone who didn’t write, so he played ‘possum. About the money—well, it musta gone out the window with him even if he *was* just in his underwear, and somebody down there snitched it before the cop came along. No evidence. The investigation’s closed as far as we’re concerned.” They sauntered out into the hall.

“Damn it,” Striker yelled after them, “you can’t walk out of here! You’re turning your backs on a murder!”

“We *are* walking out,” came back from the hallway. “Put that in your pipe and smoke it!” The elevator door clicked mockingly shut.

Courlander said almost pityingly. “It looks like tonight wasn’t your lucky night.”

“It isn’t yours either!” Striker bellowed. He swung his fist in a barrel house right, connected with the city dick’s lower jaw, and sent him volplaning back on his shoulders against the carpet.

Perry’s moonfaced and bald head were white as an ostrich egg with long-nursed resentment. “Get out of here!” You’re fired! Bring bums into my house so they can commit suicide on the premises, will you? You’re through!”

“Fired?” Striker gave him a smoldering look that made Perry draw hastily back out of range. “I’m quitting, is what you mean! I wouldn’t even finish the night out in a murder nest like this!” He stalked past the manager, clenched hands in pockets, and went up to his room to pack his belongings.

His chief problem was to avoid recognition by any of the staff, when he returned there nearly a year later. To achieve this after all the years he’d worked in the hotel, he checked in swiftly and inconspicuously. The mustache he had been growing for the past eight months and which now had attained full maturity, effectively changed the lower part of his face. The horn-rimmed glasses, with plain inserts instead of ground lenses, did as much for the upper part, provided his hat brim was tipped down far enough. If he stood around, of course, and let them stare, eventual recognition was a certainty, but he didn’t. He put on a little added weight from the long months of idleness in the furnished room. He hadn’t worked in the interval. He could no doubt have got another berth, but he considered that he was still on a job—even though he was no longer drawing pay for it—and he meant to see it through.

A lesser problem was to get the room itself. If he couldn't get it at once, he fully intended taking another for a day or two until he could, but this of course would add greatly to the risk of recognition. As far as he could tell, however, it was available right now. He'd walked through the side street bordering the hotel three nights in a row, after dark, and each time that particular window had been unlighted. The red tag would quickly tell him whether he was right or not.

Other than that, his choice of this one particular night for putting the long-premeditated move into effect was wholly arbitrary. The interval since the last time it had happened roughly approximated the previous intervals, and that was all he had to go by. One night, along about now, was as good as another.

He paid his bill at the rooming house and set out on foot, carrying just one bag with him. His radio and the rest of his belongings he left behind in the landlady's charge, to be called for later. It was about nine o'clock now. He wanted to get in before Maxon's shift. He'd been more intimate with Maxon than the other clerks, had practically no chance of getting past Maxon unidentified.

He stopped in at a hardware store on his way and bought two articles: a long section of stout hempen rope and a small sharp fruit, or kitchen, knife with a wooden handle. He inserted both objects in the bag with his clothing, right there in the shop, then set out once more. He bent his hat brim a little lower over his eyes as he neared the familiar hotel entrance, that was all. He went up the steps and inside unhesitatingly. One of the boys whom he knew by sight ducked for his bag without giving any sign of recognition. That was a good omen. He moved swiftly to the desk without looking around or giving anyone a chance to study him at leisure. There was a totally new man on now in Dennison's place, someone who didn't know him at all. That

was the second good omen. And red was peering from the pigeonhole of 913.

His eye quickly traced a vertical axis through it. Not another one in a straight up-and-down line with it. It was easy to work it if you were familiar with the building layout, and who should be more familiar than he?

He said, “I want a single on the side street, where the traffic isn’t so heavy.” He got it the first shot out of the box!

He paid for it, signed *A.C. Sherman, New York,* and quickly stepped into the waiting car, with his head slightly lowered but not enough so to be conspicuously furtive.

A minute later the gauntlet had been successfully run. He gave the boy a dime, closed the door, and had gained his objective undetected. Nothing had been changed in it. It was the same as when he’d slept in it that first time, nearly two years ago now. It was hard to realize, looking around at it, that it had seen four men go to their deaths. He couldn’t help wondering. “Will I be the fifth?” That didn’t frighten him any. It just made him toughen up inside and promise, “Not without a lotta trouble, buddy, not without a lotta trouble!”

He unpacked his few belongings and put them away as casually as though he were what he seemed to be, an unsuspecting newcomer who had just checked into a hotel. The coiled rope he hid under the mattress of the bed for the time being; the fruit knife and his gun under the pillows.

He killed the next two hours, until the deadline was due; undressed, took a bath, then hung around in his pajamas reading a paper he’d brought up with him.

At twelve he made his final preparations. He put the room light out first of all. Then in the dark he removed the whole bedding, mattress and all, transferred it to the floor, laying bare the framework and bolted-down coils of the bed. He looped the rope around the bed’s midsection from side to side, weaving it inextricably in and out of the coils. Then he

knotted a free length to a degree that defied undoing, splicing the end for a counter-knot.

He coiled it three times around his own middle, again knotting it to a point of Houdini-like bafflement. In between there was a slack of a good eight or ten feet. More than enough, considering the ease with which the bed could be pulled about on its little rubber-tired casters, to give him a radius of action equal to the inside limits of the room. Should pursuit through the doorway become necessary, that was what the knife was for. He laid it on the nightstand, alongside his gun.

Then he replaced the bedding, concealing the rope fastened beneath it. He carefully kicked the loose length, escaping at one side, out of sight under the bed. He climbed in, covered up.

The spiny roughness and constriction of his improvised safety-belt bothered him a good deal at first, but he soon found that by lying still and not changing position too often, he could accustom himself to it, even forget about it.

An hour passed, growing more and more blurred as it neared its end. He didn't try to stay awake, in fact encouraged sleep, feeling that the rope would automatically give him more than a fighting chance, and that to remain awake and watchful might in some imponderable way ward off the very thing he was trying to come to grips with.

At the very last he was dimly conscious, through already somnolent faculties, of a vague sweetness in the air, lulling him even further. Sandalwood incense. "So they're still here," he thought indistinctly. But the thought wasn't sufficient to rouse him to alertness; he wouldn't let it. His eyelids started to close of their own weight. He let them stay down.

Only once, after that, did his senses come to the surface. The scratchy roughness of the rope as he turned in his sleep. "Rope," he thought dimly, and placing what it was, dropped off into oblivion again.

The second awakening came hard. He fought against it stubbornly, but it slowly won out, dragging him against his will. It was twofold. Not dangerous or threatening, but mentally painful, like anything that pulls you out of deep sleep. Excruciatingly painful. He wanted to be let alone. Every nerve cried out for continued sleep, and these two spearheads—noise and glare—continued prodding at him, tormenting him.

Then suddenly they'd won out. *Thump*!—one last cruelly jolting impact of sound, and he'd opened his eyes. The glare now attacked him in turn; it was like needles boring into the pupils of his defenseless, blurred eyes. He tried to shield them from it with one protective hand, and it still found them out. He struggled dazedly upright in the bed. The noise had subsided, was gone, after that last successful bang. But the light—it beat into his brain.

It came pulsing from beyond the foot of the bed, so that meant it was coming through the open bathroom door. The bed was along the side wall, and the bathroom door should be just beyond its foot. He must have forgotten to put the light out in there. What a brilliance! He could see the light through the partly open door, swinging there on its loose, exposed electric-cord. That is to say, he could see the pulsing gleam and dazzle of it, but he couldn't get it into focus; it was like a sunburst. It was torture, it was burning his sleepy eyeballs out. Have to get up and snap it out. How'd that ever happen anyway? Maybe the switch was defective, current was escaping through it even after it had been turned off, and he was sure he had turned it off.

He struggled out of bed and groped toward it. The room around him was just a blur, his senses swimming with the combination of pitch-blackness and almost solar brilliance they were being subjected to. But it was the bathroom door that was beyond the foot of the bed, that was one thing he was sure of, even in his sleep-fogged condition.

He reached the threshold, groped upward for the switch that was located above the bulb itself. To look upward at it was like staring a blast furnace in the face without dark glasses. It had seemed to be dangling there just past the half open door, so accessible. And now it seemed to elude him, swing back a little out of reach. Or maybe it was just that his fumbling fingers had knocked the loose cord into that strange, evasive motion.

He went after it, like a moth after a flame. Took a step across the threshold, still straining upward after it, eyes as useless as though he were standing directly in a lighthouse beam.

Suddenly the doorsill seemed to rear. Instead of being just a flat strip of wood, partitioning the floor of one room from the other, it struck him sharply, stunningly, way up the legs, just under the kneecaps. He tripped, overbalanced, plunged forward. The rest was hallucination, catastrophe, destruction.

The light vanished as though it had wings. The fall didn't break; no tiled flooring came up to stop it. The room had suddenly melted into disembodied night. No walls, no floor, nothing at all. Cool air of out-of-doors was rushing upward into the vacuum where the bathroom apparently had been. His whole body was turning completely over, and then over again, and he was going down, down, down. He only had time for one despairing thought as he fell at a sickening speed: "I'm *outside* the building!"

Then there was a wrench that seemed to tear his insides out and snap his head off at his neck. The hurtling fall jarred short, and there was a sickening, swaying motion on an even keel. He was turning slowly like something on a spit, clawing helplessly at the nothingness around him. In the cylindrical blackness that kept wheeling about him he could make out the gray of the building wall, recurring now on this side, now on that, as he swiveled. He tried to get a grip on the wall with his fingertips, to steady himself, gain a

fulcrum! Its sandpapery roughness held no indentation to which he could attach himself even by one wildly searching thumb.

He was hanging there between floors at the end of the rope which had saved his life. There was no other way but to try to climb back along its length, until he could regain that treacherous guard rail up there over his head. It could be done, it had to be. Fortunately the rope's grip around his waist was automatic. He was being held without having to exert himself, could use all his strength to lift himself hand over hand. That shouldn't be impossible. It was his only chance, at any rate.

The tall oblong of window overhead through which he had just been catapulted bloomed yellow. The room lights had been put on. Someone was in there. Someone was in there. Someone had arrived to help him. He arched his back, straining to look up into that terrifying vista of night sky overhead—but that now held the warm friendly yellow patch that meant his salvation.

"Grab that rope up there!" he bellowed hoarsely. "Pull me in! I'm hanging out here! Hurry! There isn't much time!"

Hands showed over the guard-rail. He could see them plainly, tinted yellow by the light behind them. Busy hands, helping hands, answering his plea, pulling him back to the safety of solid ground.

No, wait! Something flashed in them, flashed again. Sawing back and forth, slicing, biting into the rope that held him, just past the guard-rail. He could feel the vibration around his middle, carried down to him like the hum along a wire. Death-dealing hands, completing what had been started, sending him to his doom. With his own knife, that he'd left up there beside the bed!

The rope began to fritter. A little severed outer strand came twining loosely down the main column of it toward him, like a snake. Those hands, back and forth, like a demon fiddler drawing his bow across a single tautened violin

string in hurried, frenzied funeral march that spelled Striker's doom!

"Help!" he shouted in a choked voice, and the empty night sky around seemed to give it mockingly back to him.

A face appeared above the hands and knife, a grinning derisive face peering down into the gloom. Vast mane of snow-white hair and long white beard. It was Peter the Hermit.

So now he knew at last—too late. Too late.

The face vanished again, but the hands, the knife, were busier than ever. There was a microscopic dip, a *give,* as another strand parted, forerunner of the hurtling, whistling drop to come, the hurtling drop that meant the painful, bone-crushing end of him.

He burst into a flurry of helpless, agonized motion, flailing out with arms and legs—at what, toward what? Like a tortured fly caught on a pin, from which he could never hope to escape.

Glass shattered somewhere around him; one foot seemed to puncture the solid stone wall, go all the way through it. A red-hot wire stroked across his instep and he jerked convulsively.

There was a second preliminary dip, and a wolf howl of joy from above. He was conscious of more yellow light, this time from below, not above. A horrified voice that was trying not to lose its self-control sounded just beneath him somewhere. "Grab this! Don't lose your head now! Grab hold of this and don't let go whatever happens!"

Wood, the wood of a chair back, nudged into him, held out into the open by its legs. He caught at it spasmodically with both hands, riveted them to it in a grip like rigor mortis. At the same time somebody seemed to be trying to pull his shoe off his foot, that one foot that had gone in through the wall and seemed to be cut off from the rest of him.

There was a nauseating plunging sensation that stopped as soon as it began. His back went over until he felt like he was breaking in two, then the chair back held, steadied, reversed, started slowly to draw him with it. The severed rope came hissing down on top of him. From above there was a shrill cackle, from closer at hand a woman's scream of pity and terror. Yellow closed around him, swallowed him completely, took him in to itself.

He was stretched out on the floor, a good solid floor—and it was over. He was still holding the chair in that viselike grip. Young, the Chinese lawyer, was still hanging onto it by the legs, face a pasty gray. Bob, the night porter, was still holding onto his one ankle, and blood was coming through the sock. Mrs. Young, in a sort of chain arrangement, was hugging the porter around the waist. There was broken glass around him on the floor, and a big pool of water with tropical fish floundering in it from the overturned tank. A dog was whining heartbreakingly somewhere in the room. Other than that, there was complete silence.

None of them could talk for a minute or two. Mrs. Young sat squarely down on the floor, hid her face in her hands, and had brief but high-powered hysterics. Striker rolled over and planted his lips devoutly to the dusty carpet, before he even took a stab at getting to his shaky and undependable feet.

"What the hell happened to *you?*" heaved the lawyer finally, mopping his forehead. "Flying around out there like a bat! You scared the daylights out of me."

"Come on up to the floor above and get all the details," Striker invited. He guided himself shakily out of the room, stiff-arming himself against the door frame as he went. His legs still felt like rubber, threatening to betray him.

The door of 913 stood open. In the hallway outside it he motioned them cautiously back. "I left my gun in there, and he's got a knife with him too, so take it easy." But he strode into the lighted opening as though a couple of little items

like that weren't stopping him after what he'd just been through and nearly didn't survive.

Then he stopped dead. There wasn't anyone at all in the room—any more.

The bed, with the severed section of rope still wound securely around it, was upturned against the window opening, effectively blocking it. The entire bedding, mattress and all, had slid off it, down into the street below. It was easy to see what had happened. The weight of his body, dangling out there, had drawn it first out into line with the opening (and it moved so easily on those rubber-tired casters!), then tipped it over on its side. The mattress and all the encumbering clothes had spilled off it and gone out of their own weight, entangling, blinding, and carrying with them, like a linen avalanche, whatever and whoever stood in their way. It was a fitting finish for an ingenious, heartless murderer.

The criminal caught neatly in his own trap.

"He was too anxious to cut that rope and watch me fall at the same time," Striker said grimly. "He leaned too far out. A feather pillow was enough to push him over the sill!"

He sauntered over to the dresser, picked up a sheet of paper, smiled a little—not gaily. "My 'suicide note' !" He looked at Young. "Funny sensation, reading your own farewell note. I bet not many experience it! Let's see what I'm supposed to have said to myself. *I'm at the end of my rope. Queer, how he hit the nail on the head that time! He made them short, always. So there wouldn't be enough to them to give the handwriting away. He never signed them, either. Because he didn't know their names. He didn't even know what they looked like."*

Courlander's voice sounded outside, talking it over with someone as he came toward the room. ". . . mattress and all! But instead of him landing on it, which might have saved his life, *it* landed on *him.* Didn't do him a bit of good! He's gone forever."

Striker, leaning against the dresser, wasn't recognized at first.

"Say, wait a minute, where have I seen *you* before?" the city dick growled finally, after he'd given a preliminary look around the disordered room.

"What a detective you turned out to be!" grunted the shaken Striker rudely.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Do you haunt the place? What do you know about this?"

"A damn sight more than you!" was the uncomplimentary retort. "Sit down and learn some of it—or are you still afraid to face the real facts?"

Courlander sank back into a chair mechanically, mouth agape, staring at Striker.

"I'm not going to *tell you* about it," Striker went on. "I'm going to demonstrate. That's always the quickest way with kindergarten-age intelligences!" He caught at the overturned bed, righted it, rolled it almost effortlessly back into its original position against the side wall, foot facing directly toward the bathroom door.

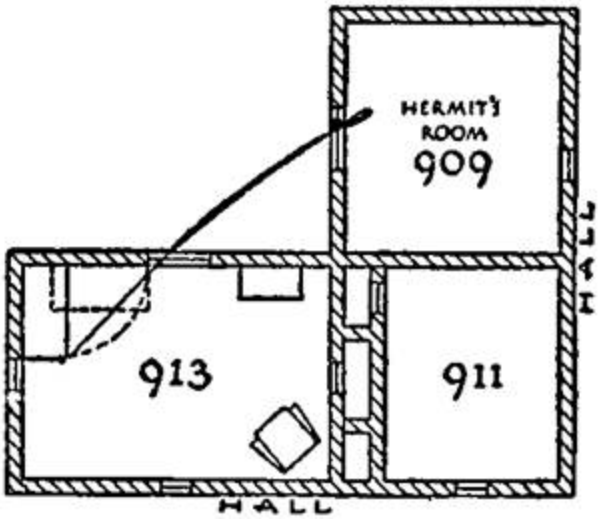
"Notice that slight vibration, that humming the rubber-tired casters make across the floorboards? That's the distant thunder' the Youngs heard that night. I'll show you the lightning in just a minute. I'm going over there to his room now. Before I go, just let me point out one thing: the sleeper goes to bed in an unfamiliar room, and his last recollection is of the bathroom door being down there at the foot, the windows over here on this side. He wakes up dazedly in the middle of the night, starts to get out of bed, and comes up against the wall first of all. So then he gets out at the opposite side; but this has only succeeded in disorienting him, balling him up still further. All he's still sure of, now, is that the bathroom door is somewhere down there *at the foot of the bed!* Now just watch closely and you'll see the rest of it in pantomime. I'm going to show you just how it was done."

He went out and they sat tensely, without a word, all eyes on the open window.

Suddenly they all jolted nervously, in unison. A jumbo, triple-toothed fishhook had come into the room, through the window, on the end of three interlocked rods—a single line running through them from hook to reel. It came in diagonally, from the projecting wing. It inclined of its own extreme length, in a gentle arc that swept the triple-threat hook down to floor level. Almost immediately, as the unseen "fisherman" started to withdraw it, it snagged the lower right-hand foot of the bed. It would have been hard for it not to, with its three barbs pointing out in as many directions at once. The bed started to move slowly around after it, on those cushioned casters. There was not enough vibration or rapidity to the maneuver to disturb a heavy sleeper. The open window was at the foot of the bed, where the bathroom had been before the change.

The tension of the line was relaxed. The rod jockeyed a little until the hook had been dislodged from the bed's "ankle." The liberated rod was swiftly but carefully withdrawn, as unobtrusively as it had appeared a moment before.

There was a short wait, horrible to endure. Then a new object appeared before the window opening—flashing refracting light, so that it was hard to identify for a minute even though the room lights were on in this case and the subjects were fully awake. It was a lighted miner's lamp with an unusually high-powered reflector behind it. In addition to this, a black object of some kind, an old sweater or miner s shirt, was hooded around it so that it was almost invisible from the street or the windows on the floor below —all its rays beat inward to the room. It was suspended from the same trio of interlocked rods.



It swayed there motionless for a minute, a devil's beacon, an invitation to destruction. Then it nudged inward, knocked repeatedly against the edge of the window frame, as though to deliberately awaken whoever was within. Then the light coyly retreated a little farther out into the open, but very imperceptibly, as if trying to snare something into pursuit. Then the light suddenly whisked up and was gone, drawn up through space.

With unbelievable swiftness, far quicker than anybody could have come up from the street, the closed door flew back at the touch of Strikers passkey, he darted in, tossed the "suicide note" he was holding onto the dresser, then swiveled the bed back into its original position in the room, scooped up imaginary money.

He stepped out of character and spread his hands conclusively. "See? Horribly simple and—simply horrible."

The tension broke. Mrs. Young buried her face against her husband's chest.

"He was an expert fisherman. Must have done a lot of it up around those mines of his," Striker added. "Probably never failed to hook that bed first cast off the reel. This passkey, that let him in here at will, must have been mislaid years ago and he got hold of it in some way. He brooded and

brooded over the way he'd been swindled; this was his way of getting even with the world, squaring things. Or maybe he actually thought these various people in here were spies who came to learn the location of his mines. I don't know, I'm no psychiatrist. The money was just secondary, the icing to his cake. It helped him pay for his room here, staked him to the supplies he took along on his 'prospecting' trips.

"A few things threw me off for a long time. He was away at the time young Hastings fell out. The only possible explanation is that that, alone of the four, was a genuine suicide. By a freak coincidence it occurred in the very room the Hermit had been using for his murders. And this in spite of the fact that Hastings had less reason than any of the others; he had just become engaged. I know it's hard to swallow, but we'll have to. I owe you an apology on that one suicide, Courlander."

"And I owe you an apology on the other three, and to show you I'm not bad loser, I'm willing to make it in front of the whole Homicide Squad of New York."

Young asked curiously, "Have you any idea of just where those mines of his that caused all the trouble are located? Ontario, isn't it? Because down at the station tonight a Press Radio news flash came through that oil had been discovered in some abandoned gold-mine pits up there, a gusher worth all kinds of money, and they're running around like mad trying to find out in whom the title to them is vested. I bet it's the same ones!"

Striker nodded sadly. "I wouldn't be surprised. That would be just like one of life's bum little jokes."

THREE O’CLOCK

She had signed her own death-warrant. He kept telling himself over and over that he was not to blame, she had brought it on herself. He had never seen the man. He knew there was one. He had known for six weeks now. Little things had told him. One day he came home and there was a cigar-butt in an ashtray, still moist at one end, still warm at the other. There were gasoline-drippings on the asphalt in front of their house, and they didn’t own a car. And it wouldn’t be a delivery-vehicle, because the drippings showed it had stood there a long time, an hour or more. And once he had actually glimpsed it, just rounding the far corner as he got off the bus two blocks down the other way. A second-hand Ford. She was often very flustered when he came home, hardly seemed to know what she was doing or saying at all.

He pretended not to see any of these things; he was that type of man, Stapp, he didn’t bring his hates or grudges out into the open where they had a chance to heal. He nursed them in the darkness of his mind. That’s a dangerous kind of a man.

If he had been honest with himself, he would have had to admit that this mysterious afternoon caller was just the excuse he gave himself, that he’d daydreamed of getting rid of her long before there was any reason to, that there had been something in him for years past now urging Kill, kill,

kill. Maybe ever since that time he'd been treated at the hospital for a concussion.

He didn't have any of the usual excuses. She had no money of her own, he hadn't insured her, he stood to gain nothing by getting rid of her. There was no other woman he meant to replace her with. She didn't nag and quarrel with him. She was a docile, tractable sort of wife. But this thing in his brain kept whispering Kill, kill, kill. He'd fought it down until six weeks ago, more from fear and a sense of self-preservation than from compunction. The discovery that there was some stranger calling on her in the afternoons when he was away, was all that had been needed to unleash it in all its hydra-headed ferocity. And the thought that he would be killing two instead of just one, now, was an added incentive.

So every afternoon for six weeks now when he came home from his shop, he had brought little things with him. Very little things, that were so harmless, so inoffensive, in themselves that no one, even had they seen them, could have guessed—. Fine little strands of copper wire such as he sometimes used in his watch-repairing. And each time a very little package containing a substance that—well, an explosives expert might have recognized, but no one else. There was just enough in each one of those packages, if ignited, to go *Ffffft!* and flare up like flashlight-powder does. Loose like that it couldn't hurt you, only burn your skin of course if you got too near it. But wadded tightly into cells, in what had formerly been a soap-box down in the basement, compressed to within an inch of its life the way he had it, the whole accumulated thirty-six-days worth of it (for he hadn't brought any home on Sundays)—that would be a different story. They'd never know. There wouldn't be enough left of the flimsy house for them to go by. Sewer-gas

they'd think, or a pocket of natural gas in the ground somewhere around under them. Something like that had happened over on the other side of town two years ago, only not as bad of course. That had given him the idea originally.

He'd brought home batteries too, the ordinary dry-cell kind. Just two of them, one at a time. As far as the substance itself was concerned, where he got it was his business. No one would ever know where he got it. That was the beauty of getting such a little at a time like that. It wasn't even missed where he got it from. She didn't ask him what was in these little packages, because she didn't even see them, he had them in his pocket each time. (And of course he didn't smoke coming home.) But even if she had seen them, she probably wouldn't have asked him. She wasn't the nosey kind that asked questions, she would have thought it was watch-parts, maybe, that he brought home to work over at night or something. And then too she was so rattled and flustered herself these days, trying to cover up the fact that she'd had a caller, that he could have brought in a grandfather-clock under his arm and she probably wouldn't have noticed it.

Well, so much the worse for her. Death was spinning its web beneath her busy feet as they bustled obliviously back and forth in those ground-floor rooms. He'd be in his shop tinkering with watch-parts and the phone would ring. "Mr. Stapp, Mr. Stapp, your house has just been demolished by a blast!"

A slight concussion of the brain simplifies matters so beautifully.

He knew she didn't intend running off with this unknown stranger, and at first he had wondered why not. But by now he thought he had arrived at a satisfactory answer. It was that he, Stapp, was working, and the other man evidently wasn't, wouldn't be able to provide for her if she left with

him. That must be it, what other reason could there be? She wanted to have her cake and eat it too.

So that was all he was good for, was it, to keep a roof over her head? Well, he was going to lift that roof skyhigh, blow it to smithereens!

He didn't really want her to run off, anyway, that wouldn't have satisfied this thing within him that cried Kill, kill, kill. It wanted to get the two of them, and nothing short of that would do. And if he and she had had a five-year-old kid, say, he would have included the kid in the holocaust too, although a kid that age obviously couldn't be guilty of anything. A doctor would have known what to make of this, and would have phoned a hospital in a hurry. But unfortunately doctors aren't mind-readers and people don't go around with their thoughts placarded on sandwich-boards.

The last little package had been brought in two days ago. The box had all it could hold now. Twice as much as was necessary to blow up the house. Enough to break every window for a radius of blocks—only there were hardly any, they were in an isolated location. And that fact gave him a paradoxical feeling of virtue, as though he were doing a good deed; he was destroying his own but he wasn't endangering anybody else's home. The wires were in place, the batteries that would give off the necessary spark were attached. All that was necessary now was the final adjustment, the hook-up, and then—

Kill, kill, kill, the thing within him gloated.

Today was the day.

He had been working over the alarm-clock all morning to the exclusion of everything else. It was only a dollar-and-a-half alarm, but he'd given it more loving care than someone's Swiss-movement pocket-watch or platinum and

diamond wristwatch. Taking it apart, cleaning it, oiling it, adjusting it, putting it together again, so that there was no slightest possibility of it failing him, of it not playing its part, of it stopping or jamming or anything else. That was one good thing about being your own boss, operating your own shop, there was no one over you to tell you what to do and what not to do. And he didn't have an apprentice or helper in the shop, either, to notice this peculiar absorption in a mere alarm-clock and tell someone about it later.

Other days he came home from work at five. This mysterious caller, this intruder, must be there from about two-thirty or three until shortly before she expected him. One afternoon it had started to drizzle at about a quarter to three, and when he turned in his doorway over two hours later there was still a large dry patch on the asphalt out before their house, just beginning to blacken over with the fine misty precipitation that was still falling. That was how he knew the time of her treachery so well.

He could, of course, if he'd wanted to bring the thing out into the open, simply have come an unexpected hour earlier any afternoon during those six weeks, and confronted them face to face. But he preferred the way of guile and murderous revenge; they might have had some explanation to offer that would weaken his purpose, rob him of his excuse to do the thing he craved. And he knew her so well, that in his secret heart he feared she would have if he once gave her a chance to offer it. Feared was the right word. He wanted to do this thing. He wasn't interested in a showdown, he was interested in a pay-off. This artificially-nurtured grievance had brought the poison in his system to a head, that was all. Without it it might have remained latent for another five years, but it would have erupted sooner or later anyway.

He knew the hours of her domestic routine so well that it was the simplest matter in the world for him to return to the house on his errand at a time when she would not be

there. She did her cleaning in the morning. Then she had the impromptu morsel that she called lunch. Then she went out, in the early afternoon, and did her marketing for their evening meal. They had a phone in the house but she never ordered over it; she liked, she often told him, to see what she was getting, otherwise the tradespeople simply foisted whatever they chose on you, at their own prices. So from one until two was the time for him to do it, and be sure of getting away again unobserved afterwards.

At twelve-thirty sharp he wrapped up the alarm-clock in ordinary brown paper, tucked it under his arm, and left his shop. He left it every day at this same time to go to his own lunch. He would be a little longer getting back today, that was all. He locked the door carefully after him, of course; no use taking chances, he had too many valuable watches in there under repair and observation.

He boarded the bus at the corner below, just like he did every day when he was really going home for the night. There was no danger of being recognized or identified by any bus-driver or fellow-passenger or anything like that, this was too big a city. Hundreds of people used these busses night and day. The drivers didn’t even glance up at you when you paid your fare, deftly made change for you backhand by their sense of touch on the coin you gave them alone. The bus was practically empty, no one was going out his way at this hour of the day.

He got off at his usual stop, three interminable suburban blocks way from where he lived, which was why his house had not been a particularly good investment when he bought it and no others had been put up around it afterwards. But it had its compensations on such a day as this. There were no neighbors to glimpse him returning to it at this unusual hour, from their windows, and remember

that fact afterwards. The first of the three blocks he had to walk had a row of taxpayers on it, one-story store-fronts. The next two were absolutely vacant from corner to corner, just a panel of advertising billboards on both sides, with their gallery of friendly people that beamed on him each day twice a day. Incurable optimists these people were; even today when they were going to be shattered and splintered they continued to grin and smirk their counsel and messages of cheer. The perspiring bald-headed fat man about to quaff some non-alcoholic beverage. “The pause that refreshes!” The grinning colored laundress hanging up wash. “No ma’am, I just uses a little Oxydol.” The farmwife at the rural telephone sniggering over her shoulder: “Still talking about their new Ford 8!” They’d be tatters and kindling in two hours from now, and they didn’t have sense enough to get down off there and hurry away.

“You’ll wish you had,” he whispered darkly as he passed by beneath them, clock under arm.

But the point was, that if ever a man walked three “city” blocks in broad daylight unseen by the human eye, he did that now. He turned in the short cement walk when he came to his house at last, pulled back the screen door, put his latchkey into the wooden inner door and let himself in. She wasn’t home, of course; he’d known she wouldn’t be, or he wouldn’t have come back like this.

He closed the door again after him, moved forward into the blue twilight-dimness of the inside of the house. It seemed like that at first after the glare of the street. She had the green shades down three-quarters of the way on all the windows to keep it cool until she came back. He didn’t take his hat off or anything, he wasn’t staying. Particularly after he once set this clock he was carrying in motion. In fact it was going to be a creepy feeling even walking back those three blocks to the bus-stop and standing waiting for the bus to take him downtown again, knowing all the time something was going *tick-tock, tick-tock* in the stillness back

here, even though it wouldn’t happen for a couple of hours yet.

He went directly to the door leading down to the basement. It was a good stout wooden door. He passed through it, closed it behind him, and went down the bare brick steps to the basement-floor. In the winter, of course, she’d had to come down here occasionally to regulate the oil-burner while he was away, but after the fifteenth of April no one but himself ever came down here at any time, and it was now long past the fifteenth of April.

She hadn’t even known that he’d come down, at that. He’d slipped down each night for a few minutes while she was in the kitchen doing the dishes, and by the time she got through and came out, he was upstairs again behind his newspaper. It didn’t take long to add the contents of each successive little package to what was already in the box. The wiring had taken more time, but he’d gotten that done one night when she’d gone out to the movies (so she’d said —and then had been very vague about what the picture was she’d seen, but he hadn’t pressed her.)

The basement was provided with a light-bulb over the stairs, but it wasn’t necessary to use it except at night; daylight was admitted through a horizontal slit of window that on the outside was flush with the ground, but on the inside was up directly under the basement-ceiling. The glass was wire-meshed for protection and so cloudy with lack of attention as to be nearly opaque.

The box, that was no longer merely a box now but an infernal machine, was standing over against the wall, to one side of the oil-burner. He didn’t dare shift it about any more now that it was wired and the batteries inserted. He went over to it and squatted down on his heels before it, and put his hand on it with a sort of loving gesture. He was proud of it, prouder than of any fine watch he’d ever repaired or reconstructed. A watch, after all, was inanimate. This was going to become animate in a few more minutes, maybe

diabolically so, but animate just the same. It was like—giving birth.

He unwrapped the clock and spread out the few necessary small implements he'd brought with him from the shop on the floor beside him. Two fine copper wires were sticking stiffly out of a small hole he'd bored in the box, in readiness, like the antennae of some kind of insect. Through them death would go in.

He wound the clock up first, for he couldn't safely do that once it was connected. He wound it up to within an inch of its life, with a professionally deft economy of wrist-motion. Not for nothing was he a watch-repairer. It must have sounded ominous down in that hushed basement, to hear that *crick-craaaack, crick-craaaack*, that so-domestic sound that denotes going to bed, peace, slumber, security; that this time denoted approaching annihilation. It would have if there'd been any listener. There wasn't any but himself. It didn't sound ominous to him, it sounded delicious.

He set the alarm for three. But there was a difference now. Instead of just setting off a harmless bell when the hour hand reached three and the minute hand reached twelve, the wires attached to it leading to the batteries would set off a spark. A single, tiny, evanescent spark—that was all. And when that happened, all the way downtown where his shop was, the showcase would vibrate, and maybe one or two of the more delicate watch-mechanisms would stop. And people on the streets would stop and ask one another: "What was that?"

They probably wouldn't even be able to tell definitely, afterwards, that there'd been anyone else beside herself in the house at the time. They'd know that she'd been there only by a process of elimination; she wouldn't be anywhere else afterwards. They'd know that the house had been there only by the hole in the ground and the litter around.

He wondered why more people didn't do things like this; they didn't know what they were missing. Probably not

clever enough to be able to make the things themselves, that was why.

When he'd set the clock itself by his own pocketwatch—1:15—he pried the back off it. He'd already bored a little hole through this at his shop. Carefully he guided the antenna-like wires through it, more carefully still he fastened them to the necessary parts of the mechanism without letting a tremor course along them. It was highly dangerous but his hands didn't play him false, they were too skilled at this sort of thing. It wasn't vital to reattach the back to the clock, the result would be the same if it stood open or closed, but he did that too, to give the sense of completion to the job that his craftsman's soul found necessary. When he had done with it, it stood there on the floor, as if placed there at random up against an innocent-looking copper-lidded soapbox, ticking away. Ten minutes had gone by since he had come down here. One hour and forty minutes were still to go by.

Death was on the wing.

He stood up and looked down at his work. He nodded. He retreated a step across the basement floor, still looking down, and nodded again, as if the slight perspective gained only enhanced it He went over to the foot of the stairs leading up, and stopped once more and looked over. He had very good eyes. He could see the exact minute-notches on the dial all the way over where he now was. One had just gone by.

He smiled a little and went on up the stairs, not furtively or fearfully but like a man does in his own house, with an unhurried air of ownership, head up, shoulders back, tread firm.

He hadn't heard a sound over his head while he was down there, and you could hear sounds quite easily through the thin flooring, he knew that by experience. Even the opening and closing of doors above could be heard down here, certainly the footsteps of anyone walking about in the

ground-floor rooms if they bore down with their normal weight. And when they stood above certain spots and spoke, the sound of the voices and even what was said came through clearly, due to some trick of acoustics. He'd heard Lowell Thomas clearly, on the radio, while he was down here several times.

That was why he was all the more unprepared, as he opened the basement door and stepped out into the ground-floor hall, to hear a soft tread somewhere up above, on the second floor. A single, solitary footfall, separate, disconnected, like Robinson Crusoe's footprint. He stood stockstill a moment, listening tensely, print. He stood stockstill a moment, listening tensely, thinking—hoping, rather, he'd been mistaken. But he hadn't. The slur of a bureau-drawer being drawn open or closed reached him, and then a faint tinkling sound as though something had lightly struck one of the glass toilet-articles on Fran's dresser.

Who else could it be but she? And yet there was a stealth to these vague disconnected noises that didn't sound like her. He would have heard her come in; her high heels usually exploded along the hardwood floors like little firecrackers.

Some sixth sense made him turn suddenly and look behind him, toward the dining-room, and he was just in time to see a man, half-crouched, shoulders bunched forward, creeping up on him. He was still a few yards away, beyond the dining-room threshold, but before Stapp could do more than drop open his mouth with reflex astonishment, he had closed in on him, caught him brutally by the throat with one hand, flung him back against the wall, and pinned him there.

"What are you doing here?" Stapp managed to gasp out

"Hey, Bill, somebody *is* home!" the man called out guardedly. Then he struck out at him, hit him a stunning blow on the side of the head with his free hand. Stapp

didn’t reel because the wall was at the back of his head, that gave him back the blow doubly, and his senses dulled into a whirling flux for a minute.

Before they had cleared again, a second man had leaped down off stairs from one of the rooms above, in the act of finishing cramming something into his pocket

“You know what to do, hurry up!” the first one ordered. “Get me something to tie him with and let’s get out of here!”

“For God’s sake, don’t tie—!” Stapp managed to articulate through the strangling grip on his windpipe. The rest of it was lost in a blur of frenzied struggle on his part, flailing out with his legs, clawing at his own throat to free it. He wasn’t fighting the man off, he was only trying to tear that throttling impediment off long enough to get out what he had to tell them, but his assailant couldn’t tell the difference. He struck him savagely a second and third time, and Stapp went limp there against the wall without altogether losing consciousness.

The second one had come back already with a rope, it looked like Fran’s clothesline from the kitchen, that she used on Mondays.

Stapp, head falling forward dazedly upon the pinioning arm that still had him by the jugular, was dimly aware of this going around and around him, crisscross, in and out, legs and body and arms.

“Don’t—” he panted. His mouth was suddenly nearly torn in two, and a large handkerchief or rag was thrust in, effectively silencing all further sound. Then they whipped something around outside of that, to keep it in, and fastened it behind his head. His senses were clearing again, now that it was too late.

“Fighter, huh?” one of them muttered grimly. “What’s he protecting? The place is a lemon, there’s nothing in it”

Stapp felt a hand spade into his vest-pocket, take his watch out. Then into his trouser-pocket and remove the

little change he had on.

"Where'll we put him?"

"Leave him where he is."

"Naw. I did my last stretch just on account of leaving a guy in the open where he could put a squad-car on my tail too quick; they nabbed me a block away. Let's shove him back down in there where he was."

This brought on a new spasm, almost epileptic in its violence. He squirmed and writhed and shook his head back and forth. They had picked him up between them now, head and feet, kicked the basement door open, and were carrying him down the steps to the bottom. They still couldn't be made to understand that he wasn't resisting, that he wouldn't call the police, that he wouldn't lift a finger to have them apprehended—if they'd only let him get out of here, *with* them.

"This is more like it," one said, as they deposited him on the floor. "Whoever lives in the house with him won't find him so quick—"

Stapp started to roll his head back and forth on the floor like something demented, toward the clock, then toward them, toward the clock, toward them. But so fast that it finally lost all possible meaning, even if it would have had any for them in the first place, and it wouldn't have of course. They still thought he was trying to free himself in unconquerable opposition.

"Look at that!" one of them jeered. "Did you ever see anyone like him in your life?" He backed his arm threateningly at the wriggling form. "I'll give you one that'll hold you for good, if you don't cut it out!"

"Tie him up to that pipe over there in the corner," his companion suggested, "or he'll wear himself out rolling all over the place." They dragged him backwards along the floor and lashed him in a sitting position, legs out before him, with an added length of rope that had been coiled in the basement.

Then they brushed their hands ostentatiously and started up the basement stairs again, one behind the other, breathing hard from the struggle they'd had with him. "Pick up what we got and let's blow," one muttered. "We'll have to pull another one tonight—and this time you let me do the picking!"

"It looked like the berries," his mate alibied. "No one home, and standing way off by itself like it is."

A peculiar sound like the low simmering of a tea-kettle or the mewing of a newborn kitten left out in the rain to die came percolating thinly through the gag in Stapp's mouth. His vocal cords were strained to bursting with the effort it was costing him to make even that slight sound. His eyes were round and staring, fastened on them in horror and imploring.

They saw the look as they went on up, but couldn't read it. It might have been just the physical effort of trying to burst his bonds, it might have been rage and threatened retribution, for all they knew.

The first passed obliviously through the basement doorway and passed from sight The second stopped halfway to the top of the stairs and glanced complacently back at him—the way he himself had looked back at his own handiwork just now, short minutes ago.

"Take it easy," he jeered, "relax. I used to be a sailor. You'll never get out of *them* knots, buddy."

Stapp swiveled his skull desperately, threw his eyes at the clock one last time. They almost started out of their sockets, he put such physical effort into the look.

This time the man got it finally, but got it wrong. He flung his arm at him derisively. "Trying to tell me you got a date? Oh no you haven't, you only think you have! Whadda you care what time it is, you're not going any place!"

And then with the horrible slowness of a nightmare—though it only seemed that way, for he resumed his ascent fairly briskly—his head went out through the doorway, his

shoulders followed, his waist next. Now even optical communication was cut off between them, and if only Stapp had had a minute more he might have made him understand! There was only one backthrust foot left in sight now, poised on the topmost basement step to take flight Stapp's eyes were on it as though their burning plea could hold it back. The heel lifted up, it rose, trailed through after the rest of the man, was gone.

Stapp heaved himself so violently, as if to go after it by sheer willpower, that for a moment his whole body was a distended bow, clear of the floor from shoulders to heels. Then he fell flat again with a muffled thud, and a little dust came out from under him, and a half-dozen little separate skeins of sweat started down his face at one time, crossing and intercrossing as they coursed. The basement door ebbed back into its frame and the latch dropped into its socket with a minor click that to him was like the crack of doom.

In the silence now, above the surge of his own tidal breathing that came and went like surf upon a shoreline, was the counterpoint of the clock. Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.

For a moment or two longer he drew what consolation he could from the knowledge of their continued presence above him. An occasional stealthy footfall here and there, never more than one in succession, for they moved with marvelous dexterity, they must have had a lot of practice in breaking and entering. They were very cautious walkers from long habit even when there was no further need for it. A single remark filtered through, from somewhere near the back door. "All set? Let's take it this way." The creak of a hinge, and then the horrid finality of a door closing after them, the back door, which Fran may have forgotten to lock and by which they had presumably entered in the first place; and then they were gone.

And with them went his only link with the outside world. They were the only two people in the whole city who knew where he was at this moment. No one else, not a living soul, knew where to find him. Nor what would happen to him if he wasn't found and gotten out of here by three o'clock. It was twenty-five to two now. His discovery of their presence, the fight, their trussing him up with the rope, and their final unhurried departure, had all taken place within fifteen minutes.

It went tick-tick, tick-tock; tick-tick, tick-tock, so rhythmically, so remorselessly, so *fast*.

An hour and twenty-five minutes left. Eighty-five minutes left. How long that could seem if you were waiting for someone on a corner, under an umbrella, in the rain—like he had once waited for Fran outside the office where she worked before they were married, only to find that she'd been taken ill and gone home early that day.

How long that could seem if you were stretched out on a hospital-bed with knife-pains in your head and nothing to look at but white walls, until they brought your next tray—as he had been that time of the concussion. How long that could seem when you'd finished the paper, and one of the tubes had burned out in the radio, and it was too early to go to bed yet. How short, how fleeting, how instantaneous, that could seem when it was all the time there was left for you to live in and you were going to die at the end of it!

No clock had ever gone this fast, of all the hundreds that he'd looked at and set right. This was a demon-clock, its quarter-hours were minutes and its minutes seconds. Its lesser hand didn't even pause at all on those notches the way it should have, passed on from one to the next in perpetual motion. It was cheating him, it wasn't keeping the right time, somebody slow it down at least if nothing else! It was twirling like a pinwheel, that secondary hand.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock. He broke it up into "Here I go, here I go, here I go."

There was a long period of silence that seemed to go on forever after the two of them had left. The clock told him it was only twenty-one minutes. Then at four to two a door opened above without warning—oh blessed sound, oh lovely sound!—the front door this time (over above *that* side of the basement), and high-heeled shoes clacked over his head like castanets.

"Fran!" he shouted. "Fran!" he yelled. "Fran!" he screamed. But all that got past the gag was a low whimper that didn't even reach across the basement. His face was dark with the effort it cost him, and a cord stood out at each side of his palpitating neck like a splint

The tap-tap-tap went into the kitchen, stopped a minute (she was putting down her parcels; she didn't have things delivered because then you were expected to tip the errand-boys ten cents), came back again. If only there was something he could kick at with his interlocked feet, make a clatter with. The cellar-flooring was bare from wall to wall. He tried hoisting his lashed legs clear of the floor and pounding them down again with all his might; maybe the sound of the impact would carry up to her. All he got was a soft, cushioned sound, with twice the pain of striking a stone surface with your bare palm, and not even as much distinctness. His shoes were rubber-heeled, and he could not tilt them up and around far enough to bring them down on the leather part above the lifts. An electrical discharge of pain shot up the backs of his legs, coursed up his spine, and exploded at the back of his head, like a brilliant rocket.

Meanwhile her steps had halted about where the hall closet was (she must be hanging up her coat), then went on toward the stairs that led to the upper floor, faded out upon them, going up. She was out of earshot now, temporarily. But she was in the house with him at least! That awful aloneness was gone. He felt such gratitude for her nearness, he felt such love and need for her, he wondered how he could ever have thought of doing away with her—

only one short hour ago. He saw now that he must have been insane to contemplate such a thing. Well if he had been, he was sane now, he was rational now, this ordeal had brought him to his senses. Only release him, only rescue him from his jeopardy, and he'd never again . . .

Five-after. She'd been back nine minutes now. There, it was ten. At first slowly, then faster and faster, terror, which had momentarily been quelled by her return, began to fasten upon him again. Why did she stay up there on the second floor like that? Why didn't she come down here to the basement, to look for something? Wasn't there anything down here that she might suddenly be in need of? He looked around, and there wasn't. There wasn't a possible thing that might bring her down here. They kept their basement so clean, so empty. Why wasn't it piled up with all sorts of junk like other people's! That might have saved him now.

She might intend to stay up there all afternoon! She might lie down and take a nap, she might shampoo her hair, she might do over an old dress. Any one of those trivial harmless occupations of a woman during her husband's absence could prove so fatal now! She might count on staying up there until it was time to begin getting his supper ready, and if she did—no supper, no she, no he.

Then a measure of relief came again. The man. The man whom he had intended destroying along with her, he would save him. He would be the means of his salvation. He came other days, didn't he, in the afternoon, while Stapp was away? Then, oh God, let him come today, make this one of the days they had a rendezvous (and yet maybe it just wasn't!). For if he came, that would bring her down to the lower floor, if only to admit him. And how infinitely greater his chances would be, with two pairs of ears in the house to overhear some wisp of sound he might make, than just with one.

And so he found himself in the anomalous position of a husband praying, pleading with every ounce of fervency he can muster, for the arrival, the materialization, of a rival whose existence he had only suspected until now, never been positive of.

Eleven past two. Forty-nine minutes left. Less than the time it took to sit through the "A"-part of a pictureshow. Less than the time it took to get a haircut, if you had to wait your turn. Less than the time it took to sit through a Sunday meal, or listen to an hour program on the radio, or ride on the bus from here to the beach for a dip. Less than all those things—to live. No, no, he had been meant to live thirty more years, forty! What had become of those years, those months, those weeks? No, not just *minutes* left, it wasn't fair!

"Fran!" he shrieked. "Fran, come down here! Can't you hear me?" The gag drank it up like a sponge.

The phone trilled out suddenly in the lower hallway, midway between him and her. He'd never heard such a beautiful sound before. "Thank God!" he sobbed, and a tear stood out in each eye. That must be the man now. That would bring her down.

Then fear again. Suppose it was only to tell her that he wasn't coming? Or worse still, suppose it was to ask her instead to come out and meet him somewhere else? Leave him alone down here, once again, with this horror ticking away opposite him. No child was ever so terrified of being left alone in the dark, of its parents putting out the light and leaving it to the mercy of the boogy-man as this grown man was at the thought of her going out of the house and leaving him behind.

It kept on ringing a moment longer, and then he heard her quick step descending the stairs to answer it. He could hear every word she said down there where he was. These cheap matchwood houses.

"Hello? Yes, Dave. I just got in now."

Then, “Oh Dave, I’m all upset I had seventeen dollars upstairs in my bureau-drawer and it’s gone, and the wrist-watch that Paul gave me is gone too. Nothing else is missing, but it looks to me as if someone broke in here while I was out and robbed us.”

Stapp almost writhed with delight down there where he was. She knew they’d been robbed! She’d get the police now! Surely they’d search the whole place, surely they’d look down here and find him!

The man she was talking to must have asked her if she was sure. “Well, I’ll look again, but I know it’s gone. I know just where I left it, and it isn’t there. Paul will have a fit”

No Paul wouldn’t either; if she’d only come down here and free him he’d forgive her anything, even the cardinal sin of being robbed of his hard-earned money.

Then she said, “No, I haven’t reported it yet I suppose I should, but I don’t like the idea—on your account, you know. I’m going to call up Paul at the shop. There’s just a chance that he took the money and the watch both with him when he left this morning. I remember telling him the other night that it was losing time; he may have wanted to look it over. Well, all right, Dave, come on out then.”

So he was coming, so Stapp wasn’t to be left alone in the place; hot breaths of relief pushed against the sodden gag at the back of his palate.

There was a pause while she broke the connection. Then he heard her call his shop-number, “Trevelyan 4512,” and wait while they were ringing, and of course no one answered.

Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.

The operator must have told her finally that they couldn’t get the number. “Well, keep ringing,” he heard her say, “it’s my husband’s store, he’s always there at this hour.”

He screamed in terrible silence: “I’m right here under your feet! Don’t waste time! For God’s sake, come away from the phone, come down here!”

Finally, when failure was reported a second time, she hung up. Even the hollow, cupping sound of that detail reached him. Oh, everything reached him—but help. This was a torture that a Grand Inquisitor would have envied.

He heard her steps move away from where the phone was. Wouldn't she guess by his absence from where he was supposed to be that something was wrong? Wouldn't she come down here now and look? (Oh, where was this woman's intuition they spoke about?!) No, how could she be expected to. What connection could the basement of their house possibly have in her mind with the fact that he wasn't in his shop? She wasn't even alarmed, so far, by his absence most likely. If it had been evening; but at this hour of the day—He might have gone out later than other days to his lunch, he might have had some errand to do.

He heard her going up the stairs again, probably to resume her search for the missing money and watch. He whimpered disappointedly. He was as cut off from her, while she remained up there, as if she'd been miles away, instead of being vertically over him in a straight line.

Tick, tock, tick, tock. It was twenty-one past two now. One half-hour and nine scant minutes more left. And they ticked away with the prodigality of tropical raindrops on a corrugated tin roof.

He kept straining and pulling away from the pipe that held him fast, then falling back exhausted, to rest awhile, to struggle and to strain some more. There was as recurrent a rhythm to it as there was to the ticking of the clock itself, only more widely spaced. How could ropes hold that unyieldingly? Each time he fell back weaker, less able to contend with them than the time before. For he wasn't little strands of hemp, he was layers of thin skin that broke one by one and gave forth burning pain and finally blood.

The doorbell rang out sharply. The man had come. In less than ten minutes after their phone talk he had reached the house. Stapp's chest started rising and falling with renewed

hope. Now his chances were good again. Twice as good as before, with two people in the house instead of only one. Four ears instead of two, to hear whatever slight sound he might manage to make. And he must, he must find a way of making one. He gave the stranger his benediction while he stood there waiting to be admitted. Thank God for this admirer or whatever he was, thank God for their rendezvous. He'd give them his blessing if they wanted it, all his worldly goods; anything, anything, if they'd only find him, free him.

She came quickly down the stairs a second time and her footfalls hurried down the hall. The front door opened. "Hello, Dave," she said, and he heard the sound of a kiss quite clearly. One of those loud unabashed ones that bespeak cordiality rather than intrigue.

A man's voice, deep, resonant, asked: "Well, did it turn up yet?"

"No, and I've looked high and low," he heard her say. "I tried to get Paul after I spoke to you, and he was out to lunch."

"Well, you can't just let seventeen dollars walk out the door without lifting your finger."

For seventeen dollars they were standing there frittering his life away—and their own too, for that matter, the fools!

"They'll think I did it, I suppose," he heard the man say with a note of bitterness.

"Don't say things like that," she reproved. "Come in the kitchen and I'll make you a cup of coffee."

Her quick brittle step went first, and his heavier, slower one followed. There was the sound of a couple of chairs being drawn out, and the man's footfalls died out entirely. Hers continued busily back and forth for a while, on a short orbit between stove and table.

What were they going to do, *sit* up there for the next half-hour? Couldn't he *make* them hear in some way? He tried clearing his throat, coughing. It hurt furiously, because the

lining of it was all raw from long strain. But the gag muffled even the cough to a blurred purring sort of sound.

Twenty-six to three. Only minutes left now, minutes; not even a full half-hour any more.

Her footsteps stopped finally and one chair shifted slightly as she joined him at the table. There was linoleum around the stove and sink that deadened sounds, but the middle part of the room where the table stood was ordinary pine-board flooring. It let things through with crystalline accuracy.

He heard her say, “Don’t you think we ought to tell Paul about—us?”

The man didn’t answer for a moment. Maybe he was spooning sugar, or thinking about what she’d said. Finally he asked, “What kind of a guy is he?”

“Paul’s not narrow-minded,” she said. “He’s very fair and broad.”

Even in his agony, Stapp was dimly aware of one thing: that didn’t sound a bit like her. Not her speaking well of him, but that she could calmly, detachedly contemplate broaching such a topic to him. She had always seemed so proper and slightly prudish. This argued a sophistication that he hadn’t known she’d had.

The man was evidently dubious about taking Paul into their confidence, at least he had nothing further to say. She went on, as though trying to convince him: “You have nothing to be afraid of on Paul’s account, Dave, I know him too well. And don’t you see, we can’t keep on like this? It’s better to go to him ourselves and tell him about you, than wait until he finds out. He’s liable to think something else entirely, and keep it to himself, brood, hold it against me, unless we explain. I know that he didn’t believe me that night when I helped you find a furnished room, and told him I’d been to a movie. And I’m so nervous and upset each time he comes home in the evening, it’s a wonder he hasn’t noticed it before now. Why I feel as guilty as if—as if I were

one of these disloyal wives or something." She laughed embarrassedly, as if apologizing to him for even bringing such a comparison up.

What did she mean by that?

"Didn't you ever tell him about me at all?"

"You mean in the beginning? Oh, I told him you'd been in one or two scrapes, but like a little fool I let him think I'd lost track of you, didn't know where you were any more."

Why, that was her brother she'd said that about!

The man sitting up there with her confirmed it right as the thought burst in his mind. "I know it's tough on you, Sis. You're happily married and all that I've got no right to come around and gum things up for you. No one's proud of a jailbird, an escaped convict, for a brother—"

"David," he heard her say, and even through the flooring there was such a ring of earnestness in her voice Stapp could almost visualize her reaching across the table and putting her hand reassuringly on his, "there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, and you should know that by now. Circumstances have been against you, I that's all. You shouldn't have done what you did, but that's spilt milk and there's no use going back over it now."

"I suppose I'll have to go back and finish it out. Seven years, though, Fran, seven years out of a man's life—"

"But this way you have no life at all—"

Were they going to keep on talking his life away? Nineteen to three. One quarter of an hour, and four minutes over! "Before you do anything, let's go downtown and talk it over with Paul, hear what he says." One chair jarred back, then the other. He could hear dishes clatter, as though they'd all been lumped together in one stack. "I'll do these when I come back," she remarked.

Were they going to leave again? Were they going to leave him behind here, alone, with only minutes to spare?

Their footsteps had come out into the hall now, halted a moment undecidedly. "I don't like the idea of you being seen

with me on the streets in broad daylight, you could get in trouble yourself, you know. Why don't you phone him to come out here instead?"

Yes, yes, Stapp wailed. Stay with me! Stay!

"I'm not afraid," she said gallantly. "I don't like to ask him to leave his work at this hour, and I can't tell him over the phone. Wait a minute, I'll get my hat." Her footsteps diverged momentarily from his, rejoined them again.

Panic-stricken, Stapp did the only thing he could think of. Struck the back of his head violently against the thick pipe he was attached to.

A sheet of blue flame darted before his eyes. He must have hit one of the welts where he had already been struck once by the burglars. The pain was so excruciating he knew he couldn't repeat the attempt. But they must have heard something, some dull thud or reverberation must have carried up along the pipe. He heard her stop short for a minute and say, "What was that?"

And the man, duller-sensed than she and killing him all unknowingly, "What? I didn't hear anything."

She took his word for it, went on again, to the hall-closet to get her coat. Then her footsteps retraced themselves all the way back through the dining-room to the kitchen. "Wait a minute, I want to make sure this back door's shut tight. Locking the stable after the horse is gone!"

She came forward again through the house for the last time, there was the sound of the front door opening, she passed through it, the man passed through it, it closed, and they were gone. There was the faint whirr of a car starting up outside in the open.

And now he was left alone with his self-fashioned doom a second time, and the first seemed a paradise in retrospect compared to this, for then he had a full hour to spare, he had been rich in time, and now he only had fifteen minutes, one miserly quarter-hour.

There wasn’t any use struggling any more. He’d found that out long ago. He couldn’t anyway, even if he’d wanted to. Flames seemed to be licking lazily around his wrists and ankles.

He’d found a sort of palliative now, the only way there was left. He’d keep his eyes down and pretend the hands were moving slower than they were, it was better than watching them constantly, it blunted a little of the terror at least. The ticking he couldn’t hide from. Of course every once in a while when he couldn’t resist looking up and verifying his own calculations, there’d be a renewed burst of anguish, but in-between-times it made it more bearable to say, “It’s only gained a half-minute since the last time I looked.” Then he’d hold out as long as he could with his eyes down, but when he couldn’t stand it any more and would have to raise them to see if he was right, it had gained *two* minutes. Then he’d have a bad fit of hysterics, in which he called on God, and even on his long-dead mother, to help him, and couldn’t see straight through the tears. Then he’d pull himself together again, in a measure, and start the self-deception over again. “It’s only about thirty seconds now since I last looked. . . . Now it’s about a minute . . .” (But was it? But was it?) And so on, mounting slowly to another climax of terror and abysmal collapse.

Then suddenly the outside world intruded again, that world that he was so cut off from that it already seemed as far-away, as unreal, as if he were already dead. The doorbell rang out.

He took no hope from the summons at first. Maybe some peddler—no, that had been too aggressive to be a peddler’s ring. It was the sort of ring that claimed admission as its right, not as a favor. It came again. Whoever was ringing was truculently impatient at being kept waiting. A third ring was given the bell, this time a veritable blast that kept on for nearly half-a-minute. The party must have kept his finger pressed to the bell-button the whole time. Then as

the peal finally stopped, a voice called out forcefully: “Anybody home in there? Gas Company!” And suddenly Stapp was quivering all over, almost whinnying in his anxiety.

This was the one call, the one incident in all the day’s domestic routine, from earliest morning until latest night, that could have possibly brought anyone down into the basement! The meter was up there on the wall, beside the stairs, staring him in the face! And her brother had had to take her out of the house at just this particular time! There was no one to let the man in.

There was the impatient shuffle of a pair of feet on the cement walk. The man must have come down off the porch to gain perspective with which to look inquiringly up at the second-floor windows. And for a fleeting moment, as he chafed and shifted about out there before the house, on the walk and off, Stapp actually glimpsed the blurred shanks of his legs standing before the grimy transom that let light into the basement at ground-level. All the potential savior had to do was crouch down and peer in through it, and he’d see him tied up down there. And the rest would be so easy!

Why didn’t he, why didn’t he? But evidently he didn’t expect anyone to be in the basement of a house in which his triple ring went unanswered. The tantalizing trouserleg shifted out of range again, the transom became blank. A little saliva filtered through the mass of rag in Stapp’s distended mouth, trickled across his silently vibrating lower lip.

The gas inspector gave the bell one more try, as if venting his disappointment at being balked rather than in any expectation of being admitted this late in the proceedings. He gave it innumerable short jabs, like a telegraph-key. Bip-bip-bip-bip-bip. Then he called out disgustedly, evidently for the benefit of some unseen assistant waiting in a truck out at the curb, “They’re never in when you want ‘em to be!”

There was a single quick tread on the cement, away from the house. Then the slur of a light truck being driven off.

Stapp died a little. Not metaphorically, literally. His arms and legs got cold up to the elbows and knees, his heart seemed to beat slower, and he had trouble getting a full breath; more saliva escaped and ran down his chin, and his head drooped forward and lay on his chest for awhile, inert.

Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. It brought him to after awhile, as though it were something beneficent, smelling salts or ammonia, instead of being the malevolent thing it was.

He noticed that his mind was starting to wander. Not much, as yet, but every once in awhile he'd get strange fancies. One time he thought that his *face* was the clock-dial, and that thing he kept staring at over there was his face. The pivot in the middle that held the two hands became his nose, and the 10 and the 2, up near the top, became his eyes, and he had a red-tin beard and head of hair and a little round bell on the exact top of his crown for a hat. "Gee, I look funny," he sobbed drowsily. And he caught himself twitching the muscles of his face, as if trying to stop those two hands that were clasped on it before they progressed any further and killed that man over there, who was breathing so metallically: tick, tock, tick, tock.

Then he drove the weird notion away again, and he saw that it had been just another escape-mechanism. Since he couldn't control the clock over there, he had attempted to change it into something else. Another vagary was that this ordeal had been brought on him as punishment for what he had intended doing to Fran, that he was being held fast there not by the inanimate ropes but by some active, punitive agency, and that if he exhibited remorse, pledged contrition to a proper degree, he could automatically effect his release at its hands. Thus over and over he whined in the silence of his throttled throat, "I'm sorry. I won't do it

again. Just let me go this one time, I've learned my lesson, I'll never do it again."

The outer world returned again. This time it was the phone. It must be Fran and her brother, trying to find out if he'd come back here in their absence. They'd found the shop closed, must have waited outside of it for a while, and then when he still didn't come, didn't know what to make of it. Now they were calling the house from a booth down there, to see if he had been taken ill, had returned here in the meantime. When no one answered, that would tell them, surely, that something was wrong. Wouldn't they come back now to find out what had happened to him?

But why should they think he was here in the house if he didn't answer the phone? How could they dream he was in the basement the whole time? They'd hang around outside the shop some more waiting for him, until as time went on, and Fran became real worried, maybe they'd go to the police. (But that would be hours from now, what good would it do?) They'd look everywhere but here for him. When a man is reported missing the last place they'd look for him would be in his own home.

It stopped ringing finally, and its last vibration seemed to hang tenuously on the lifeless air long after it had ceased, humming outward in a spreading circle like a pebble dropped into a stagnant pool. *Mmmmmmmm*, until it was gone, and silence came rolling back in its wake.

She would be outside the pay-booth or wherever it was she had called from, by this time. Rejoining her brother, where he had waited. Reporting, "He's not out at the house either." Adding the mild, still unworried comment, "Isn't that strange? Where on earth can he have gone?" Then they'd go back and wait outside the locked shop, at ease, secure, unendangered. She'd tap her foot occasionally in slight impatience, look up and down the street while they chatted.

And now *they* would be two of those casuals who would stop short and say to one another at three o'clock: "What was that?" And Fran might add, "It sounded as though it came from out our way." That would be the sum-total of their comment on his passing.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock. Nine minutes to three. Oh, what a lovely number was nine. Let it be nine forever, not eight or seven, nine for all eternity. Make time stand still, that he might breathe though all the world around him stagnated, rotted away. But no, it was already eight The hand had bridged the white gap between the two black notches. Oh, what a precious number was eight, so rounded, so symmetrical. Let it be eight forever—

A woman's voice called out in sharp reprimand, somewhere outside in the open: "Be careful what you're doing, Bobby, you'll break a window!" She was some distance away, but the ringing dictatorial tones carried clearly.

Stapp saw the blurred shape of a ball strike the basement-transom, he was looking up at it, for her voice had come in to him through there. It must have been just a tennis-ball, but for an instant it was outlined black against the soiled pane, like a small cannonball; it seemed to hang there suspended, to adhere to the glass, then it dropped back to the ground. If it had been ordinary glass it might have broken it, but the wire-mesh had prevented that.

The child came close up against the transom to get its ball back. It was such a small child that Stapp could see its entire body within the height of the pane, only the head was cut off. It bent over to pick up the ball, and then its head came into range too. It had short golden ringlets all over it. Its profile was turned toward him, looking down at the ball. It was the first human face he'd seen since he'd been left where he was. It looked like an angel. But an inattentive, unconcerned angel.

It saw something else while it was still bent forward close to the ground, a stone or something that attracted it, and picked that up too and looked at it, still crouched over, then finally threw it recklessly away over its shoulder, whatever it was.

The woman's voice was nearer at hand now, she must be strolling along the sidewalk directly in front of the house. "Bobby, stop throwing things like that, you'll hit somebody!"

If it would only turn its head over this way, it could look right in, it could see him. The glass wasn't too smeary for that. He started to weave his head violently from side to side, hoping the flurry of motion would attract it, catch its eye. It may have, or its own natural curiosity may have prompted it to look in without that. Suddenly it had turned its head and was looking directly in through the transom. Blankly at first, he could tell by the vacant expression of its eyes.

Faster and faster he swiveled his head. It raised the heel of one chubby, fumbling hand and scoured a little clear spot to squint through. Now it could see him, now surely! It still didn't for a second. It must be much darker in here than outside, and the light was behind it.

The woman's voice came in sharp reproof: "Bobby, what are you doing there?!"

And then suddenly it saw him. The pupils of its eyes shifted over a little, came to rest directly on him. Interest replaced blankness. Nothing is strange to children—not a man tied up in a cellar any more than anything else—yet everything is. Everything creates wonder, calls for comment, demands explanation. Wouldn't it say anything to her? Couldn't it talk? It must be old enough to; she, its mother, was talking to it incessantly. "Bobby, come away from there!"

"Mommy, look!" it said gleefully.

Stapp couldn't see it clearly any more, he was shaking his head so fast. He was dizzy, like you are when you've just

gotten off a carousel; the transom and the child it framed kept swinging about him in a half-circle, first too far over on one side, then too far over on the other.

But wouldn't it understand, wouldn't it understand that weaving of the head meant he wanted to be free? Even if ropes about the wrists and ankles had no meaning to it, if it couldn't tell what a bandage around the mouth was, it must know that when anyone writhed like that they wanted to be let loose. Oh God, if it had only been two years older, three at the most! A child of eight, these days, would have understood and given warning.

"Bobby, are you coming? I'm waiting!"

If he could only hold its attention, keep it rooted there long enough in disobedience to her, surely she'd come over and get it, see him herself as she irritably sought to ascertain the reason for its fascination.

He rolled his eyes at it in desperate comicality, winked them, blinked them, crossed them. An elfin grin peered out on its face at this last; already it found humor in a physical defect, or the assumption of one, young as it was.

An adult hand suddenly darted downward from the upper right-hand corner of the transom, caught its wrist, bore its arm upward out of sight. "Mommy, look!" it said again, and pointed with its other hand. "Funny man, tied up."

The adult voice, reasonable, logical, dispassionate—inattentive to a child's fibs and fancies—answered: "Why that wouldn't look nice, Mommy can't peep into other people's houses like you can."

The child was tugged erect at the end of its arm, its head disappeared above the transom. Its body was pivoted around, away from him; he could see the hollows at the back of its knees for an instant longer, then its outline on the glass blurred in withdrawal, it was gone. Only the little clear spot it had scoured remained to mock him in his crucifixion.

The will to live is an unconquerable thing. He was more dead than alive by now, yet presently he started to crawl back again out of the depths of his despair, a slower longer crawl each time, like that of some indefatigable insect buried repeatedly in sand, that each time manages to burrow its way out.

He rolled his head away from the window back toward the clock finally. He hadn't been able to spare a look at it during the whole time the child was in sight. And now to his horror it stood at three to three. There was a fresh, a final blotting-out of the burrowing insect that was his hopes, as if by a cruel idler lounging on a beach.

He couldn't *feel* any more, terror or hope or anything else. A sort of numbness had set in, with a core of gleaming awareness remaining that was his mind. *That* would be all that the detonation would be able to blot out by the time it came. It was like having a tooth extracted with the aid of novocaine. There remained of him now only this single pulsing nerve of premonition; all the tissue around it was frozen. So protracted foreknowledge of death was in itself its own anaesthetic.

Now it would be too late even to attempt to free him first, before stopping the thing. Just time enough, if someone came down those stairs this very minute, sharp-edged knife with which to sever his bonds already in hand, for him to throw himself over toward it, reverse it. And now—now it was too late even for that, too late for anything but to die.

He was making animal-noises deep in his throat as the minute hand slowly blended with the notch of twelve. Guttural sounds like a dog worrying a bone, though the gag prevented their emerging in full volume. He puckered the flesh around his eyes apprehensively, creased them into slits—as though the closing of his eyes could ward off, lessen, the terrific force of what was to come! Something deep within him, what it was he had no leisure nor skill to recognize, seemed to retreat down long dim corridors away

from the doom that impeded. He hadn't known he had those convenient corridors of evasion in him, with their protective turns and angles by which to put distance between himself and menace. Oh clever architect of the Mind, oh merciful blueprints that made such emergency exits available. Toward them this something, that was he and yet not he, rushed; toward sanctuary, security, toward waiting brightness, sunshine, laughter.

The hand on the dial stayed there, upright, perpendicular, a perfect right-angle to its corollary, while the swift seconds that were all there were left of existence ticked by and were gone. It wasn't so straight now any more, but he didn't know it, he was in a state of death already. White reappeared between it and the twelve-notch, behind it now. It was one minute after three. He was shaking all over from head to foot—not with fear, with laughter.

It broke into sound as they plucked the dampened, bloodied gag out, as though they were drawing the laughter out after it, by suction or osmosis.

"No, don't take those ropes off him yet!" the man in the white coat warned the policeman sharply. "Wait'll they get here with the straitjacket first, or you'll have your hands full."

Fran said through her tears, cupping her hands to her ears, "Can't you stop him from laughing like that? I can't stand it. Why does he keep laughing like that?"

"He's out of his mind, lady," explained the intern patiently.

The clock said five past seven. "What's in this box?" the cop asked, kicking at it idly with his foot. It shifted lightly along the wall a little, and took the clock with it

"Nothing," Stapp's wife answered, through her sobs and above his incessant laughter. "Just an empty box. It used to

have some kind of fertilizer in it, but I took it out and used it on the flowers I—I've been trying to raise out in back of the house."

I.O.U.—ONE LIFE

To the others in the back room, Detective Sergeant Clinton Sturgess said, “So long, fellows—see you tomorrow.” He went down the hall, past the sergeant’s desk, out of the precinct house and into the velvety softness of an August dusk. He went around the corner to the garage, got his old car out. He swung it up the ramp to the street, stopped long enough to light a cigarette, exhaled an enjoyable “Aahh!” and started homeward, whistling.

It was a swell night. It was a swell life. He was 35, had a nice wife and a nice kid, he was a second-grader, and he wasn’t stopping there. He had it all lined up before him, step by step: first-grade, lieutenant, captain, inspector. Still remote those steps were, but not unattainable. The way lay plain before him, with odds just stiff enough to try his mettle, and the rewards generous to a fault. It was a swell night. It was a swell life.

He was out on the lake shore drive now, with its lights curving around before him in a long vista and the lake gray-violet in the twilight. His rented little bungalow was a little far out from the city, in a district not yet fully built up; but it was cheaper out there and you got more for your money.

He was whistling *My Blue Heaven.* It was old but it stayed with him, and the words in his mind fitted his contentment.

A turn to the right—
A little white light,

He made the turn (but it was to the left) and climbed the steep grade that led to their house. The development was called Lakeview Heights because it was strung along the top of this bluff. He parked at the curb instead of backing into the garage because he'd decided to take his family to the movies. He sounded the horn, and the porch light went on and they both came out in a flurry, his wife just to the lower step, the kid flying out all the way to swing from his neck as he stepped from the car and caught her.

The kid was pretty. Everybody said so. She'd been on loan to them from heaven for seven years now, and each time he could see the place she'd come from just by looking at her.

"Get your things ready. We're going to the movies."

The flurry became a whirlwind. His wife said, "I've got supper waiting for you on the table. We're finished already. Barbara, come in and get your hat."

He turned the car around to face downhill, to save time leaving, and braked once more. The kid came racing out past him a second time as he got up to the porch. "I'll wait for you in the car!" she cried gaily.

"All right—but don't monkey with the horn now."

He wasn't even sitting down yet, he was crouched above a chair in the act of pulling it forward under him, and his wife was passing him a plate across the table. He was in a straight line with the porch door. He happened to turn his head that way, and there was something wrong. There was a blankness out where there shouldn't have been. He could see the opposite side of the street.

His chair cracked over and he was running through the living room to the porch. Behind him a plate shattered on the floor and the S.O.S. of his wife's heels came tapping after him.

He could still hear the whisper of the car's going receding on the hushed night air. No engine. So then he knew what had happened, and the knowledge nearly felled

him, like a crowbar across the top of his head, even before he got out to the porch and could see.

Street lamps made it bright all the way down, all the way to where—the lake was. The car was going straight as an arrow. It didn't swerve at all. Its momentum held it gripped too tightly. A little arm was thrust briefly out at the side, then withdrawn again. A sort of gay wave; coasting was fun.

There wasn't a sound behind him. Somehow he knew, without looking, that his wife had fallen senseless there on the walk. But he was already yards down that fearful incline. He ran down that hill like nothing that had ever run down it before.

It was all over so quickly, so soundlessly. He had been gaining on the car, but the foot of the street came too quickly. Horror such as a man sees only once in a lifetime was fleetingly there before his eyes, then gone again. But never quite gone again until the day he'd die. For the car reached Lakeshore Drive, swept across its triple-lane width, unerringly hurtled the pitifully low pedestrian parapet—it was such a new development, and it would have hidden the beauties of the lake to have built it any higher—cleared the barrier almost by the unaided resiliency of its own tires and springs, with a flaring of dust and a crumbling along the top, and was gone from sight.

It was as instantaneous as the exposure of a snapshot. Two of the limestone blocks along the upper tier, a car's width apart, had been knocked out by the wheels, giving a battlement effect. But the spray that had risen on the other side never seemed to finish falling back into place.

There was a screaming of brakes off to one side of him as he darted across the roadway, and some kind of a pitching, swerving beam of light flicked at him. Somebody's arrested headlights maybe.

A horrid heaving was there below him as he mounted one of the loosened blocks. The high-posted driveway lights behind him played up a single blister-like bubble formed

there in the water, a bubble that refused to burst, that kept renewing itself from below. He didn’t bother about his coat. He aimed himself face-forward into those roiling eddies, and as he went down the thought that he couldn’t swim was with him, but that didn’t matter.

He went in wrong, with a spanking blow across the chest and stomach. He went down a little way, arms groping before him—toward nothing. Then he was being pushed up again, and he didn’t know how to make himself go down any farther. He didn’t know how not to breathe either, and long before he could get up again he was nothing but a mass of convulsive muscular spasms, drawing in destruction at every inhalation. He broke the surface briefly, but he didn’t know how to take advantage of it. He was already dying himself now, as he went under again.

Something swift and safe and sure got him at some point after that. He never knew when, and it drew him backward through water and up into air, air that now hurt as much as water, but didn’t kill. Then he was lying there heaving like a bellows, on a tiny lip of soil that protruded at the base of the parapet, and there was a man standing over him, dripping but not spent, looking down at him with a sort of scorn that had no solicitude or consideration to it. The man said, “What the hell did you go in for, if you can’t swim?”

Sturgess turned over on his face, supporting himself on his hands, and between spasms of coughing managed to strangle out: “My kid! In a car down there—!”

The man was suddenly gone again. And in a little while, in only the space between two paroxysms of coughing it seemed, she was there again before his eyes, cradled in the man’s arms, her face so blue and still in the darkness. From where he lay Sturgess just mutely looked his gratitude, as the stranger climbed up over the parapet still holding her, toward the waiting arms of quickly gathered spectators reaching down to help.

When the inhalator squad had finished, and Sturgess had held her tight to him a minute, with her open-eyed, breathing, he looked around and asked: “Where is he? Where’d he go?”

He saw a car start to glide furtively off in the background. He shouted, “Wait!” and ran directly across the path of its headlights. The car stopped with a poor sort of grace, and the man at the wheel hitched his head in surly inquiry as Sturgess came up alongside. One hand, on the wheel-rim, was bandaged.

Sturgess poised his own two hands downward across the edge of the door, and gratitude was somehow expressed even in the gesture itself. But the man inside grated impatiently, “Well, whaddye want?”

It was hard to put into words, especially when it wasn’t welcome. All Sturgess could say was, “You don’t know what this means—”

The man said with a jeer, a jeer for himself, “I don’t know how I come to do it. I never done a thing like that before.”

“But isn’t there anything I can do? Won’t you at least let me have your name?”

The answer was almost venomous. “What d’you care what my name is? I don’t go around giving people my name!”

Sturgess would have taken a kick in the teeth from him. His balked gratitude had to find some means of expression, so he gave the man his own name instead.

The stranger just looked at him stolidly. Sturgess couldn’t tell if he was bored, or contemptuous. His eyes flicked to Sturgess’ fingers, which were folded across the rim of the car door. The meaning was plain: Take your hands off; get away from me.

The car inched away, and Sturgess dropped his hands defeatedly.

“If there’s ever anything I can do—” he called out helplessly.

His benefactor stayed in character to the end. A cynical “That’s what they all say!” came floating back above the dwindling tail-light.

The reports on the Torrington murder were coming in faster and more promising by the hour. There had been a lull of half a week first, that preliminary lull that the outside world always mistakes for inactivity, even defeat. But they hadn’t been idle. They’d been working behind the scenes, in the laboratory, in the Bertillon files, on the weapon-testing range, in the world of the exact sciences. They had built up their man from nothing, with the aid of nap from his suit, body oil from his fingertips, a hundred and one other microscopic things. At the end of half a week they had him, although they had never seen him. They had his height, his weight, his habits, almost the way he walked, and what his blood count was. Now came the time to get him, to pull him out of thin air, the way a magician makes a rabbit appear out of a hat—to match him in the flesh to his preconceived identity.

The murderer had had plenty of time to leave the city during those three and a half days. He had left. They’d expected him to, they’d counted on his doing just that. They cast their net in a great wide loop first, overreaching the farthest possible limits of his flight; for in his own mind he was still safely anonymous. They began to draw the net in by telegraph, by radio, by all the means they had. Too late by a matter of hours he tried to break through. He was recognized, the alarm sent out, the highways blocked off. He turned and fled back again; the chase went into reverse. He plunged back into the sanctuary of the city. The net was drawn in slowly but surely.

Yesterday his car had been found, abandoned just inside the city limits, and by that they got his name. It was Murray

Forman—there were infinite variations to it, but none of them was of paramount importance. He was guilty of cold-blooded murder, and that was.

Tighter and tighter the noose was pulled. From citywide it narrowed to a single neighborhood, from an entire neighborhood down to a single street. And presently they would have the very house, and then the exact room inside that house and then they'd have him. It was a matter of hours only, fractions of hours. They were old in guile, and remorseless, and their combined intelligences never slept. But singly they were only human beings.

First-Grader Sturgess, of the Homicide Squad, was relieved temporarily at 2 that morning, almost at the zero hour, and sent home subject to immediate recall. He had slept only in snatches for a week past, his reflexes were no longer dependable, and much as he rebelled against it, he recognized the advisability of the respite. The climax might not occur until dawn, in which case he could still be in time for it on his return to duty.

He put his key to the door and let himself into the empty house. The wife and kid were away in the country with relatives for two weeks, and the summer mustiness of rooms that have been shut up tight all day clung to die air. He put on the lights and saw halos around them, from his fatigue.

The image of his girl leaped out at him from the green-gold easel on the radio, and already he was less weary. Just the sight of her likeness was restful. She was still on loan; and now, at twelve, more than a hint of the way she was going to be was apparent. And she was going to be the tops.

He said, "Hello, honey," to her. He said it every time he got back, just as though she were here.

"Your old man's all in, "he mourned to her under his breath. He opened the windows first of all, to freshen up the place a little. Then he took off the things that bothered him most, in order—his tie and then his shoes and then his

coat. He said to himself, “I’m getting old,” but with the complacency that only a man who knows he really isn’t can bring to bear on the thought.

He puttered around in his socks a minute or two. He thought, “Where did she keep the cans of salmon, now?” He thought, “I’m too tired to bother.” He went in and stood over the bed, sketchily straightened since the last time he’d been in it. He looked at it questioningly. It was too much trouble to pull down that spread. It would take too long—he couldn’t wait another minute. He turned slightly, let himself fall back on the bed in a straight line from shoulders to heels, so that his feet kicked up slightly with the fall. The bed sang out threateningly under the impact but held, and before the springs had stopped jarring he was already out of the world.

The tapping alone would never have roused him. It was too low, too furtive. It was the sharper note of the bell that brought him up through layers of oblivion into-the shallows of awareness. He raised his head from the neck alone, held it erect, let it drop back again of its own weight.

The ring came again, cut short as though no more than a peck had been given the button. The tapping was blurred, like hail or gravel striking on wood. He got up, wavered through the two rooms toward the front door, said sharply, “Who’s there?”

The tapping broke off short.

He opened the door and a man was standing there in the dim light. The man acknowledged the opening with a peculiar, warning gesture, a diagonal cut of his hand that held a plea for caution in it.

He seemed to take his right of admission for granted. His hat was low, and Sturgess didn’t know him, didn’t know why he should. The visitor inserted himself obliquely between Sturgess and the door frame, and then as Sturgess gave ground before him, the man closed the door and sealed it with his own body, pressing himself against the knob.

He pushed his hat higher, but inadvertently, by backing a hand to his forehead as though in unutterable relief. “I thought you’d never open the door,” he said. “I saw you come in before.”

Sturgess said on a rising inflection that held no anger, yet led the way toward it, “Who are you?”

The man leaning dejectedly against the door—he was starting to sag a little now as if some long-sustained tension had relaxed—sneered: “You don’t know me?”

There was memory in that sneer alone, in that characteristic tone that never gave the benefit of the doubt. The man’s shoulder blades went a notch lower on the door-seam. “You better know me,” he said. And then he jeered, “Or don’t you want to?” His eyes found the picture, rested on it, guessed, came back again with a mocking gleam. But he didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. Sturgess knew by now.

He’d never been good at saying things. He said, “You’re the fellow, you’re the man—the lake, that time.” His face lit up with long-stored gratitude, but then the light died again as the man brushed by him, seemed not to see the friendly start Sturgess’ hand had made. The man found his own way across the room, pitched into a chair.

There was blood on one side of his face, or rather vestiges of it, a thin dark patina.

Sturgess was awake now. He was frightened too, by some kind of foreknowledge. He ran his tongue across his lower lip, said, “What’d you do, hurt yourself?”

The man lowered his head abruptly, glared challengingly. “No, I didn’t hurt myself. A bullet grazed me getting over here. From one of your crowd.”

Sturgess was getting whiter by the minute. The other’s eyes held him derisively, forcing knowledge on him that he didn’t want. “Why don’t you ask me why I’m here?”

Sturgess flinched. “Don’t tell me anything you’re liable to be sorry—” he said quickly.

The man in the chair started to repeat what he'd just said. "Don't you want to find out why I'm—"

"Shut up!" Sturgess shouted.

"No you don't! I've got something coming to me. What're you trying to do—leave an out for yourself, welsh out of it? So that when they come ganging around here in a minute or two—See no evil, hear no evil, eh? Well, you're looking at Murray Forman, and what are you going to do about it?"

Sturgess ran a hand through the bird's-nest tangle of his hair. "My God!" he groaned. "Don't you know who I am?"

"D'you suppose I'd be here if I didn't? You're my trump card, the last one I hold. Somebody else told me who you were that night. I came across your picture in the paper once after that, when you were promoted for running down those cop-killers. It gave your address." He laughed mirthlessly. "It pays to change addresses more often, when you've got debts outstanding."

He looked rested now, fit, compared to Sturgess. His color was high alongside Sturgess' agonized pallor. His pores were dry, not glistening like the other man's.

Sturgess flung the door open, folded it back flat against the wall as if he couldn't get it wide enough. "Get out!" he said in a choked voice. "Get out of here! That's the most I can—" Forman kept looking at the picture, as though he hadn't heard. He said softly, "Is her hair gold-brown like it looks on there? Is that how she smiles all the time, with a little dent in the middle of her cheek?"

"Get out, you dirty killer!"

"I know how they do; sometimes they slip their arm around your neck from behind your chair, and hug you tight. Sometimes they get down on the floor at your feet and lean their head against your knee, and look up and over at you, backwards. She wouldn't do all that, Sturgess, if it wasn't for me. What's her name, Sturgess?"

"Barbara," said Sturgess limply, and closed the door again very slowly, as though it weighed a ton.

They didn’t say anything for a long time—either of them. It seemed like a long time anyway. Forman stayed in the chair, which was the most comfortable one in the room. Sturgess stood against the door.

Forman spoke finally, as matter-of-factly as though they had known each other all their lives. “Gimme a cigarette. Got one on you?”

Sturgess felt absently for his coat pocket without looking up. He didn’t have any. Forman must have got up and helped himself from the humidor. The next thing Sturgess noticed he was back in the chair smoking.

Sturgess said finally, as though the trivial request had managed to restore his own power of expression, “I’m a police officer, Forman. There isn’t anything I can do.”

The man in the chair snapped ashes from his cigarette. “You don’t have to do a thing. Just let me stay here till the heat cools a little, then you’ll turn your back and I’ll be gone, the way I came. That’s all, and then we’re square—quits.”

“You struck down and murdered a man in cold blood—”

“That doesn’t cancel *your* obligation. I’d already croaked someone long before that night you first came across me. That didn’t keep you from accepting your kid’s life from my hands, did it? She breathes just as good, her lungs are just as empty of water, her eyes are just as wide open, as if a right guy saved her, aren’t they? I didn’t argue the right and wrong of it before I went in, did I? You owe me a life—”

(“Two lives,” Sturgess admitted to himself. It was clever of him, good psychology, not to mention having saved Sturgess himself, to emphasize only the one that really mattered.)

“—and I want a life back from you. My own.”

Sturgess said fiercely, “D’you want a drink? I do!” Three times he started out in the wrong direction, before he could remember where the liquor was kept.

Forman was thoroughly at ease now, sure of himself. Or else that was his game, to seem sure of himself, to appear not to have any doubts, to take it for granted.

He said, holding his little whiskey glass up to the light and studying it idly, “Don’t take it so hard.” He went on with detached curiosity, as though confronting for the first time some rare trait he’d often heard of but never encountered until now: “You’re dead on the level, aren’t you? So straight it hurts.” He made a grimace. “Gee, it must be hell to be like that! I had you figured that way even that night. The way you jumped in without knowing how to swim. I’m good that way at sizing people up. I’ve had to be. That’s why I came here. D’you think I’d have taken a chance like this on one of those other guys you string along with ?

Sturgess had sat down now, staring sightlessly at the problem as though it were spread out on the carpet before him. He heard the man say, “Is this the only bottle in the place?”

He nodded absently. He heard the thudding of liquid on the carpet and he looked up. Forman was holding the uncorked bottle upside down. Sturgess didn’t say anything. A million little things like that didn’t matter; there was only one thing that mattered. Forman explained, “I want to keep your thinking straight. And mine too. I can’t take a chance. What it’s all about might get too foggy for us to handle—right.”

Sturgess nodded again, to himself. That was right, from his own point of view too. Liquor made him sentimental. That could be just as dangerous either way, in this case—romanticize his duty or his debt. He slashed the contents of his little glass jigger viciously across the floor.

“It’s simple enough,” Forman remarked. Meaning: nothing to lose your temper about, nothing to go up in the air about.

“Shut up,” Sturgess growled. “The less you say the better.” He looked over at the open bedroom door. “When’d

you sleep last? You can go in there and lie down if you want to. Get out of here!" Then as Forman rose to his feet, crooked his arms behind his head, and yawned—he was that composed—Sturgess added: "Wait a minute. Have you got a gun on you?"

"Sure. Want it?" He brought it out and indifferently pitched it across at Sturgess butt-first. "You didn't have to worry about that," he assured him. "You're my trump card. I have everything to lose and nothing to gain by—" The rest of it was lost as he went, calmly and leisurely, into the bedroom.

Sturgess heard his shoes drop, one after the other, and the bed creaked a little as it had under him earlier. He balled his hands into fists and put them up alongside his temples as though he were going to bash his own head in. After a while, as if to give his hands something to do, he picked the gun up from the side of the chair and started to empty it. Long before he'd finished, the harsh breathing of a man in deep sleep was coming from the bedroom . . .

The knocking came within ten minutes. He stopped dead in the middle of the oval he had been coursing endlessly around the room, one heel raised clear of the floor and held that way. It came again, and the bell chirped, and a voice said, "Sturge! Are you in here?" He recognized it as Hyland's. Hyland was one of his team-mates.

He went over and closed the bedroom door first. Then he came back to the front door, put out his hand to it, breathed deeply, and threw it wide open.

Hyland was out there and another man named Ranch, and two uniformed cops. The last two had their guns out. But they'd already started away by the time he got the door open, as though summoning him had been only incidental.

Sturgess said, "What's up?" Hyland said, "Forman broke through again! At the last minute, just as we were ready to close in! We've picked up a cab driver that brought him as

far as the corner below here—he's holed up around here some place! I'm going to case the back."

"You won't find him there," Sturgess said.

He didn't offer to join them. All he said was, "I'm off duty."

Hyland gave him a look, but he turned and went loping off. His voice came drifting back with a cutting edge to it. "Sleep tight—sorry we bothered you."

Sturgess closed the door and stood by it a minute, head down. Down as low as if he were looking at his shoes, but he wasn't.

Behind him Forman's voice said slurringly, through the narrow opening of the bedroom door, "So you went to bat for me."

Sturgess answered viciously through clenched teeth: "I don't have to turn you in behind your back while you're asleep! That isn't my way! I'm not afraid of you!"

"No," was the grudging admission, "it's your own conscience you're afraid of. And her eyes."

"You let me do the worrying about that. And stay in there." Sturgess took a threatening step forward. "Stay out of my sight, or I'll settle the problem with my own two hands!"

The door eased mockingly closed again.

Sturgess was standing in his wife's kitchen, awkwardly jockeying something hot with the help of an enveloping dishcloth, when Forman came out the second time. It was still dark, the gunmetal pall preceding dawn.

Forman lounged there in the alcove a minute, watching him. "What's this, the prisoner's last breakfast? Why so early?"

Sturgess just motioned to a chair drawn up at the formica-topped table. The guest sat down. Sturgess

brought over an aluminum percolator, snatched his hand away, blew on his thumb. He sat down opposite the killer.

Forman studied him, detached.

“You look like you been pulled through a knothole. I bet you pounded the carpet in there the whole time I was asleep.”

To that Sturgess said, “It took me three tries before I got this right.” The sink, lined with black coffee grounds, looked like some kind of flower bed. He pointed to a loaf of white bread. “You can cut some of that, if you want any.”

They sat there, after that, facing each other across the table with a peculiar sort of normality, an everydayness: like two men at a kitchen table while their women were away. Forman, wolfing great chunks of spongy white bread, looked around appraisingly. “How much you pay for this place?”

There may have been a method in his assumption of unshaken confidence, his taking of immunity for granted; or there may not. He may have been as artless as he sounded, or he may have been as wary as a man cornered in a cage with a lion, who knows that to show fear is fatal. Sturgess was past knowing or caring. “Eighty-five,” he said.

Forman mused, while he picked his teeth, “I never stayed in one place long enough to pay by the month.”

“It might have been better if you had.”

They sat a while longer in silence. Then little by little the tension grew—tension that was coming from Sturgess. His hands went down to the edge of his chair seat, gripping it on each side, like a man reluctantly about to stand up. Forman started smoking a little faster, shortening the intervals between puffs. Finally he said, “What’re you getting all white like that for? You’re getting white as a ghost. You ought to see yourself!” Sturgess said, “We’re going over there. If you feel like starting anything, now’s the time.”

“Still looking for a way out, huh? No you don’t! You don’t get off that easy!”

Sturgess got up and left the kitchen without a word. When he came back he had his coat on and was holding an open manacle in his hand. He said thickly, “Come on—let’s get started. Shove out your hand.”

Forman slowly extended a hand flat across the table top; he started drawing back his sleeve until he had bared his forearm nearly to the elbow. On its upper reaches were transverse white scars, from breaking the glass in the submerged car window that night. He just sat and looked up at Sturgess, holding it exposed that way.

Sturgess’ lips got white, he blinked, and the manacle clicked shut on the other’s wrist. Forman got up and followed Sturgess out of the kitchen. “You can’t go through with it,” he said quietly. “It’s written all over you you can’t.”

The window was open a little from the bottom, just below the shade. Sturgess threw out the handcuff key with a flick of his free hand.

Forman said, “You don’t trust yourself, do you? It’s going to be a devil of a job now to—”

The picture was lying face-down on the radio as they went past. “Is that the way you had to do it?” Fort man said. Sturgess turned down the wall switch and the picture vanished. There wasn’t enough light outside to penetrate the room. “You’ll have to see her again,” Forman pointed out. “You’ll have to see her every day of your life. You can’t keep her face turned away from you. What’ll you do then?”

Sturgess opened the front door, swept his arm around in an arc, and towed Forman through after him. “I’m not going to beg or whine,” Forman said. “I’m going to make it tough for you. It’d be a lot easier for you if I went yellow, wouldn’t it?”

The killer was right again. His intuition was uncanny. If he had cringed and slobbered and resisted, accepted the role of a squirming, apprehended culprit, somehow he would

have weakened the validity of his claim; Sturgess could have dragged him in without compunction. This way—

Sturgess closed the door and they went out side by side. It was steel blue overhead now, but still a little murky down at street level.

"You'll get a citation for this," Forman taunted. "You'll get promoted. You'll be the envy of every man in the department. And without having to lift a finger either. A man comes to you, that gave you the one thing you've got that you give a damn about, the one thing that holds you together, that makes you tick, he comes *trusting* you—You're the lowest thing on the face of God's earth, Sturgess. Even an alley cur has gratitude."

"Shut up!" Sturgess roared.

They went on slowly, almost waveringly, but Sturgess was breathless with effort, as though he'd been running. The green lamps of a precinct house blinked at them as they rounded a corner, and Forman recoiled involuntarily. Sturgess could feel the hitch through the manacle.

Forman said, "They're going to kill me if you take me in there. You know that, don't you? You know that once we go up these steps no power of yours, nothing you can do, will get me out alive again, don't you? I gave you your kid's life, Sturgess. For the last time—*I want my own from you!"*

Sturgess' face was glossy with sweat, and gray in the early dawn. He brought his forearm up level to his chest and nudged Forman into motion.

"Copper!" the man beside him breathed with contempt as they trudged up the steps and inside together.

Sturgess just stood there rigid, watching the clock, that last night. They tried to tell him, "Sit down, Sturge, don't take it like that," but he didn't seem to hear them.

When the phone call from upstate came through, you couldn't see him breathe at all while the lieutenant was talking. The lieutenant hung up and was quiet.

Sturgess asked, "Was that it?"

“Yeah, that was it.”

“Did he leave any word, say anything about—forgiving anybody?”

“He left a message for you,” the lieutenant said unwillingly, looking down at his desk.

Sturgess came closer still. “Tell me what is it! I’ve got to know!”

“He said, ‘Tell Sturgess I’ll be seeing him again. *He* knows where to find me. In her eyes. Tell him I’ll always be waiting there.’ ”

Sturgess put his hand to where he carried his badge, as if something hurt him there, and turned around and walked out of the room without another word.

Barbara said, half-laughingly, when he squatted down before her, his face so strained and white, and peered so closely, “What’re you looking at me like that for?”

“Hold still,” he said huskily, “and look at me.” There was sweat all over his forehead.

Then when he had drawn a great deep breath and straightened up again she asked playfully, “Did you think you’d see something in my eyes?”

His answer to that was, “Yes. The ghost of the man who saved your life—” but he didn’t tell her that. “Well, *did* you?” she insisted.

“Yes,” he admittedly sadly, “I guess I always will—a little.” He took out his badge and started polishing it. “But the other way,” he added mysteriously, “I wouldn’t have been able to look into them at all.”

THE SCREAMING LAUGH

A call came into constabulary headquarters, at the county seat, about seven one morning. It was from Milford Junction, a local doctor named Johnson reporting the death of one Eleazar Hunt sometime during the night. Just a routine report, as required by law.

"And have you ascertained the causes?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes, I just got through examining him. I find he had burst a blood vessel—laughing too hard. Nothing out of the usual about it, but of course that's for you to decide."

"Well, I'll send a man over to check." The sheriff turned to Al Traynor, one of the members of his constabulary, who had just come in. "Drive down Milford Junction way, Al. Local resident near there, name of Eleazar Hunt, died from laughing too hard. Look things over just for the record."

"Laughing too hard?" Traynor looked at him when he heard that. Then he shrugged. "Well, I suppose if you've got to go, it's better to go laughing than crying."

He returned to his car and started off for Milford Junction. It was about three quarters of an hour's drive by the new State highway that had been completed only two or three years before, although the hamlet itself wasn't directly on this, had to be reached by a dirt feeder road that branched off it. The Hunt place was about half a mile on the other side of it, near a point where the highway curved back again to rejoin the short cut, cutting a corner off the late Mr. Hunt's acreage.

The white painted farmhouse with its green shutters gleamed dazzlingly in the early morning sunshine. Peach trees, bursting into bloom before it, hid the roof and cast blue shade on the ground. A wire fence at the back enclosed a poultry yard, and beyond that were hen houses, a stall from which a black and white cow looked plaintively forth, a toolshed, a roofed well, a vegetable garden. It was an infinitely pleasant-looking little property, and if death had struck there at all, there was no outward sign.

* * * *

There was a coupé standing in the road before the house, belonging to the doctor who had reported the death, presumably. Traynor coasted up behind it, braked, got out, and went in through the gate. He had to crouch to pass under some of the low hanging peach boughs. There was a cat sunning itself on the lower doorstep. He reached down to tickle it and a man came around the corner of the house just then, stood looking at him.

He was sunburned, husky, and about thirty. He wore overalls and was carrying an empty millet sack in his hand. Judging by the commotion audible at the back, he had just finished feeding the poultry. His eyes were shrewd and lidded in a perpetual squint that had nothing to do with the sun.

“You the undertaker already?” he wanted to know.

“Sheriff’s office,” snapped Traynor, none too pleased at the comparison. “You work here?”

“Yep. Hired man.”

“How long?”

“ ‘Bout six months.”

“What’s your name?”

“Dan Fears.”

“He keep anybody else on?”

Fears answered indirectly, with a scornful gesture toward the back. “Not enough to keep one man busy as it is. Tend

one cow and pick up a few eggs."

It occurred to Traynor if there was that little to do, why hadn't the cow been led out to pasture by now and the poultry fed earlier? He went on in, stepping high over the cat. She looked indolently upward at his heel as it passed over her.

A shaggy, slow moving man was coming toward the screen door to meet Traynor as he pushed through it with a single cursory knock at its frame. Johnson was a typical country doctor, of a type growing scarcer by the year. You could tell by looking at him that he'd never hurried or got excited in his life. You could surmise that he'd never refused a middle-of-the-night call from miles away in the dead of winter either. He was probably highly competent, in spite of his misleading rusticity.

"Hello, son." He nodded benignly. "You from the sheriff's office? I was just going back to my own place to make out the death certificate."

"Can I see him?"

"Why, shore. Right in here." The doctor parted a pair of old-fashioned sliding doors and revealed the "front parlor" of the house. Across the top of each window was stretched a valance of faded red plush, ending in a row of little plush balls. On a table stood an oil lamp-there was no electricity this far out—with a frosted glass dome and a lot of little glass prisms dangling from it.

There was an old-fashioned reclining chair with an adjustable back near the table and lamp. Just now it was tilted only slightly, at a comfortable reading position. It was partly covered over with an ordinary bed sheet, like some furniture is in summertime, only the sheet bulged in places and a clawlike hand hung down from under it, over the arm of the chair. Traynor reached down, turned back the upper edge of the sheet. It was hard not to be jolted. The face was a cartoon of frozen hilarity. It wasn't just that death's-head grimace that so often, because of bared teeth, faintly

suggests a grin. It was the real thing. It was Laughter, permanently photographed in death. The eyes were creased into slits; you could see the dried but still faintly glistening saline traces of the tears that had overflowed their ducts down alongside his nose. The mouth was a vast upturned crescent full of yellowish horse teeth. The whole head was thrown stiffly back at an angle of uncontrollable risibility. It was uncanny only because it was so motionless, so silent, so permanent.

"You found him just like this?"

"Shore. Had to examine him, of course, but rigor had already set in, so I figger nothing I did disturbed him much." Johnson chuckled inside himself, gave Traynor a humorously reproachful look. "Why, son, you don't think this is one of those things? Shame on you!"

He saw that he hadn't convinced the younger man by his raillery. "Why, I examined him thoroughly, son," he protested gently. "I know my business as well as the next man. I tell you not a finger was laid on this man. Nothing's happened to him but what I said. He burst a blood vessel from laughing too hard. Course, if you want me to perform a complete autopsy, send his innards and the contents of his stomach down to the State laboratory—" It was said with an air of paternal patience, as if he were humoring a headstrong boy.

"I'm not discrediting your competence, doctor. What's this?" Traynor picked up a little booklet, lying open tent-shaped on the table. "Joe Miller's Joke Book," it said on the cover, and the copyright was 1892.

"That's what he was reading. That's what got him, I reckon. Found it lying on the floor under his right hand. Fell from his fingers at the moment of death, I guess."

"Same page?"

"Same one it's open at now. You want to find the exact joke he was reading when he passed away, that what you're aiming at, son?" More of that paternal condescension.

Traynor evidently did, or at least an approximation of what type of killing humor this was. He stopped doing anything else and stood there stock-still for five minutes, conscientiously reading every joke on the two open pages, about a dozen altogether. The first one read:

Pat: Were you calm and collected when the explosion occurred?
Mike: I wuz calm and Murphy wuz collected.

The others were just about as bad, some even staler.

"Do me a favor, doc," he said abruptly, passing the booklet over. "Read these for yourself."

"Oh, now, here—" protested Johnson, with a rueful glance at the still form in the chair, but he went ahead and did what Traynor requested.

Traynor watched his expression closely. He'd only just met the man, but he could already tell he was full of a dry sort of humor. But not a gleam showed, his face never changed from first to last; it became, if anything, sort of mournful.

"D'you see what I mean?" was all Traynor said, taking the booklet back and tossing it aside.

Johnson shook his head. "No two people have the same sense of humor, remember that, son. What's excruciatingly funny to one man goes right over another's head. Likely, these jokes were new to him, not mossbacked like they are to you and me."

"Did you know him at all, doc?"

"Just to say howdy to on the road."

"Ever see him smile much?"

"Can't say I did. But there's nothing funny about saying howdy. What is it you're driving at, son?"

Traynor didn't answer. He went over to the corpse, unbuttoned its shirt, and scrutinized the under arms and ribs with exhaustive intentness.

The doctor just stood looking on. “You won’t find any marks of violence, son. I’ve been all over that.”

Next Traynor squatted down by the feet, drew up one trousers leg to the knees, then the other. Johnson by this time, it was plain to see, considered him a bad case of dementia detectives. Traynor seemed to see something at last; he smiled grimly. All Johnson could see were a pair of shanks encased in wool socks, supported by garters. Patent garters, sold by the million, worn by the million.

“Found something suspicious?” he asked, but without conviction, it was easy to see.

“Suspicious isn’t the word,” Traynor murmured low. “Damning.

“Damning whom—and of what?” said Johnson dryly.

Again Traynor didn’t answer.

He hurriedly unlaced both of Hunt’s shoes, dropped them off. Then he unfastened one garter and stripped the sock off his foot. Turned it inside out and peered at the sole. Peered at the sole of the foot itself too. He stripped the other one off and went through the same proceeding. Johnson, meanwhile, was shaking his head disapprovingly, as if his patience were being overtaxed.

“You are the most pee-culiar young fellow I ever hope to meet,” he sighed.

Traynor balled up the two socks, and thrust one into each pocket of his coat, garter and all. They were black—fortunately. He flipped the sheet back over the bared feet, concealing them. A little wisp of something rose in the air as he did so, disturbed by the draft of his doing that, fluttered, winged downward again. A little bit of fluff, it seemed to be. He went after it, nevertheless, retrieved it, took an envelope out of his pocket, and thrust it in.

Johnson was past even questioning his actions by now; he was convinced they were unaccountable by all rational standards, anyway. “Would you care to talk to Mrs. Hunt?” he asked.

“Yes, I sure would,” Traynor said curtly.

Johnson went out to the hall, called respectfully up the stairs:

“Mrs. Hunt, honey.”

She was very ready to come down, Traynor noticed. Her footsteps began to descend almost before the words were out of the doctor’s mouth. As though she’d been poised right up above at the head of the staircase, waiting for the summons.

He couldn’t help a slight start of surprise as she came into sight; he had expected someone near Hunt’s own age. She was about twenty-eight, the buxom blond type. “Second wife,” Traynor thought.

She had reached the bottom by now, and the doctor introduced them.

“This is Mr. Traynor of the sheriff’s office.”

“How do you do?” she said mournfully. But her eyes were clear, so she must have stopped crying some time before. “Did you want to talk to me?”

“Just to ask you the main facts, that’s all.”

“Oh. Well, let’s go outdoors, huh? It—it sort of weighs you down in here.” She glanced toward the partly open parlor doors, glanced hurriedly away again.

* * * *

They went outside, began to stroll aimlessly along the front of the house, then around the corner and along the side. He could see Fears out there in the sun, beyond the poultry yard, hoeing the vegetable patch. Fears turned his head, looked over his shoulder at them as they came into sight, then looked down again. Hunt’s widow seemed unaware of his existence.

“Well,” she was saying, “all I can tell you is, I went upstairs to bed about ten o’clock last night, left him down there reading by the lamp. I’m a sound sleeper, and before I knew it, it was daybreak and the roosters woke me up. I

saw he'd never come up to bed. I hurried down, and there he was just like I'd left him, lamp still lit and all, only the book had fallen out of his hand. He had this broad grin on his face and—"

"He did?" he interrupted.

"Yes. Isn't it spooky?" She shuddered. "Did you see it?"

"I did. And spooky," he said slowly, "is a very good word for it."

If he meant anything by that, she seemed to miss it completely.

She wound up the little there was left of her story. "I tried to wake him, and when I couldn't, I knew what it was. I called to Fears, but he was out back some place, so I ran all the way down the road to Doctor Johnson's house myself and brought him back."

"Did he usually stay down alone like that, nights, and read?"

"Yes. Only in the beginning, when I first married him, he used to read things like mail order catalogues and such. Well, I'd tried to liven him up a little lately. I bought that joke book for him and left it lying around, tried to coax him to read it. He wouldn't have any part of it at first, pretended not to be interested, but I think on the sly he began to dip into it after I'd go upstairs at nights. He wasn't used to laughing and he got a stitch or something, I guess. Maybe he was ashamed to have me catch him at it and tried to hold it in—and that's what happened to him."

They were lingering under the parlor windows. He'd stopped unnoticeably, so she had too, perforce. He was gazing blankly around, eyes on the treetops, the fleecy clouds skimming by, everywhere but the right place. He'd seen something on the ground, and the job was to retrieve it right under her eyes without letting her see him do it.

"Do you mind?" he said, and took out a package of cigarettes. It was crumpled from being carried around on his person for days, and in trying to shake one out, he lost

nearly the whole contents. He bent down and picked them up again one by one, with a fine disregard for hygiene, and each time something else as well. It was very neatly done. It went over her head completely.

They turned around and went slowly back to the front of the house again. As they were rounding the corner once more, Traynor looked back. He saw Fears raise his head and look after them at that moment. “Very allergic to my being here,” Traynor thought to himself.

Johnson came out of the door.

“The undertaker’s here.”

And he looked questioningly at Traynor; the latter nodded his permission for removal.

She said, “Oh, I’d better get upstairs; I don’t want to—see him go,” and hurriedly ran inside.

* * * *

Traynor didn’t hang around to watch, either. He drifted back around the side of the house again. He let himself through the poultry yard, and out at the far side of it, where Fears was puttering around. He approached him with a fine aimlessness, like a man who has nothing to do with himself and gravitates toward the nearest person in sight to kill time chatting.

“He had a nice place here,” he remarked.

Fears straightened, leaned on his hoe, drew his sleeve across his forehead. “No money in it, though.” He was looking the other way, off from Traynor.

“What do you figure she’ll do, keep on running it herself now that he’s gone?”

The question should have brought the other’s head around toward him, at least. It didn’t. Fears spat reflectively, still kept looking stubbornly away from him.

“I don’t think she’s cut out for it, don’t think she’d make a go of it.”

There’s something in this direction, away from where he’s looking, that he doesn’t want me to notice, Traynor told himself. He subtly jockeyed himself around so that he could look behind him without turning his entire head.

There was a toolshed there. Implements were stacked up against the wall at the back of it. The door was open and the sun shone sufficiently far in to reveal them. It glinted from the working edges of shovels, rakes, spades. But he noted a trowel with moist clayey soil drying out along its wedge; it was drying to a dirty gray white color.

“That looks like the well,” he thought. Aloud he said: “Sun’s getting hotter by the minute. Think I’ll have a drink.”

Fears dropped the hoe handle, stooped and got it again.

“I’d advise you to get it from the kitchen,” he said tautly. “Well’s all stirred up and muddy, ‘pears like part of the sides must have crumbled. Have to ‘low it to settle.”

“Oh, I’m not choosy,” Traynor remarked, strolling toward it. It hadn’t rained in weeks. He shifted around to the far side of the structure, where he could face Fears while he pretended to dabble with the chained drinking cup.

There could be no mistaking it, the man was suddenly tense, rigid, out there in the sun, even while he went ahead stiffly hoeing. Every play of his shoulders and arms was forced. He wasn’t even watching what he was doing, his hoe was damaging some tender young shoots. Traynor didn’t bother getting his drink after all. He knew all he needed to know now. What’s Fears been up to down there that he don’t want me to find out about?—Traynor wondered. And more important still, did it have anything to do with Eleazar Hunt’s death? He couldn’t answer the first—yet—but he already had more than a sneaking suspicion that the answer to the second was yes.

He sauntered back toward the tiller.

“You’re right,” he admitted; “it’s all soupy.”

With every step that took him farther away from the well rim, he could see more and more of the apprehension lift

from Fears. It was almost physical, the way he seemed to straighten out, loosen up there under his eyes, until he was all relaxed again.

"Told you so," Fears muttered, and once again he wiped his forehead with a great wide sweep of the arm. But it looked more like relief this time than sweat.

"Well, take it easy." Traynor drifted lethargically back toward the front of the house once more. He knew Fears's eyes were following him every step of the way; he could almost feel them boring into the back of his skull. But he knew that if he turned and looked, the other would lower his head too quickly for him to catch him at it, so he didn't bother.

* * * *

Hunt's body had been removed now and Doctor Johnson was on the point of leaving. They walked out to the roadway together toward their cars.

"Well, son," the doctor wanted to know, "still looking for something ornery in this or are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly satisfied now," Traynor assured him grimly, but he didn't say in which way he meant it. "Tell the truth, doc," he added. "Did you ever see a corpse grin that broadly before?"

"There you go again," sighed Johnson. "Well, no, can't say I have. But there is such a thing as cadaveric spasm, you know."

"There is," Traynor agreed. "And this isn't it. In fact this is so remarkable I'm going to have it photographed before I let the undertaker put a finger to him. I'd like to keep a record of it."

"Shucks," the doctor scoffed as he got in his coupé. "Why, I bet there never was a normal decease yet that couldn't be made to 'pear onnatural if you tried hard enough."

"And there never was an unnatural one yet," Traynor answered softly, "that couldn't be made to appear normal—

if you were willing to take things for granted."

After he had arranged for the photographs to be taken, he dropped in at the general store. A place like that, he knew, was the nerve center, the telephone exchange, of the village, so to speak. The news of Eleazar Hunt's death had spread by now, and the cracker barrel brigade were holding a post-mortem. Traynor, who was not known by sight to anyone present, for his duties had not brought him over this way much, did not identify himself for fear of making them self-conscious in the presence of the law. He hung around, trying to make up his mind between two brands of plug tobacco, neither of which he intended buying, meanwhile getting an earful.

"Waal," said one individual, chewing a straw, "guess we'll never know now whether he actually did git all that money from the highway commission folks claim he did, for slicin' off a corner of his propitty to run that new road through."

"He always claimed he didn't. Not a penny of it ever showed up in the bank. My cousin works there and he'd be the first one to know it if it did."

"They say he tuck and hid it out at his place, that's why. Too mean to trust the bank, and he didn't want people thinking he was rich."

An ancient of eighty stepped forth, right angled over a hickory stick, and tapped it commandingly to gain the floor. "Shows ye it don't pay to teach an old dog new tricks! I've knowed Eleazar Hunt since he was knee-high to a grasshopper, and this is the first time I ever heard tell of him even smiling, let alone laughing fit to kill like they claim he done. Exceptin' just once, but that were beyond his control and didn't count."

"When was that?" asked Traynor, chiming in carefully casual. He knew by experience the best way to bring out these villagers' full narrative powers was to act bored stiff.

The old man fastened on him eagerly, glad of an audience. "Why, right in here where we're standing now,

‘bout two years ago. Him and me was both standing up to the counter to git waited on, and Andy took me first and asked me what I wanted. So I raised this here stick of mine to point up at the shelf and without meaning to, I grazed Eleazar’s side with the tip of it—I can’t see so good any more, you know. Well, sir, for a minute I couldn’t believe my ears. Here he was, not only laughing, but giggling like a girl, clutching at his ribs and shying away from me. Then the minute he got free of the stick, he changed right back to his usual self, mouth turned down like a horseshoe, snapped, ‘Careful what you’re doing, will you!’ Ticklish, that’s all it was. Some’s more so than others.”

“Anyone else see that but you?”

“I saw it,” said the storekeeper. “I was standing right behind the counter when it happened. I never knew that about him until then myself. Funny mixture, to be ticklish with a glum disposition like he had.”

“And outside of that, you say you never saw him smile?”

“Not even as a boy!” declared the old man vehemently.

“She was livening him up, though, lately,” qualified the storekeeper. “Heard she was making right smart progress too.”

“Who told you?” asked Traynor, lidding his eyes.

“Why, she did herself.”

Traynor just nodded to himself. Buildup beforehand, he was thinking.

“Yes, and that’s what killed him!” insisted the garrulous old man. “Way I figger it, he’d never used them muscles around the mouth that you shape smiles with and so they’d gone useless on him from lack of practice. Just like, if you don’t use your right arm for fifty years, it withers on you. Then she comes along and starts him to laughing at joke books and whatnot, and the strain was too much for him. Like I said before, you can’t teach an old dog new tricks! These old codgers that marry young chickens!”

All Traynor did, after the old man had stumped out with an accurate shot at the brass receptacle inside the door, was get his name from the storekeeper and jot it down in his notebook, without letting anyone see him do it. The ancient one just might come in handy as a witness, if a murder trial was to come up—provided of course that he lasted that long.

* * * *

“Well, how does it look?” the sheriff asked Traynor when he finally got back to headquarters.

“It doesn’t look good,” was the grim answer. “It was murder.”

The sheriff drew in his breath involuntarily. “Got any evidence?” he said finally.

His eyes opened wide in astonishment as a small joke book, a handful of chicken feathers, and a pair of black socks with garters still attached, descended upon his desk. “What’ve these got to do with it?” he asked in stupefaction. “You don’t mean to tell me—this is your evidence, do you?”

“It certainly is,” said Traynor gloomily. “It’s all the evidence there is or ever will be. This, and photographs I’ve had taken of his face. It’s the cleverest thing that was ever committed under the sun. But not quite clever enough.”

“Well, don’t you think you’d better at least tell me what makes you so sure? What did you see?”

“All right,” said Traynor irritably, “here’s what I saw—and I know you’re going to say right away it didn’t amount to a row of pins. I saw a dead man with a broad grin on his face, too broad to be natural. I saw chicken feathers lying scattered around the ground—”

“It’s a poultry farm, after all; they raise chickens there.”

“But their tips are all bent over at right angles to the quill; show me the chicken that can do that to itself. And they were lying outside the wired enclosure, under the window of the room in which the dead man was.”

“And?” said the sheriff, pointing to the socks.

“A few fibers of the same chicken feathers, adhering to the soles. The socks are black, luckily! I could see them with my naked eye.”

“But isn’t it likely that this Hunt might potter around in his stocking feet, even outdoors—where there are chicken feathers lying around?”

“Yes. But these fibers are on the linings of the socks, not the outsides of the soles. I reversed them pulling them off his feet.”

“Anything else?”

“Not directly bearing on the commission of the murder itself, but involved in it. I saw a trowel with white clay drying on its edges, and a pair of thick gauntlets, used for spraying something on the peach trees, hanging up in the toolshed. Now tell me all this is no good to us.”

“It certainly isn’t!” declared the sheriff emphatically. “Why, I’d be laughed out of office if I moved against anyone on the strength of evidence such as this! You’re talking in riddles, man! I can’t make anything out of this. You not only haven’t told me whom you suspect, but you haven’t even given me the method used, or the motive.”

Traynor drummed his finger tips on the desk. “And yet I’m dead sure. I’m as sure of it right now as if I’d seen it with my own eyes. I can give you the method right now, but what’s the use? You’d only laugh at me, I can tell by the look on your face. I could name the motive and the suspects too, but until I’ve got the one, there’s no use bringing in the others; there wouldn’t be enough to hold them on.”

“Well,”—his superior shrugged, turning up his palms —“what do you want me to do?”

“Very little,” muttered Traynor, “except lend me a waterproof pocket flashlight, if you’ve got one. And stick around till I come back; I’ve got an idea I won’t be coming alone. There might be matters discussed that you’d be interested in.”

“Where’ll you be in the meantime?” the sheriff called after him as he pocketed the light and headed for the door.

“Down in Eleazar Hunt’s well,” was the cryptic answer. “And not because I’m thirsty, either.”

* * * *

Traynor coasted to a noiseless stop, well down the road from the Hunt place and out of sight of it, at about ten thirty that night. He snapped off his headlights, got out, examined the torch the sheriff had lent him to make sure it was in good working order, then cut across into the trees on foot, and made his way along under them parallel to the road but hidden from it.

There were no lights showing by the time he’d come in sight of the house. Death or no death, people in the country retire early. He knew there was no dog on the place so he didn’t hesitate in breaking cover and skirting the house around to the back. The story was Hunt had been too stingy to keep one, begrudging the scraps it would have required to feed it. His sour face, was the general verdict, was enough to frighten away any trespasser.

He found the poultry yard locked, but his business wasn’t with that; he detoured around the outside of it in the pale moonlight, treading warily in order not to make his presence known. He played his light briefly on the toolshed door; it was closed but not locked, fortunately. He eased it open, caught up the trowel and rope ladder he had noticed yesterday morning, and hurried over to the well with them. He mightn’t need the trowel, but he took it with him to make sure. The clay, incidentally, had been carefully scraped off it now—but too late to do Fears any good; the damage had already been done.

Traynor clamped the iron hooks on the end of the ladder firmly to the rim of the well, paid it out all the way down the shaft until he heard it go in with a muffled splash. It sounded deeper than he enjoyed contemplating, but if

Fears had gone down in there, dredging, then he could do it too.

He clicked his light on, tucked it firmly under his left armpit, straddled the well guard, and started climbing down, trowel wedged in his coat pocket. The ladder pivoted lightly from side to side under his weight, but so long as it didn't snarl up altogether, that was all right. He stopped every few rungs to play the light around the shaft in a circle. Nothing showed above the water line, any more than it had yesterday morning, but that trowel hadn't had clay on it, and the water hadn't been all muddied up, for nothing.

The water hit him unexpectedly and he jolted at the knifelike cold of it. He knew he couldn't stay in it very long without numbing, but he kept going down rung by rung. It came up his legs, hit his kidneys, finally rose above the light under his arm. That was waterproof, didn't go out. He stretched one leg downward off the ladder, feeling for the bottom. No bottom; the shaft seemed to go to China. One sure thing was, he couldn't—and keep on breathing.

He explored the wall of the well under the water line with his free hand, all around him and down as far as he could reach. The clay was velvet smooth, unmarred. Another rung—they were widely spaced—would take his head under, and he didn't like to risk it; he was already beginning to get numb all over.

Then suddenly the leg that he was using for a depth finder struck something like a plank. But across the shaft, behind him. He'd attached the ladder to the wrong side of the well rim. Still, it was fairly accessible; the circumference of the bore wasn't unduly large. He adjusted his leg to its height and got his heel on it. Tested its sustaining powers and it didn't crumble in spite of the fact that it must have been water-logged for years. It was evidently inserted solidly into the clay, like a sort of shelf, more of it bedded than actually protruding. Still it was a risky thing to trust

oneself to; he had an idea it was meant more for a marker than to be used to stand on. He turned his body outward to face it, got across to it without mishap, but bringing the ladder with him over his shoulder as a precaution. He was mostly under water during the whole maneuver, and rapidly chilling to the bone. That Fears before him had been through all this without some good, all powerful reason, he refused to believe.

* * * *

He found a large cavity on that side of the well almost at once. It was just a few inches above the plank, a large square recess gouged out of the compact clay. It was, as far as his waterlogged finger tips could make out, a large empty biscuit tin wedged in flush with the well wall, open end outward. A sort of handmade but none the less efficient safe deposit box, so to speak.

But the important thing was that he could feel a heavy rubbery bulk resting within it. Flat, pouch shaped. He drew this out, teeth chattering as the water momentarily rose into his nostrils, and finding it was too bulky to wedge into his pocket, tucked it into his submerged waistband, not caring to run the risk of bringing it up under his arm and perhaps dropping it to the bottom of the well just as he neared the top. The trowel, which he found he had not needed after all, he tossed over his shoulder into watery oblivion. The light, though it hampered him the way he kept it pinned against his side, he retained because it was not his but the sheriff’s.

He renewed his grip on the transported ladder, took his feet off the scaffolding, and let the ladder swing back with him to its original side of the well. He didn’t feel the slight collision at all, showing how thoroughly numbed he was by now, and showing what a risk he was running every moment of having his hold on it automatically relax and drop him into the depths. Nor could he tell the difference

when his body was finally clear of the water. Meaning he'd better get out of there fast.

But it was twice as slow getting up as it had been getting down. He couldn't tell, through shoes and all, when each successive rung was firmly fixed under the arches of his feet, he kept making idiotic pawing gestures with his whole leg each time before it would finally catch on. That should have looked very funny, but not down there where he was.

Finally the cloying dampness of the air began to lift a little and he knew he must be nearing the top. Then a whiff of a draft, that he would never have felt if he'd been dry, struck through his drenched clothes like ice cold needles, and that proved it. His teeth were tapping together like typewriter keys.

There was something else, some faint warning that reached him. Not actually heard so much as sensed. As if someone's breath were coming down the shaft from just over his head, slightly amplified as if by a sounding board. He acted on it instantly, more from instinct than actual realization of danger. Unsheathed the light from under his arm and pointed it upward. He was closer to the top than he'd thought, scarcely a yard below it. The beam illumined Fears's face, bent low above him, contorted into a maniacal grimace of impending destruction, both arms high over his head wielding something. It looked like the flat of a shovel, but there was no time to find out, do anything but get out of its way. It came hissing down in a big arc against the well shaft. It would have smashed his skull like an egg, ground the fragments into the clay—great whipcords of straining muscle stood out on the arms wielding it—but he swerved his body violently sidewise off the ladder, hanging on just by one hand and one foot, and it cycloned by, missing him by fractions of inches, and battered into the clay with a pulpy whack.

Fears had been in too much of a hurry; if he'd let him get up a single rung higher, so that his head showed above the

well rim, nothing could have saved him from being brained by the blow. The torch, of course, went skittering down into oblivion with a distant plink! The shovel followed it a second later; Fears didn't trouble to bring it up again from striking position, let go of it, perhaps under the mistaken impression that it had served its purpose and the only reason the victim didn't topple was that his stunned body had become tangled in the ropes.

Traynor could feel the ladder jar under him as his would-be destroyer sought to detach the hooks that clasped the well rim and throw the whole structure snaking down to the bottom. The very weight of his own body, on the inside, pinning it down close to the shaft, defeated the first try, gave him an added second's grace. To free the hooks, Fears had to raise the climber's whole weight first, ladder and all, to get enough slack into it.

* * * *

There wasn't enough time to finish climbing out. Traynor vaulted up one more rung with the agility of desperation, so that his head cleared the shaft rim; he flung up his arm and caught Fears's lowered head, bent down to his task, toward him in a riveted headlock that was like a drowning man's. Fears gave a muffled howl of dismay, tried to arch his slumped back against it. There was a brief equipoise, then gravity and their combined top-heavy positions had their way. Fears came floundering over into the mouth of the well, nearly broke Traynor's back by the shift of weight to the other side of him, tore him off his own precarious foothold, and they both went plunging sickeningly down off the ladder together. Their two yells of approaching destruction blended hollowly into one.

Numb and half frozen as Traynor already was, the shock of submersion was evidently less for him than for Fears, plunging in with his pores wide open and possibly overheated from hurrying out to the well from a warm bed.

Traynor had been in the water once already, felt it less than he would have the first time. The way people condition their bodies to frigid water by wetting themselves before they dive off a board, for instance.

He never touched bottom, even now. He came up alone—the fall must have loosened the bear hug he'd had on the other man—struck out wildly all around him, aware that if he went down again—The radius of the confining wall was luckily narrow. He contacted the ladder, sealed his hands to it in a hold that blow torches couldn't have pried off, got on it again, and quickly pulled himself up above the water.

He waited there a minute, willing to stretch out a hand, but unable to do more than that. Fears never came up. Not a sound broke the inky black silence around Traynor but the slow heave of the disturbed water itself. The shock had either made the man lose consciousness or he'd struck his head against his own shovel at the bottom. If there was a bottom, which Traynor was beginning to doubt.

Go in again after him and try to find him, he couldn't. He got the warning from every cramped muscle in his body, and his restricted lungs and pounding heart. It meant his own sure death, inevitably. There are times one can tell. He wasn't even sure that he could get up any more, unaided.

But he finally did, tottering painfully rung by rung and feeling as if he'd been doing this all night. He flung himself across the well rim, crawled clear of it on his belly like some half drowned thing, then turned over on his back and did nothing else much but just breathe. Gusts of uncontrollable shivering swept over him every once in a while. Finally he sat up, pulled off his soaked coat, shirt, and even undershirt, and began beating himself all over the body with them to bring back the circulation.

It was only when he'd started it going again that he remembered to feel for the rubber pouch that had cost two lives so far, and nearly a third—his own. If he'd lost it down there, he'd had all his trouble for nothing. But instead of

falling out, it had slipped down under his waistband and become wedged in the top of one trousers leg, too bulky to go any farther. There wasn't enough sensation left in his leg to tell him it was there until he'd pried it out with both hands.

"Money," he murmured, when he'd finally stripped it open and examined it. He turned his head and looked toward that sinister black opening in the ground. "I thought it was that. It almost always is."

There were seventy-five thousand dollars in it, so well protected they weren't even damp after three years' immersion.

He put on his coat and made his way back toward the house. One of the upper story window sashes eased up and a voice whispered cautiously down in the stillness:

"Did you get him, Dan?"

"No, Dan didn't get him, Mrs. Hunt," he answered in full speaking tone. "Put on something and come down; I'm taking you in to the sheriff's office with me. And don't keep me waiting around down here; I'm chilled to the bone."

* * * *

The sheriff awoke with a start when Traynor thrust open his office door and ushered Mrs. Hunt in ahead of him.

"Here's one," he said, "and the other one's at the bottom of the well with the rest of the slimy things where he belongs. Sit down, Mrs. Hunt, while I run through the facts for the benefit of my superior here.

"I'll begin at the beginning. The State built a spanking fine concrete highway that sliced off a little corner of Eleazar Hunt's property. He had the good luck—or bad luck, as it now turns out to have been—to collect seventy-five thousand dollars for it. Here it is." He threw down the waterlogged package. "There's your motive. First of all, it got him a second wife, almost before he knew it himself. Then, through the wife, it got him a hired man. Then,

through the hired man and the wife, it got him—torture to the death."

He turned to the prisoner, who was sitting nervously shredding her handkerchief. "You want to tell the rest of it, or shall I? I've got it on the tip of my tongue, you know—and I've got it straight."

"I'll tell it," she said dully. "You seem to know it anyway."

"How'd you catch on he was hypersensitive to tickling?"

"By accident. I was sitting on the arm of his chair one evening, trying to vamp it out of him—where the money was, you know. I happened to tickle him under the chin, and he jumped a mile. Dan saw it happen and that gave him the idea. He built it up to me for weeks. 'If he was tied down,' he said, 'in one place so he couldn't get away from it, he couldn't hold out against it very long, he'd have to tell you. It'd be like torture, but it wouldn't hurt him.' It sounded swell, so I gave in.

"But, honest, I didn't know Dan meant to kill him. He was the one did it. I didn't! I thought he only meant for us to take the money and lam, and leave El tied up."

"Never mind that; go ahead."

"Dan had it all thought out beautiful. He had me go around the village first building it up that I was getting El to laugh and liven up. He even had me buy the joke book at the general store. Then last night about ten thirty when El was sitting by the lamp reading some seed catalogues, I gave the signal and Dan came up behind him with rope and pillows from the bed and insect spray gauntlets. He held him while I put the gauntlets on him—they're good thick buckram, you know—so no rope burns would show from his struggles, and then he tied his hands to the arms of the chair, over the gauntlets. The pillows we used over his waist and thighs, for the same reason, to deaden the ropes. Then he let the chair back down nearly flat, and he took off El's shoes and socks, and brought in a handful of chicken feathers from the yard, and squatted down in front of him

like an Indian, and started to slowly stroke the soles of his feet back and forth. It was pretty awful to watch and listen to: I hadn't thought it would be. But that screaming laugh! Tickling doesn't sound so bad, you know.

"Every time Dan blunted a feather, he'd throw it away and start in using a new one. And he said in his sleepy way: 'Care to tell us where it is now? No? Wa-al, mebbe you know best.' I wanted to bring him water once, but Dan wouldn't let me, said that would only help him hold out longer.

"El was such a stubborn fool. He didn't once say he didn't have the money, he only said he'd see us both in hell before he told us where it was. He fainted away, the first time, about twelve. After that he kept getting weaker all the time, couldn't laugh any more, just heave his ribs.

"Finally he gave in, whispered it was in a tin box plastered into the well, below the water line. He told us there was a rope ladder he'd made himself to get down there, hidden in the attic. Dan lowered himself down, and got it out, brought it up, and counted it. I wanted to leave right way, but he talked me out of it. He said: 'We'll only give ourselves away if we do that. We know where it is now. Let's leave it there a mite longer; he mayn't live as long as you 'd expect. 'I see now what he meant; I still didn't then. Well, I listened to him; he seemed to have the whole thing lined up so cleverly. He climbed back with it and left it down there. Then we went back to the house. I went upstairs, and I no sooner got there than I heard El start up this whimpering and cooing again, like a little newborn baby. I quickly ran down to try and stop him, but it was too late. Just as I got there, El overstrained himself and suddenly went limp. That little added extra bit more killed him, and Dan Fears had known it would, that's why he did it!

"I got frightened, but he told me there was nothing to worry about, everything was under control, and they'd never tumble in a million years. We took the ropes and

pillows and gauntlets off him, of course, and no marks were left. We raised the chair back to reading position, and dropped the joke book by his hand, and I put on his shoes and socks. The only thing was, after he'd been a dead a little while, his face started to relapse to that sour, scowly look he always had all his life, and that didn't match the joke book. Well, Dan took care of that too. He waited until just before he was starting to stiffen, and then he arranged the lips and mouth with his hands so it looked like he'd been laughing his head off; and they hardened and stayed that way. Then he sent me out to fetch the doctor." She hung her head. "It seemed so perfect. I don't know how it is it fell through."

"How did you catch on so quick, Al?" the sheriff asked Traynor, while they were waiting for a stenographer to come and take down her confession.

"First of all, the smile. You could see his features had been rearranged after death. Before rigor sets in, there's a relaxation to the habitual expression. Secondly, the jokes were no good. Fears may have thought a sour puss wouldn't match them, but it would have matched them lots better than the one they gave him. Thirdly, when I hitched up the cuffs of his trousers, I saw that his socks had been put on wrong, as if in a hurry by someone who wasn't familiar with things like that—therefore presumably it was a woman. The garter clasps were fastened at the insides of the calves, but the original indentations still showed on the outsides. Fourthly, the bent chicken feathers. I still didn't quite get it, though, until I learned this afternoon at the general store that he was supersensitive to tickling. That gave me the whole picture, intact. I'd already seen the clay on the trowel, and Fears did his level best to keep me away from the well, so it didn't take much imagination to figure where the money was hidden. The marks of the ropes may not have shown on his hands, but the gauntlets were scarred by

their friction, I could see that plainly even by the light of the torch when I went back to the toolshed tonight.

"It was pretty good, I'll give it that. If they'd only left his face alone. I don't think my suspicions would have been awakened in the first place. They spoiled it by overdoing it; just a mere inference of how he'd died wasn't enough—they had guilty consciences, so they wanted to make sure of getting their point across, hitting the onlooker in the eye with it. And that was the one thing he'd never had in life—a sense of humor. The joke wasn't really in the book after all. The joke was on them."

THE INVINCIBLES

She lived on the roof, Vivian Lane did. Her friends called it a penthouse but she herself, whenever she spoke of it, called it simply the roof. When she was through at the theater each night, the theater that had her name up in electric lights on the outside, she used to say, “I’m going home to my roof now.” She always said it with a sigh of relief, as though she was glad she was through for that night, glad to be alone.

To reach this rooftop home of hers, you had to go up twenty stories or more in an elevator, her own private elevator, inside a tall sleek white apartment building. That was what Sybil Jenkins was doing, and doing it very much against her will too. In fact her unwillingness to make this call on Vivian Lane had nearly cost her her job. The call was not by invitation—for Vivian and Sybil did not know each other—it was not even by request. It was by command. And Sybil had brought the reason for her call with her; it was a flat oblong cardboard box with *Chez Lorraine* marked on the cover in small neat letters. Within, Sybil knew, for she saw it being done up, were endless layers of dainty, faintly scented crepe paper, and within those in turn nestled the pride of the firm of Chez Lorraine, the apple of its proprietress’ eye—a gown designed specially for Vivian Lane.

Two weeks before, out of a clear blue sky, she had telephoned the shop and said, “This is Vivian Lane. I want a

dress; something different; something that no one else in town has." Mrs. Lorenz, the proprietress, had nearly strangled on the spot in an attempt to get all the honeyed words she had to say out of her windpipe at one time. Then later she had clasped her hands together repeatedly in an attitude of prayer and jubilation while she marched back and forth from reception room to fitting room and from fitting room back to reception room again. "Think what this means to us! Think of the prestige this will give us! Oh, that dear sweet darling young woman! She's going to have the most stunning dress New York ever saw!" Later she had called on Miss Lane herself with pencil, ink, and water-color sketches which three of the firm's crack designers had toiled over day and night and submitted them in trembling and trepidation. The whole staff had been kept in after hours that night to learn the fateful decision. "I'll need everyone, everyone!" Mrs. Lorenz had said. "If this goes over, you get a bonus, every one of you!"

It was almost seven before she returned, tottered out of the taxi, and collapsed weakly in the first chair at hand. Her assistants gathered anxiously about her, picking up the assorted sketches which she had dropped all over the floor. "A glass of water!" she gasped, and then, somewhat restored, went on: "I've lost five or ten pounds, my hair has turned gray, but—we're going to make a dress for Vivian Lane!" A polite murmur of rejoicing and congratulation filled the shop.

Two more visits followed on Mrs. Lorenz' part after that first fateful interview, both conducted in person, one to obtain Miss Lane's measurements and the other for the only fitting that the busy star could find time to concede to her, and then the fateful day of delivery arrived. "Have it here at seven," Vivian Lane commanded briefly and imperiously when informed by telephone that her gown was ready and waiting her approval. "Not a minute sooner and not a

minute later. Your check will be in the mail Monday morning," and hung up.

It was at this point that everything had started to go wrong.

First the gown was done up and carefully put, box and all, into the safe in Mrs. Lorenz' private office. "If anything should happen to it at the last minute," she explained, "I think it would kill me!"

Next the delivery-man was called in and told to report to Mrs. Lorenz in person at six-thirty for a special assignment. "On a Saturday night?" he gasped. "Not much. I'm through at five."

"I'll pay you for the overtime," Mrs. Lorenz promised seductively.

"I can't," he protested. "It's my wife's birthday."

Mrs. Lorenz had been under a nervous strain all week. She lost her temper. "Very well," she snapped, "you're through here. I'll deliver it myself."

Six o'clock arrived and everyone had gone home except Mrs. Lorenz and Sybil Jenkins. The porter had even appeared with his pail and mop and had begun to slosh water about on the marble foyer to have it clean for Monday morning. The priceless dress was extracted from the safe and Mrs. Lorenz, hugging it jealously under one arm, began drawing on her gloves preparatory to leaving. "Don't forget to turn off the lights in the showcases before you go," she called in to Sybil Jenkins. A moment later there was a scream of horror from the direction of the door, a crash of tin, and a heavy thud.

Now what? thought Sybil in fright, and she came running out and across the long carpeted reception room. In the foyer, beside the overturned bucket of water, Mrs. Lorenz was seated firmly and catastrophically in the exact center of the floor, surrounded by what appeared to have been a young cloudburst and holding the package containing the dress desperately above her head with both hands.

“Here, take this, quick,” she cried to Sybil, “before it gets wet.”

But when Sybil, assisted by the penitent porter, tried to help her to her feet, she moaned. “I can’t stand up! He left that pail right in my way. I’ve turned my foot or something!” Anxiously they both led her to a chair near the door and seated her in it. “Don’t stand watching me!” she shouted irritably. “That dress has to be delivered! Get a taxi, you fool!” This last to the dumbfounded porter, who promptly turned and darted through the door.

“Oh, but Mrs. Lorenz,” protested Sybil, “you can’t think of going up there now!”

“I’m not,” agreed Mrs. Lorenz bitterly. “You’re the one who’s going to deliver it instead. Hurry up! There’s no time to lose—it’s got to be there at seven sharp!”

A look of panic appeared on poor Sybil’s face, and she drew back momentarily as though she had been bitten. “Oh, but Mrs. Lorenz,” she wailed, “I can’t! Any other night but tonight! I have a date with the boy I’m going with. I should have been home half an hour ago!”

A taxi meanwhile had drawn up in front of the shop and stood waiting dramatically.

“Miss Jenkins,” announced her employer majestically, “there are a million boys you can have dates with, but there is only one Vivian Lane and she has got to have her dress tonight. Now your work here has been highly satisfactory up to now, but unless you are in that taxi on your way to Park Avenue in five minutes, you needn’t come back here Monday morning. Take your choice!”

Sybil had a brief struggle with herself. The job won.

Half an hour later she was standing dejectedly in Vivian Lane’s private elevator, slowly going up twenty stories to the roof.

The elevator stopped at last and Sybil stepped out. She found herself on a roof under the open sky. But what a roof; Vivian Lane’s roof ! Above her all the stars of the night

gleamed like jewels. Sybil had always thought a roof meant tar and chimney-pots and perhaps clothes hanging on a line to dry. This roof meant plants and flowers, a little fountain of tinkling water in a pebbled basin, and a white-sanded path, soft as silk, leading toward an arched doorway beyond which inviting gold and orange lights gleamed. She went in there, past a long fringed Spanish shawl hanging diagonally from the doorway in place of a door, and looked about her uncertainly. Almost at once Vivian Lane's maid appeared from somewhere or other and beckoned to her.

"Right this way, please." Each room they passed through seemed more attractive to Sybil than the one before until at last they stopped in the loveliest room of all and there was Vivian Lane herself. "Your new gown, Miss Lane," said the maid and disappeared once more, leaving Sybil standing nervously alone in there.

Vivian at first sight was just a very beautiful but partially unclothed back, from where Sybil was standing. Beyond her the reflection of her face was repeated eight times, from left to right, by eight lighted mirrors ranged about her in fan-shaped formation. All eight of them spoke at the same time, saying politely but indifferently, "Oh yes, my dress. I'd forgotten about it. Be right with you." Poor Sybil was quite startled by the effect these multiple mirrors managed to convey; the whole room seemed crowded with Vivian Lanes.

"Sit down," Vivian added after a moment or two. "No use tiring yourself."

But just as Sybil was about to carry this suggestion into effect, a new one was forthcoming. "Suppose you try it on for me; we seem to be about the same size. That'll save time. You can step behind that screen there." And Vivian Lane pointed with an eiderdown powder-puff set on the end of a long ivory stick.

Sybil, too taken aback to protest at this rather unusual idea, found herself behind the screen a moment later, obediently slipping off her own garments and then untying

the package containing the dress. Oh, my! she thought frantically, if anything happens to it while it's on me, what will Mrs. Lorenz say? She got the dress out and put it on with as much care as though it was made of spun glass and might fall apart at the slightest touch. Then, trying to control her trembling, she stepped out from behind the screen. Vivian Lane was preoccupied at the moment doing something to one eyebrow. Sybil cleared her throat timidly.

Vivian wheeled around on the low bench she occupied, opened her eyes and mouth at the same time in astonishment, and finally dropped the crayon she had been using to the floor. At last her breath returned to her.

"A natural!" she exclaimed. She stood up slowly, her eyes still as wide as they could be stretched. "I never—!" she started to say, then changed this to: "My hat's off to your firm, young lady."

Sybil stood there, never so embarrassed in her life, not knowing what to do or say.

"Walk back and forth," ordered Vivian. "Turn around." Sybil turned. "Pretend you're dancing."

Sybil stood stock-still. "I can't," she faltered miserably. "I haven't any partner."

Vivian laughed friendlily. "I'm sorry," she said. "I forgot you're not on the stage. We're so used to doing anything we're told at a moment's notice," she explained.

"Then you like the dress, Miss Lane?" Sybil murmured anxiously.

Vivian laughed again. "My dear child!" she said gayly. "I've been trying to tell you that in every possible way for the last five minutes." She was about to say more when the maid suddenly reappeared and murmured something apologetically that Sybil couldn't quite catch. At once all Vivian Lane's good humor seemed to desert her. "How dare he show up here!" she exploded angrily. "He's never even been introduced to me! I won't see him! I know what's up

his sleeve! You go back and tell him I've gone away for a week—or a month—or a year! Get rid of him!"

The maid vanished with bent, repentant head. A moment later the telephone rang. Vivian went over and answered while Sybil stood uncertainly in the middle of the room, radiant in the borrowed gown. She tried not to listen to what Vivian was saying into the telephone, but she couldn't help hearing most of it.

"George, your brother's here, and I don't know how to get out of the place without running into him. He's camped outside. No, please don't come up and give him a piece of your mind; the two of you will only end up by having a row—and that will set him more against me than ever. Don't let on I told you. Wait for me where you are, I'll find a way of giving him the slip . . . The Carillon bar? Good, don't forget." She hung up just as the maid returned a second time.

"Oh, Miss Lane, what am I going to do now?" the latter quavered almost tearfully. "He knows you're in; he heard your voice in here and told me so. He says he won't budge."

Vivian clapped a distracted hand to her head. "He's driving me crazy! He's pestered me for weeks now to go out with him!" Sybil, thinking she had overheard just about enough of what was none of her business, made a move toward the screen to change her clothes. It was getting late, and she remembered she had had no dinner herself.

"Wait a minute," Vivian said to her suddenly. "Don't take that off yet. Will you do something for me?"

Sybil stopped and looked at her in surprise. "What?" she asked.

Vivian opened a drawer of the vanity table, rummaged in it, came back with a handful of crisp green bills.

"Could you use a hundred dollars?" she blurted out.

"Nicely," Sybil had to admit.

"First let me ask you something. Something terrifically personal, and please don't take offense. Are you—er—this

sounds so silly—but are you a good girl? You know what I mean?”

“I should hope to tell you,” bridled Sybil, blushing.

“How good?”

“I haven’t had a strike called against me yet.”

“Well, here’s the point,” Vivian said. “Are you good enough to hold out against—well, against the handsomest man you probably ever laid eyes on? Not only that, he’s got money to burn. You’ll not only have to buck him, you’ll have to buck a walloping big fat check, diamonds, furs, a big car, a penthouse, the promises of all those things anyway, and he can make ’em sound awfully real.”

“Sure I can hold out,” said Sybil sullenly. “I’m no one night stand. I want to get married myself someday.”

“Then you’re what I’m looking for.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Just go in there dressed like that and pretend you’re me for one evening until he gets it out of his system.”

“But how can I?” Sybil gasped in astonishment.

“He’s never seen me except on the stage,” Vivian explained rapidly. “In a white wig, with a lot of thick make-up all over my face. He’ll never know the difference. What do you say? Is it a go?”

Sybil pondered the matter a moment or two, then suddenly raised her head in quick decision. “A hundred dollars is a lot of money,” she said. “But it’s a crazy thing to do. I never heard of anything like it before in my life, but I’ll do it if you want me to that badly.”

Vivian nearly threw her arms around her in delight. Then turning quickly to the maid, she said:

“Tell Mr. Worthington I’ll be out in a few minutes. Just as soon as the dressmaker leaves.”

As soon as the two of them were alone once more, she confided jubilantly to Sybil: “Now that you’ve decided to help me in this, I’m going to give you the absolute facts of the case. I couldn’t talk openly in front of Yvette.” Sybil

listened wide-eyed, wondering what was coming next. “The boy that called me just now,” Vivian went on breathlessly, wriggling into a trim tailored suit while she spoke, “is this man’s younger brother. He’s dead stuck on me, and his intentions are as honest as the day is long; wants to marry me and all that. He worships the very ground I walk on, and I think he’s aces. So far so good. Now here’s where the complications come in. The family has a lot of money, but the older brother controls all of it, at least until George—that’s my boy—is thirty. He’s threatened to cut him off if he marries an actress. There are a lot of stuffed shirts in the family with these peculiar old-fashioned notions about stage people; another objection would be that I might just be marrying him to divorce him later and milk him for a heavy settlement. Which has been known to happen, I’ll admit, but I happen to love the kid. Try to tell them that, though!

“Well, withholding his inheritance wouldn’t be enough to stop us in itself, and the older one knows it, so he’s decided to make a play for me himself, to prove his point that stage women are all alike, they can all be had if you ring up the right price. In other words, he’s out to cure his brother by making me himself and then presenting poor George with a nice little fait accompli.

“‘You still want her? There she is, old top!’ I know just what his little game is, don’t worry! And the worst part of it is,” she went on, running a tortoise-shell comb sketchily through her gleaming hair once or twice and then crushing a diminutive hat down on top of it, “he’s as dangerous as dynamite; he’s got this damnable magnetism and charm, what they used to call sex appeal in the old days. He has a reputation for always having been able to get any woman he wanted. That’s why the family are using him for their stooge. He’s really the wilder and more experienced of the two, but the family doesn’t object to that because he never marries any of them, whereas George, who’s really an innocent boy alongside of him, respects me and wants to

bring me into the family. So what do all the old fogies of the clan do but deliberately set this Jimmy—the black sheep—on to me, to turn me into what they say I am if I'm not already."

"But," objected Sybil astonishedly, "what I can't see is—isn't forewarned forearmed? If you know what his object is, why do I have to take your place? Why can't you go out with him yourself and beat him at his own game, show him he's wrong?"

"Because," admitted Vivian in a throaty confidential voice, "as woman to woman I'm not so sure he would be before the night's over. I've heard too much about him. Two of the girls in my last show went out with him; they had a reputation for being hard-to-get until they put on the gloves with him. They didn't last one round, either of them! And I really love George and I'm afraid to take any chances. I never was told by any doctor yet that I'm suffering from low blood-pressure exactly. I'm playing safe and staying away from him; what you don't go near won't hurt you. When you're out with him, the odds are two-to-one against you; him and you both against your conscience and the way your mother brought you up."

"But you're trusting me to hold out?"

"I'm paying you a hundred dollars to. And of course it always leaves an out for me in the end. Even if you drop a stitch. I can always come back to him: 'That wasn't me, sweetheart; try again!' Now I hope I haven't frightened you too much. How about it? Is it still a go or are you afraid you're not allergic enough?"

Sybil's self-confidence was equal to the ordeal, like that of a raw recruit who hasn't yet been under fire and therefore doesn't share a veteran's instinct for self-preservation. At least not very well-aimed fire; just slingshots, you might say, as opposed to machine-guns and heavy artillery.

"He's met his Waterloo," she announced firmly. "He's going to find out by the time tonight's over there's one girl

in this town he can’t have. You can look but you mustn’t touch or you’re gonna get all the enamel scratched offa you!”

“Onward Christian Soldiers!” encouraged Vivian. “Kid, you do the trick and you get another five hundred tomorrow morning, in whichever hospital ward you may be at the time!”

Sybil tapped her lower teeth thoughtfully. “And just to load the dice in my own favor and make doubly sure,” she said, “could I have a—let’s see—a pair of embroidery scissors? Or anything with a sharp point will do.”

“You’re not going to stab him, are you?” cried Vivian alarmedly.

“Oh no, I’m not taking them out with me. I just want to use them here in the room for a minute before I go.”

Vivian located a pair, handed them to her with her shapely mouth slightly ajar.

“Not my new dress?” she asked apprehensively.

“No, not the dress either,” Sybil reassured her. She stepped behind the screen she had used the first time, remained hidden with them a short while. A faint sound of snipping was discernible in the bated stillness of the room. Then she came out again and handed them back with a complacent expression. “There. Now I’m a cinch to outsmart him.”

“What on earth did you want them for?” asked Vivian, mystified. She looked her over from head to foot but couldn’t see any signs of their having been used on her.

“That’s a professional secret,” said Sybil airily. “I’ll tell you tomorrow—if it works.”

Vivian transposed her shapely middle-finger across her equally shapely index-finger, held them up to show her. “These are staying this way—all through the witching hours of the night,” she intoned melodramatically. “You go out there now and keep him busy. You can say I’m the dressmaker as I slip by on my way out.”

Sybil took a last look at herself in the eight mirrors and was eight knockouts. She drew a deep breath, like a person who is about to dive into a pool of ice-cold water without testing it first, and sauntered regally in the direction of the penthouse living-room where the adversary was waiting. Enemy territory and no quarter given.

Vivian was egging her on in a stage-whisper like a fight-manager's parting advice to his bantam before he climbs through the ropes. "Remember, my whole future is in your hands. Don't give up the ship! Think of your mother. Think of your future husband. Think of your grandchildren. Think of the multiplication table if you have to, or the price of eggs wholesale. Stay away from sofas with too many pillows on them. Make sure there're always at least two lamps on at any given time. Be careful of soft music. Keep your eyes off the moon if there is one, or the stars if there isn't one."

"When better resistance is made than he's going to get tonight," was Sybil's parting assurance, "I'll make it!"

Into the living-room she swept, with that gliding walk she had seen the models use at Mrs. Lorenz' establishment. The long dress was clinging to her body like wet elastic, so perfectly did it fit, and then at the bottom around her insteps it flared out all around her like pale green sea-foam. She was something to see. There was a startled gasp of admiration from one corner, like this—Uff !—and then the menace rose slowly to his full height of six-feet-one. Sybil knew just how St. George must have felt facing that dragon. Only this dragon was darned easy to take; you wanted to get up close and cuddle and croon, "Go on, blow a little smoke and flame my way." She thought: No wonder Lane sent me in here to take the risks for her. Smart girl! She wouldn't have a chance against this with her artistic temperament. Even I with my Washington Heights morality can feel a peculiar what-do-I-careishness coming on! Turn those eyes off, mister; I don't carry fire-insurance.

“Mr. Worthington?” she said sweetly, making a U-turn in front of him and then braking on the red-light look in his face.

His mouth was open, as though he found the sight of her incredible.

“George didn’t exaggerate when he said you were the loveliest thing ever,” he began rather insidiously. “Why, you’re even more of a treat to the eye than you were the night I saw you on the stage!”

“It is a little hard to make passes with a ten-piece orchestra in between,” she purred felinely. “How did you like my singing?”

“Were you singing?” he exclaimed with what seemed like genuine surprise.

“How did you like my dancing?”

“Were you dancing?”

“Well then, how did you like the show?”

“Were there other people on the stage with you? I thought I noticed a kind of blur, a haze around you, but all I could see was your face.”

“Damned liar,” she said agreeably. “Tell me more. You’ll run out of tackle after a while and I’ll still be swimming fancy-free.”

“The footlights,” he went on, “made your eyes seem gray that night, but now I know they’re really blue. And your voice is really much softer than it sounded in the theater.”

“Why don’t you go home with a good book, honey?” she coaxed. “You’re wasting a perfectly good evening for yourself this way and getting absolutely nowhere.”

“I’d rather read you.”

“Sure, I know. The Braille system.”

At this point a demure little figure in tailor-made suit, with a hat pulled down close over her eyes, glided unobtrusively through the room toward the outside door. “Good night, Miss Lane,” she breathed respectfully in a barely audible voice.

“Oh, good night,” Sybil replied carelessly. “Just my dressmaker,” she explained indifferently for Worthington’s benefit. He glanced around, turned away again. You don’t waste time on a sparrow when there’s a peacock in front of you.

Behind his back the departing “dressmaker,” as she slipped out through the door, held up one hand ostentatiously. The middle-finger was still crossed inflexibly over the index-finger.

Sybil glanced over, imperceptibly drooped one eyelid in a ghost of a wink. The door closed and she was on her own.

“Let’s see, where were we, Mr. Worthington?”

“Just call me Jimmy, won’t you?”

“What held that up until now?” she asked mockingly. “You’re nearly a minute-and-a-half late with it. I’m afraid you need oiling. Very well then, just call me Brrh!”

“What does that mean?” he asked, puzzled.

“I don’t know,” she shrugged engagingly. “But that’s what all the boys say when they kiss me. They get chapped lips.”

He shook his head with mock ruefulness. “Gee, you’re case-hardened.”

“Case-hardened? I’m an armadillo. Even diamonds won’t cut my shell.”

“I noticed that,” he admitted, “the way I got that bracelet back.”

“Tired yet? Want to give up? Or would you like to try a little longer?”

His face colored and his eyes glittered dangerously. “You’ve made the fatal mistake,” he told her grimly, “of offering opposition, putting me on my mettle. Now you’re in for it; now you’re sunk! How about coming out and dining with me while I map out a campaign of action?”

“I’ve got to eat anyway,” she said with devastating aloofness, “so somebody may as well pay for it. One wing tie is pretty much like another, sitting across the table from me. Just let me get my brass-knuckles, be right with you.”

She came out again in a borrowed velvet wrap of Vivian's, insolently flicked a speck of imaginary dust from his sleeve with the tips of two fingers as he held the door open for her. "Come, beloved," she said scathingly, "and be sure not to forget the sleeping-powders for my wine."

In the upholstered car he tried to hold her hand. "Never before dinner," she let him know, and took it away. "It's as light as a feather; I can hold it myself."

The restaurant where his driver stopped didn't mean a thing to her. She'd heard of it but that was about all.

"You see, I know all your habits," he said as they got out. She didn't understand in time, and the car had already driven on by the time he added: "I know this is your favorite rendezvous after the theater."

"Oh, couldn't we go somewhere else?" she exclaimed with a clutching gesture after the car as if to pull it back again by main force. "I'm so tired of it here."

"Sorry," he said. "I should have consulted you first. It'll be impossible to get him back now in all this traffic. Surely once more won't hurt," and he looked at her curiously.

She gathered the wrap and her courage more closely about her. Heaven help a little dress-shop employee on a night like this! she thought as she tilted her chin and advanced with grim determination into the brightly lighted vestibule.

A tall distinguished-looking young man was standing in the exact middle of it, evidently waiting for some girl to come out of the powder-room. Sybil passed so close to him their elbows brushed but with chin still in air.

"Aren't you two on speaking terms?" Worthington murmured with a glance over his shoulder.

"How's that?" was the best she could manage, with a feeling of thin ice cracking underfoot.

"Why, he's been carrying you in his arms up a flight of stairs, while he smothers your face with kisses, six nights a

week and two matinees for the past eight months—at the end of the second act."

"Yes, but he's very mean; he keeps bumping my—er—the bottom of my spine into the scenery every time he does it. Purposely."

"Oh!" he said. But again he gave her a curious sidelong look, this time with a trace of a grin on his face.

She had an uneasy feeling, as she sat down at the table with him and pretended to scan a menu, that she had bitten off a good deal more than she could chew. She stole a look at him over the top of the folder. Not for nothing had the Worthington clan selected him to do tonight's dirty work. Vivian had known what she was doing in steering clear of temptation. She caught herself wondering: Does he sort of swoop when he kisses, or stand perfectly still and haul you in at him?

He caught her eyeing him. "Yes, I'm still here," he grinned impudently.

The following Monday morning the former Vivian Lane, now Mrs. George Worthington, was sitting breakfasting on the terrace with her brand-new husband when Yvette, the maid, appeared and told her someone wished to see her.

"I'm not at home to anyone," said Vivian firmly, "from now on."

"It's that young lady who brought your dress the other night," explained the maid.

Vivian jumped up. "Oh, that's different. I must see her! She's a dear! Come along, George, and meet her. She's the one I told you about, that I used to turn the tables on Mr. Smart-Aleck Jimmy Saturday night."

"Gee, the poor little kid," said George penitently. "We'll have to do what we can for her. It's a foregone conclusion what happened to her if she went out with Indian!"

Instead of just Sybil, however, the terrible Jimmy Worthington had come along with her. Vivian and George took a deep breath when they saw him and edged closer to one another as if for mutual protection against the tirade that was to come.

He looked, however, slightly sheepish and not at all tiradeish. Sybil was the only one of the four who seemed to have her wits about her.

“I brought your dress back,” she told Vivian.

George stepped manfully into the breach. “Now, Jim,” he began earnestly, “you and the family can do what you like about it, but I married Vivian Saturday night up at Greenwich, Connecticut, and—”

“Congratulations, old man,” said Jimmy meekly.

George and Vivian just stared, mouths open, at this unexpected submission.

“Yes, and now you two can congratulate us,” remarked Sybil matter-of-factly. “We got married ourselves at Greenwich Saturday night. Isn’t that a coincidence? We must have passed each other on the way, you coming back and we going up.”

“You what?” Vivian gasped. When she had recovered somewhat, she put an arm about her new sister-in-law and murmured:

“Could I talk to you alone, dear, for a minute?” As soon as they were out of earshot, she burst out: “How did you ever land him? Him of all people! Why, he was known to be absolutely allergic to marriage.”

“Virtue is its own reward,” explained Sybil complacently. “When he got tired wrestling with me and not getting anywhere, he suddenly discovered he couldn’t live without me even if it meant marrying me, so he whisked me away to a justice of the peace up at Greenwich.”

“But how did you manage to hold out against him? He’s deadly to women, you know. What will-power!”

“Will-power nothing!” snapped Sybil. “I’ve got my own little private system. You remember when I borrowed those scissors before I left here that night? Well, they did it. I’ll show you what I used them for.” She stepped behind the screen for a moment or two, came out again holding what had once been a dainty pair of pantalettes. You couldn’t tell what they were any more, they were as full of holes as if an army of angry moths had been busy at them for months. They were tattered, threadbare, disreputable.

“You did that yourself ?” gasped Vivian.

“Certainly! It’s sure-fire! You’re a woman yourself; you know how we’d rather die than be found out with a hole in our stockings or underthings. All I had to do was think of what my lingerie looked like under that beautiful gown and I was perfectly safe.”

EYE OF DOOM

In India, in the year 1757, a French private plucked a great jewel from the God with the Diamond Eyes. But, fleeing in the night, he carried away with him the curse of the dying priest: "Despoiler of the god, for your sacrilege the atonement unto alt generations shall be death.

In the whirl of Fate's wheel both Europe and America saw the Diamond Eye and the doom that slept within it—and now its disaster is stalking again . . .

I

London, 1939

Maxine Murray stepped out of the lift, hurried down the hall toward the door inscribed: *Watts and Fraser, Barristers.* "Did it come yet?" she blurted out before she was fairly inside.

The switchboard girl stared at her in amazement. "Did what come, Miss?"

"I'm Miss Murray, of the Puss-Kat Club. I—Mr. Watts has been expecting a package from America for me. He promised to call but I just couldn't stand the suspense another minute."

The phone-girl's arched eyebrows expressed her opinion of Americans and their helter-skelter ways. "Couldn't say, I'm sure," she drawled. She plugged in a cord languidly: "A Miss Murray here, sir, asking for a package from Amurrica . . . Yes, sir, I'll send her in."

In the inner office a lanky young Englishman, typical solicitor type, was having tea at his desk. He rose immediately.

"Ah, just in time, Miss Murray. Join me?"

"Hello, Mr. Watts. No thanks—do sit down and finish." She took a chair and leaned forward eagerly. "I've been counting the boats for the past three weeks, haven't been able to sleep planning what I'd do with it. The *Queen* docked last night—don't tell me it didn't come over on that!"

He crinkled his forehead. "Oh yes, the legacy arrived, Miss Murray. It's in the office safe right now."

"But why are you acting so disillusioned? You promised to call my flat the moment it got here. I've been waiting all day."

"I didn't have the heart," he said, letting his spoon drop back on the tray. Then as she stared wordlessly, his honest face showed concern. "Miss Murray, try not to be too disappointed. My colleague and I have already examined the contents of the pouch, and—well I'm sorry to say the whole bequest isn't worth a continental."

"O-oh!" She slumped back in her chair and let her arms fall limply.

"Here, see for yourself—" He came back with a padlocked pouch, dumped its contents out. "It really wasn't worth the expense of sending over. And it's very fortunate that you didn't borrow on it to make the trip over there personally, as you wanted to do at first. That lawyer in the States had no business cabling us to locate you and all that, and thereby arousing false hopes on your part, without waiting until the estate had been examined and appraised." He

flicked several packets of yellowed bonds with his thumbnail.

"And you're quite sure none of them is worth anything at all?" she asked forlornly.

"Absolutely certain. They're not even known, not listed in Wall Street—or anywhere else. Confederate bonds, shares in forgotten mines, in railroads that are no longer in existence. One issue in particular, they told me, was blotted out as far back as the Black Friday panic in New York. 1876, wasn't that?"

Maxine Murray just held her forehead expressively.

As for the so-called jewels, the trinkets and heirlooms that impressed you when you visited Logan Manor as a child—here they are, you can see for yourself. Simply a lot of junk. They would dazzle a child, of course, and probably account for the unwarranted legend of vast secret wealth that attached to Mrs. Logan all her life in that small town. You yourself recalled it when we first notified you, if you remember. There's where the trouble came in. It simply shows how little rustic gossip of that sort is to be relied on." He paused, drew in a deep breath. "The thing to do is to look at it sensibly. After all, until we contacted you several months ago, you didn't even remember this eccentric old lady's existence. You probably hadn't thought twice about her in all the years since you'd come away from home.

Well then, let's put it this way. You're really no worse off than before. Just a bit let down, I daresay, as anyone would be."

She managed to smile up at him quizzically. "I'm not so sure about that. Only two nights ago I turned down an advantageous offer to go to Australia. Told my agent I was coming into a fortune, didn't have to worry about my next engagement."

“Oh, I say, I *am* sorry!” He spoke so sincerely that her smile broadened. “If there’s anything we’ve done here in this office to mislead you—”

“Oh, it’s not your fault How could it be? You simply showed me the cable. I had no business letting my imagination run wild, ‘counting my chickens before they were hatched.” She’d gotten over it by now. “Well, no use crying about it. At least Mrs. Logan meant well. No doubt she really believed she had something of value to bequeath me.”

She began to finger the ornaments one by one. “Here’s her wedding ring. And look at this thing! Did you ever *see* anything like it before in your life? What on earth—”

“Meant for a brooch, I should say, judging by the setting and the cross-pin behind it.”

“Yes, but look at that crystal sticking straight out of it like a unicorn’s horn. If that were only a diamond, now—”

The barrister joined her in laughing. “Yes, if that were a diamond it would be a different story.” He turned it this way and that. “I’m not an expert on precious stones, myself, but it looks like a chunk of quartz, judging by its size alone. Probably backed with silver to make it gleam a bit. What a curious old character this Mrs. Logan must have been, to hang onto stuff like this.”

“My mother, whose girlhood chum she was, told me she’d never been quite right in her mind after Major Logan’s death. He was killed by a runaway team less than a week after their marriage. Stopped all the clocks in the house, kept the blinds down, left his things just the way they’d been—that sort of thing, trying to make time stand still.” She stood up, held out her hand. “Well, I won’t keep you any longer, Mr. Watts. I’ve got to get back and sing for my supper. Thanks for your trouble, and next time I’ll know better than to build castles in the air just on the strength of a vague cablegram.”

“What shall I do with this stuff, Miss Murray? Do you want to take it with you?”

“No, hardly.” She riffled the ornaments under her hand. “Wait—on second thought I *will* take this oddity, this dunce’s cap of a brooch. If I shine it up with a bit of cloth I may be able to wear it in my hair at the club tonight. I’ve been needing something to finish off my costume.” She dropped it into her handbag. “The rest you may—” She spaded both hands down toward the wastebasket beside his desk.

He went to the door with her. “Goodbye, Miss Murray. Sorry about this. If there’s any way in which we can be of further service—”

“No, thanks,” she called back cheerfully on her way out to the lift. “One inheritance like this is enough.”

II

“An American,” the maharajah’s secretary answered his question. “Quite a pretty piece too, isn’t she?”

“I was not thinking of that, although it is true she is charming,” Sir Hari Duggarawath remarked in his clipped Oxford accent, adjusting his monocle and looking out across the club-floor. “I am interested in that bit of *decor* she is carry out about in her hair. Have you very good eyes, Ramm? Can you see it from here? Watch when she turns her head about—there.”

“Of course I can see it. How could I miss it? If it was any bigger it’d make a fair-sized headstone.” Mr. Johan Ramm stopped eating to center his polite brown gaze upon his employer: “Why do you keep following it with your eyes like that?

You’re not thinking it’s real, are you?”

The maharajah did not answer for a moment. He was a plump, brown, placid little man, and the jeweled turban above his evening clothes served only to give him a sort of comic importance. He smiled inanely and waved a fat hand.

"Does it matter?" he said.

Johan Ramm shrugged. By now he had become accustomed to the cryptic ways of royalty. Another of those stupid whims, he thought, remembering frantic chases in pursuit of out-of-season delicacies, a glass slipper, some silly piece of bric-a-brac. Another scavenger hunt with His Highness pointing the quarry and Johan Ramm to attend the dirty details.

He kept his handsome face expressionless but a spark of anger burned within him. Mr. Ramm was tall and suave and sartorially impeccable. His lean features had enabled him to pose as a Latin personage upon occasion, and his bearing sometimes confused new acquaintances into believing that he was the great man and Sir Hari the humble servant. A natural error, Mr. Ramm would have said, for Johan Ramm had polished his wits and his personality in Chicago and Shanghai and Cairo, among other ports of call, and therefore made his brain sharper than that of any fat little kingling who buried himself in the back-of-beyond for eleven months of the year.

"It is hardly logical," Mr. Ramm said drily, "that any one would wear a *real* jewel of that size around the floor of a night club. Why that girl doesn't earn more than—Oh, come off of it!"

Sir Hari smiled blandly.

"Whether anyone would or would not is hardly the question. Nor how much the young lady's wages are. Logic is not your forte, Ramm. As you know, I am not entirely inexperienced where diamonds are concerned." (His collection was famous all over the world.) "Let me explain why I think it is not paste nor glass, even judging from this

distance. Now the whole object of paste is to imitate, pretend to be the real jewel, isn't that so?"

Another of his damned lectures, Ramm thought. He rested his chin on palm and feigned a mild interest.

"Imitations of smaller stones have some chance of passing for the real thing," the maharajah went on. "But when a thing is that size, what is the point in making an imitation of it, when it would not be believed anyway? Secondly, it is rather dull, do you notice? Just winks dimly once in a while, as though it were all encrusted. There again—dull imitations are never made. The whole purpose of paste is to reproduce the dazzle, the flash of the real stone. A dull imitation defeats its own purpose. So I say again, that ornament our young lady is wearing so casually in her hair has every chance of being a real diamond."

"You could talk a beach-pebble into the Kohinoor," Ramm said grudgingly. "All right, suppose it's real? Why are you so interested? Haven't you enough diamonds already?"

"More than I know what to do with. But those are mere diamonds—" said the maharajah enigmatically. "She is coming around this way again. We will resume the topic later." He became very interested in eating a dessert that had been standing untouched for the past half-hour. "Don't let her see you staring," he hissed beneath his breath.

Maxine Murray swayed by them with scarcely a glance at the two dusky faces dimly visible in the twilight gloom beyond the perimeter of the blinding spotlight that accompanied her. She was too busy giving an erratic lilt and variation to an old ballad, swinging the melody out:

"When a body
Meets a body
Coming through the rye—"

The maharajah peered after her as she swept on along the polished floor that gave her reflection upside-down as though she were gliding on a mirror. His face was expressionless.

Ramm tried to resume the discussion. “What’d you mean just then: the ones you’ve got already are *mere* diamonds? First you argue the brooch on her is a diamond, then you make it sound like another kettle of fish.”

The maharajah shuddered. “Stop using those stupid American expressions,” he said. He waved a. plump hand. “There is too much smoke in this place.”

Evidently His Highness did not wish to continue on the subject of diamonds just then, and Johan Ramm had learned long ago to respect these conversational moods. A wise man knows when to keep his mouth shut.

Maxine Murray had finished her number, was taking bows. The applause was cordial but not overwhelming. The English are reserved even in their night-clubs. Then too, they were just a little puzzled. Swing, of all the musical and terpsichorean phenomena that had come over from New York, was the hardest for them to grasp. She retired, the supper-entertainment came to an end and general dancing began.

The maharajah sat impatiently drumming his fingers on the edge of the table, as though waiting for something. Suddenly he stopped, as though the something had taken place. He got up with deceptive aimlessness, but when Ramm made a move to follow suit, he motioned him to remain where he was. “I—ah—think I’ll stretch my legs a bit. Sit here, we’re not going yet.” He flung down his ruby-clasped cigarette-case as an inducement for the other to remain.

As soon as his back was turned Ramm not only, helped himself to a cigarette, but emptied one entire compartment of the case into his pocket. This was such a long-standing

custom by now, he thought no more of it than if they had been his own.

He lounged around in his chair, puffing away complacently, and noticed that Maxine Murray had appeared again. Not to entertain this time, but to have a bite by herself at an unobtrusive little table against the wall. She had thrown a cloak around her gown to escape attention, and the ornament was no longer in her hair. She read an evening paper while she munched'

Sir Hari returned a few minutes later, casual as ever, but with a childishly smug expression on his face. He took out his monocle, polished it, hitched his head at Ramm to draw a little closer.

"What's up?" the latter asked bluntly. The maharajah made a deprecating gesture. "Nothing. Why should anything be up? I simply strolled a bit to stretch my legs. I—ah—I lost my bearings, wandered into some passageway or other back there where I had no business to be." He smiled slyly, "You know how stupid I am sometimes. I opened the wrong door by mistake—an empty dressing-room belonging to that young lady over there. She had left her most unusual ornament behind on the dressing-table. I couldn't resist studying it a moment, to satisfy my own curiosity and settle our little dispute once and for all."

John Ramm was beginning to grin broadly, as if he were discovering a hitherto unsuspected kinship with his employer.

"It is indisputably a genuine diamond," the maharajah went on, tapping a fingernail on the tablecloth to emphasize the point. "Of very great age, very crudely cut, practically no polish at all. But I have seen too many in my time not to know one, rough or polished."

Ramm gave a low expressive whistle. "Let's have a look," he said.

The maharajah instantly stiffened, stared over at him coldly. “Hold on,” he said resentfully. “Do you think I helped myself to it?”

Ramm saw he’d made the mistake of applying his own standards of conduct, hastily tried to repair the blunder. “I was clowning,” he mumbled apologetically. “Can’t you take a joke?”

“I don’t care for that brand of humor. I admit it was cheeky of me to handle the thing without the owner’s knowledge, but there’s a vast difference between doing that and appropriating it.” Sir Hari helped himself to a cigarette from the case he had left on the table, saw that it had been half-emptied, but. made no comment.

“I’ll tell you what I want you to do, Ramm,” he went on when he’d regained his temper somewhat. He glanced across the other’s shoulder. “She’s finished at the table, gone inside again. There’s another show yet, so she won’t be going home for a bit.” He reached inside his dinner-jacket, brought out a billfold. “I want you to go back there and look her up. Not just yet—wait till I’ve gone back to the hotel. I want you to buy that brooch for me. But be careful how you go about it. Leave me out of it entirely. As soon as they hear the word ‘maharajah’, they imagine that the Bank of England is walking around on two legs. Let her think it’s for yourself. Don’t appear anxious—just casual, take-it-or-leave-it.”

Ramm counted the banknotes that were thrust at him, tucked them away in his own pocket. “Suppose she holds out for more than this?” he said craftily.

The maharajah sighed, like a man who is used to paying double for what he wants. “Then give her what she asks, if you have to. I’ll cash a check at the hotel for the balance. I must have that stone. See that you get it for me.”

“You’ve as good as got it already,” Ramm drawled, lidding one brown eye.

The maharajah stood up. “And remember,” he drawled, “none of your little tricks. You amuse me, Ramm, and you are valuable in your way,-but I should hardly call you indispensable. This stone you will secure is so flawed that it has no great commercial value. I merely happen to want it for certain reasons of my own.”

His bearded body-servant rushed up with his cloak and stick. Johan Ramm stood at attention and bowed his employer out. He reseated himself, called for the bill, smoked a thoughtful cigarette. Then he made his way casually “to the flap-doors at the rear of the club. He signalled a page-boy. “Here’s a shilling, boy. Take me back to Miss Murray’s dressing-room. Business, not social.”

Maxine’s smile faded when she opened the door and saw a stranger. “Oh—when he said ‘business’ I thought it might be my agent. I don’t usually receive people back here.”

“This won’t take a jiff,” said Ramm cocksurely.

“Very well, come in. There’s a chair.”

He crossed his legs as though he owned the place, began swinging one foot back and forth. “Pretty good pair of pipes you’ve got,” he said patronizingly. His eyes were busy scanning the dressing-table. The ornament had vanished again; she must have put it away just before he came in. He smiled:

“No offense, but how would you like to take ten pounds for that odd-looking brooch you had in your hair out there just now?”

The girl gave him a long searching look. “What’s odder than the brooch is your coming in here like this and offering to buy it,” she said finally. “Would you mind telling me exactly why you want it?”

“Hard to say. It caught my eye just now and—well—” He floundered badly; he hadn’t expected to be cross-questioned.

“And whenever anything catches your eye, do’ you rush right up to owners and make an offer? I mean, if you see a car on the road that you fancy, or a man riding a fine horse in the park—”

“No, of course not—” he faltered. “Then why did you do it in this case?” Her eyes snapped. “Is it the brooch you want, or is it your sly little way of suggesting we might be friends? In either case the answer is ‘No!’ I choose my own friends and I’m not exactly a pauper. I may have to work here for a rather meager living. I may have to walk to and from my work to save cab-fare, but that doesn’t mean I’m reduced to peddling the very fastenings off my hair to the first cheeky young *toff* that walks in here! I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mr.—whatever your name is, but I’m not selling that brooch or anything else to you. Run, do not walk, to the nearest exit.” She threw the door open.

“No need of going up in the air about it,” he tried to soothe her. “Twenty pounds, then—”

“Didn’t you hear what I said? I didn’t like your Valentino hair the moment I set eyes on you. Either get out of here or I’ll have the porters show you the bum’s-rush!”

“All right, goldilocks, all right,” he , bowed insolently, sauntered past her. “Turn your valves off, I’m going.”

He went to a phone-booth in the foyer, rang the Dorchester House.

“Did you get it?” Sir Hari wanted to know eagerly as soon as he got on.

“Not quite, but I’ve got a very good chance,” Ramm said calculatingly, staring high up on the booth-wall before him. “Why not? What’s the matter?”

“Well, here’s the thing, Your Highness. She’s willing to sell, but she’s a sharp one. It’ll take a good deal more than you planned—”

The maharajah’s voice dropped desolately. “Oh, then she knows how valuable it is. The way she left it lying around, I didn’t think “she did.”

Ramm winked expressively at the wall. “She knows all right, never fear. Pretending not to give a damn about it is part of her little game to attract potential buyers. Then once she’s whetted their interest, up goes the asking-price. See what I mean?”

“Well, give her whatever she wants then. I’ve telephoned long-distance to my viceroy at home since leaving you, and —well, never mind why now, but there are certain developments which make that brooch important.”

Ramm leered at the instrument before him. (“Wonder why you want it so bad, old boy? Think I’ll hang onto it myself a bit first, and try to find out.”) Aloud he said: “I told you before you’d get it, and get it you shall. It will merely mean a little time and patience, and more money than we thought, that’s all. She’ll come around.”

As soon as he’d rung off, he called another number, glancing furtively over his shoulder to make sure no one was loitering outside in a position to overhear. He said in a guarded voice: “Hello, is this the Red Domino? Alf Jenkins there? Just tell him an old chum wants to speak to him . . . Hello, that you Alf? This is Ramm . . . Never mind that ‘Gentleman Jack’ stuff, I chucked that name long ago. Any of the old crowd there with you? Smithers? All right, he’ll do. Now look here, I’ve got a little job for you boys. No, no breaking and entering—nothing like that. A simple little job and five pounds apiece. You get out in front of the Puss-Kat Club and watch the door. No later than twelve. There’ll be a girl come out, dunno where she lives, but I do know she’ll be walking to wherever it is. I’ll be standing there in the foyer with my back to her. When you see me spin a lighted butt out into the gutter, that’ll be the girl you want. Keep your eye on her and clean her. Not that she’ll have anything, couple of bob in her purse, piece of glass she wears in her act maybe, but bring along whatever you find. I’m just doing it to settle an old score. Meet you at the Red Dominio later. Carry on, now!”

Bud Gordon, fed up with jollying the plump barmaid and drinking ale, swung out of the pub, turned up his coat-collar against the chill mist, shoved his hands deep into his pockets, and struck out toward the docks, where the *Aurora* was moored. He decided that London had been sadly overestimated as a city in which to spend any length of time. Big as it was, he'd found less to do with himself than in many a smaller port. Not that he was disgruntled about it, for he was an even-tempered, uncomplaining sort of chap; he simply felt he could have spent his time to better account had he stayed aboard and turned in early.

He had a considerable distance to go, but it never occurred to him to do anything but walk it, clammy as the air was. He was in no danger of losing his way. He had an infallible sense of direction, even in a town he'd never seen before. London, most tortuous of cities to the average newcomer, held no difficulties at all for him. Only, of course, he was ignorant of the street and district names.

He was striding along a narrow dingy thoroughfare, that he knew would bring him to a broader, more populous one eventually, which in turn would lead him down to the river, when what sounded like a strangled cry came from somewhere just ahead. It stopped short as though forcibly restrained, and as he came on he could hear the scrape of shifting feet on the pavement, two or three pairs of them.

A voice whined: "She bit me 'and!" And once again that same stifled scream sounded.

But by that time Bud Gordon had bolted ahead and rounded a corner, which gave onto a shadowy lane. Three intertwined figures were weaving back and forth in the uncertain light, as in a weird dance. The middle one was a girl.

Gordon lowered his neck and shoulders and charged. One of the men turned to take him on. " 'Ullo. 'ere's company; 'ang onto 'er, Bert, I'll settle with 'im!" He swung

out at Gordon. “Now then! Dincher ever learn to mind yer business?”

Gordon didn’t waste breath in repartee. He swerved his head aside, took the blow over one shoulder, and his own fist shot straight upward from nearly waist-level. His adversary was jolted back with the drive of it. He went buckling over, kicking Gordon inadvertently in the legs as he flattened out. Gordon vaulted over him and went at the second man. But the latter hadn’t waited. He had wrested something from the girl and was already in full flight up the alley. Gordon chased him to the upper end of it, changed his mind and came back again, to make sure the one he had already dealt with didn’t molest the girl further. But the flattened one had scrambled crab-wise to his feet and now he made off in the opposite direction.

The girl leaned against a rough wall, fingering her manhandled throat and apparently unable to decide between self-possessed indignation and frightened tears.

“Brave pair of lads, those two,” Gordon remarked scornfully.

The matter-of-fact calmness of his voice seemed to have a steadying effect on her. She took a deep breath. “Yes, weren’t they? I always thought London was so safe at night. I never heard of anything like that happening here before.”

“You’ll run into footpads in any large city,” he said tolerantly although only a short while ago He had been ready to knock London himself. “They hurt you?”

“They got my bag.” Then as he took a belated step to go after them, she made a gesture of dissuasion. “Don’t bother. Only a few shillings and a cake of rouge in it. Not worth calling a bobby about. They tore my shirtwaist, too. Here, this’ll hold it together until I get home.” She shifted an odd-shaped brooch from the front of her blouse to the shoulder, closing a large rent. “I tried to tell them I hadn’t any money. I would have let them have the bag without any fuss if they

hadn’t frightened me by jumping out like that. Well, I guess I’d better be on.”

“You’d better let me walk the rest of the way with you.”

“Yes, I wish you would. I’m not naturally scary, but I’d probably imagine a boogy-man every dark doorway after what just happened.” As they walked along she introduced herself. “I’m Maxine Murray.”

“Bud Gordon,” he said’, touching his cap.

She glanced up at its visor as they passed beneath a street-lamp. *“Aurora.* Steamship?”

“No, yacht. Raymond Dahlhouse’s skiff.”

“I’ve heard of him. Pays for his cigarettes with hundred-dollar bills.”

Gordon didn’t commit himself, but she could read strong inner disapproval of his employer’s notoriety by the way he briefly shut his eyes. “You’re not English?”

“Biloxi, on the Gulf Coast. But that was y’ars and y’ars ago. And you’re not either.”

“If the States are good enough for you,” he grinned, “I guess they’re good enough for me too.”

She stopped before a typical rooming-house. “Well, here’s the wealthy Maxine’s luxurious domicile. I’d ask you up for a cup of tea, only you don’t know my landlady. They got my key, too; I’ll have to wake her up and I’ll catch it!”’

He stood edging his cap around self-consciously. “Would the invitation still be open if I dropped around sometime, in the afternoon?”

She crinkled her nose at him. “I think so. Try it sometime and find out for yourself.”

His lean jaws shaved almost down to the bone, his shoes, polished like mirrors, Bud Gordon walked back and forth in front of a sweet-shop two days later, bashful as a schoolboy, trying to summon up courage enough to go in. This was navigating uncharted waters, as far as he was concerned.

After three tries he finally pushed inside, stepped up to the counter.

"Er—I'm not much on shore-manners," he said embarrassedly to the counter-girl, "wonder if you'd help me out. When you're going to a girl's house for the first time, is it all right to take along some candy?"

The clerk's coquettish attitude didn't help to make him feel any more at ease.

"Depends on who's doing the calling," she simpered pointedly. "I'd say it'd be quite all right—in this case. *I'd* like it, if I were the girl."

"Fair enough," he said, easing his collar as though it felt constricted. "Then just ladle out some of this stuff and box it up." He escaped outside finally with a deep breath of relief.

A hatchet-faced middle-aged woman was standing on the doorstep of Maxine Murray's house when Gordon finally arrived in sight of it, talking to a tall and dapper individual, who had pushed his bowler-hat far to the back of his head in disgusted frustration. Gordon caught a glimpse of darkly handsome features and the flash of a silver ring on a lean finger. As the dapper man turned and strode off he pitched something into the gutter. Gordon made out a room-key lying there as he came up.

"You'll 'ave an 'ard time reaching 'er there," the landlady called out after the departing applicant. "It ain't just around the corner, you know!"

"I'll locate her, don't you worry!" the handsome gentleman promised truculently over his shoulder.

"Miss Murray?" said Gordon, stopping the landlady as she was turning to go in.

"What, another one? There was a gent just arsking for 'er a moment ago. She's gone to Australia—left yesterday morning to play with a show down there. Went real sudden, she did, too."

Gordon was staring after the bowler-hatted man. "He one of her friends?" he murmured half-aloud. "Thought she had

better taste than that—” He raised the candy-box to fling it irritably away.

“ ’Ere! Not on me front walk!” warned the landlady sharply. “I just got through sweepin’ it.”

He changed his mind, ungallantly shoved the box at her instead. “Here, take ’em yourself then!” and strode off scowling, hands deep in pockets.

“Gorblimey! And at my age, too!” She stood staring after him, open-mouthed.

“There’s one of your room-keys lying over here,” Gordon called back, giving it a hearty kick. And to himself, “That’s what I get for’ straying off my course!”

III

Australia, 1939

The proprietor of the Bon Ton cabaret, in Sydney, came rushing into the windowless cubbyhole without the formality of knocking first, although it was, technically at any rate, a dressing-room. He had an enormous pot-belly and great hanging jowls, and both vibrated as he stopped short just over the threshhold, staring with disapproval at the bowed-down figure under the cheap tin-backed mirror, head buried between arms.

Behind him a blast of raucous laughter mingled with the clink of glassware and the tinny clatter of a piano. He kicked the door shut with his heel, to insure privacy for his displeasure. He tugged at the tongues of his split-open vest, trying to pull them down over a circular width of pink-striped shirt.

“ ’Ere, wot’s this?” he snarled. “Wot’s this me fine lydy, eh?” His jaw locked and his little pig-eyes glinted malevolently. “Cryingk again, eh? Place ain’t good enough

for you, I daresy. Is this wot I pays yer fer? Why aincher never out there when I wants yer?”

Maxine Murray raised her head, touched the corners of her eyes with one finger. “What do you want now?” she said, choking back a sob. “I just got through out there a few minutes ago. You didn’t hire me to sing continuously.”

He banged a great ham of a fist on the improvised dressing-table. “I ’ired yer to sing when yer needed, that’s wot I ’ired yer for! And that’s right now! Don’t give me none of yer lip, me duchess! You get out there farst as ever yer can, or you can clear out! Go a’ead, clear out, no one’s stopping you!”

“You know I can’t clear out!” the girl said bitterly, touching a soiled powder-rag to her chin. “You know I’m stranded down here, without any friends or money. But if you had any manhood in you, any decency at all, you wouldn’t overwork me like this!” She stood up, turned away from the table. “All right, I’ll go out there and sing! I’ll sing till I drop!” He changed his tune when he saw she was ready to obey him, began to wheedle and whisper cajolingly. “That’s the girl! There’s a party of swells just come in, off some bloomin’ yacht in the ’arbor. Spending money like water, they are, and very took with the plyce too. Just go out there and keep ’em going. Be nice to them. If they arsk you to sit with them, you know what to order—champyne. But chynge your face. Brighten up a bit. They’re ’appy, they’re ’avin’ a ’igh old time, they don’t, wanter see no weepy fyces. Smile!”

“How’s this?” She grimaced distortedly from ear to ear.

The irony was lost on him. “That’s it! Now go ahead, give ’em all yer got!” Maxine crossed the smoke-filled outer room, with barely a glance at the hilarious slumming-party in evening-dress that occupied a long table in the rear. She stopped beside the wearied piano-player.

“What again?” he groaned. “My fingers are coming off, and nobody’s listening anyway.”

“Sorry, Tommy, it’s not my idea. Run through them in the usual order, starting with *London Bridge is Falling Down*.” He gave her a chord and she walked out into the middle of the room. The noisy group at the long table quieted a little momentarily to look her over.

A girl in a wispy green evening-dress was resting her chin on the shoulder of a tall blond young man. She placed her hands over her ears. “Another of those songbirds of the Antipodes,” she said loudly. “God help our eardrums!”

Maxine flashed her a dangerously sweet smile. “It will be pretty awful,” she agreed, “but what did you expect in a dive like this—Lily Pons?”

The blond man struck his thigh appreciatively and led the roar of laughter that went up at, the comeback. His features were pleasant and would have been attractive except for the sagging lines of dissipation. His face was well known to the Broadway tabloids—Mr. Raymond Dahlhouse, son and heir of the Chemical tycoon, and more familiarly known as The Clown Prince of the Playboys.

Maxine began to sing. Dahlhouse kept interrupting her through the whole number, but it was the sort of interruption a performer likes. “Say, she’s good! Listen to that, will you? What’s she doing in this hole-in-the-wall?” And when she’d finished: “C’mere, little lady, here’s something for your trouble.” He thrust an American hundred-dollar note into her hand.

She glanced down coolly, asked: “What’s the matter with it?”

Another roar went up, Dahlhouse joining with the rest. “That’s what this party’s been needing all along,” he cried, “New blood. I’d like to have her on the boat with us.”

“I knew this was coming,” the girl in green said waspishly.

“Why not?” Young Dahlhouse began to appraise Maxine as though she weren’t standing less than a yard away.

“She’s got looks, talent, sense of humor, refinement—”

“At Nagasaki he wanted to kidnap a geisha,” the girl in green complained to the brunette across the table. “At Apia he collected that Samoan dancer. In New Zealand it was a Maori chief and his whole family. I only hope we don’t put in at the Cannibal Islands!”

Dahlhouse had enough champagne in him to stick to his point. Her opposition probably solidified the whim, whereas if she’d kept quiet he might have forgotten it in another five minutes. “It’s my boat, isn’t it? I’m going to ask who I want aboard. Anybody that doesn’t like it, they know what they can do.”

The brunette leaned over behind his back to warn her fellow guest in an undertone: “Shut up, you fool! You’ll queer ‘ yourself. Besides, he hasn’t asked her yet.”

Dahlhouse caught the last part of it. “No? Well I’m going to ask right now. C’mere, babe. Would you like to sail on my yacht with us, as a member of the party—?”

“Just one happy family,” the girl in green sneered.

“Where to?” Maxine asked, ignoring her.

“I don’t know myself yet. Wait a minute—here’s my captain. He bothers about things, like that for me—”

But Gordon had come in to report. He didn’t see Maxine at first, just walked over to Dahlhouse, touched the visor of his cap.

“Gordon, where’s the next stop on our itin—itin—oh you know what I mean,” Dahlhouse said thickly.

“You get the angle, don’t you, Gordon?” the girl in green put in crudely, hitching her head sidewise.

He turned to look, stared at her in sudden recognition. Maxine glanced casually at the *Aurora* in gold letters on the headband of his cap and recollection came to her. She remembered London and a walk home through the misty streets.

“Hey, I asked you a question,” Dahlhouse insisted.

Gordon turned back to him again. “Goa, in Portuguese India,” he answered slowly.

“Oh yeah, now it’s coming back to me. And after that Suez, and after that Marseilles, and after that—home.” He was addressing Maxine. “How about it? Don’t pay any attention to these mopes. Nothing under handed about it. I just happen to like your style, that’s all, and what I like, I want around me. You come along as a guest, on an equal footing with anyone else. Sing for us at night, under the Indian Ocean moon.” He tried to raise his champagne-glass to his lips, missed connections, and its contents flushed down his shirt front. “What-d’ye say?”

She seemed about to refuse for a minute. Then she turned and saw the porcine bulk of the Bon Ton proprietor outlined dimly through the smoke-haze. She turned swiftly to Dalhhouse again, almost pleadingly. “Yes, I want to get out of here terribly,” she said in a trembling voice. “Yes, I’d like very much to come, Mr. Dalhhouse.”

“Did you ever play in stock?” the girl in green bit through clenched teeth. Bud Gordon was standing there with his eyes fixed in silent appraisal on the hundred-dollar note that was still gripped in her fingers.

“Thass fine,” Dahlhouse said, on the verge of a crying jag now. “You don’t belong in a place like this—see that right away, with one eye closed. Get your things and come right along with us. We’re leaving with the tide to morrow morning. Isn’t that right, captain?”

Gordon’s eyes flicked over Maxine as if she weren’t there at all. “That’s right, Mr. Dahlhouse.”

“And just to make the invitation binding—” He slipped another hundred-dollar-bill into her hand, tightening her fingers over it.

The girl in green hissed to the other, “Get him out of here before he persuades the piano-player to join our happy throng:”

“Yeah, or runs out of hundreds.”

Maxine turned and ran back into the dingy dressing-room, oblivious of what anyone thought or said. It was like being released from a nightmare.

The bull-necked proprietor had the audacity to swing the door open behind her a moment later, as she was getting her few belongings hastily together. “So yer quittin’ arter all I done for yer?” he whined.

“Yes,” she flared, whirling around on him. “And let me do a little something for you in return!” She picked up an unlidded tin of cold-cream and flung it full in his face. “Take that out of my week’s, wages!”

When she came out again, a small battered grip swinging at the end of her arm, the Dahlhouse party had already left to go down to the dock. Bud Gordon was standing alone at the upper end of the bar, staring grimly down into a whiskey and soda. He didn’t appear to see her until she started to walk by him, then without turning his head he said quietly: “Congratulations.”

She stopped, put the grip down. “What do you mean by that, Captain—Captain—?”

“Don’t waste time trying to get a me captain’s name straight, when there’s a multimillionaire in the offing.”

She stared angrily. “You sound as though I—You think you’ve got me pretty well typed, don’t you?”

He swivelled around, leaned on his elbow against the bar. “You didn’t refuse his—tips, did you? I’ve seen him hand them out halfway across the world. Someday I’ll see a girl refuse one of them, and I’ll take off my hat to her.” And with studied meaning, he pushed his cap so far down on one side of his head that it covered one eye.

She flung her arm out angrily, motioning around the room. “Look at this place! Do you think I want to stay here? Do you know what I’ve gone through here? The show I was with folded up somewhere in Queensland. I didn’t have a roof over my head or the price of a cup of coffee when I

walked in here. This offer is a godsend to me! I want to get back home!”

“You’ll get as far as Goa, and then he’ll drop you. You’ll be worse off, you won’t even be in a white man’s country.”

“I’ll take my own chances! Whatever happens later, at least he’s giving me a break now! Why should you resent it? Am I crowding you?”

He looked at her moodily. “You’ve got that way about you that fools people. That fools a fool like me, anyway. The kind of a girl you seemed to be that night I met you in London—well, she wouldn’t go aboard a yacht with those people, no matter how badly she needed to get away. There’s something worse than singing for longshoremen—to my way of thinking, anyway—and that’s being a lush-worker, chiselling from a habitual drunkard. Like those other two you saw with him tonight.”

Maxine’s face was drawn and pale.

“I ought to slap your face for daring to talk to me this way! Well whether it disillusions you or not, Mr. Captain know-it-all Gordon, I’m sailing with your employer on the *Aurora* “I expected you to,” he said cuttingly. “Hit ’em while the hitting’s good. More power to you. All right. I’ll grab you a cab and tool you down to the harbor.”

“I wouldn’t ride in a cab with you if—” He finished for her, satirically. “If I was the last man in the world. I’ve heard that before somewhere or other. Have it your way, then I’ll ride up in front with the driver.” And as he picked up her grip for her, “Got everything? Sure you didn’t forget your pick and shovel?”

“Never saw nothink like it,” the fat proprietor of the Bon Ton was still relating to anyone who would listen, two nights later. “One minute she’s in ’ere down to ’er last bloomin’ penny. I go in there that very syme night it ’appened and I find ’er cryink ’cause she’s so down’earted. Then in they

blow—pop!—and hoff she goes on this swanky yacht. So ’elp me! Didn’t she, Alf? And d’ye think she thanked me arter all I done for ’er? She throws a bloomin’ tin of cauld cream stryte in me fyce, if yer please—!”

A waiter elbowed his way through the ring of spellbound auditors. “There’s a lad down there arsking for that Amurrican girl we ’ad ’ere, boss. Wot’ll I sye—?”

The proprietor trundled down to where the newcomer stood puffing on a’ cigarette. He was dark and dapper and his voice had a faint foreign slur in it: “You have a blonde American girl by the name of Murray working here?” he asked, peering up under his hat-brim.

“We did ’ave. She’s gone now.”

Johan Ramm flung his cigarette down with such force that the coal exploded in a geyser of sparks. He spoke a couple of guttural words.

“You seem to want ’er sort of bad,” suggested the proprietor.

The half-caste burrowed his head into his arms across the top of the bar, went on growling muffled curses through them. He looked up again. “D’ye know I come all the way out here from London after that girl?”

“Wull, you’ll ’ave a bit farther on to go then, me bucko,” said the proprietor unfetelingly. “She’s on ’er way to India, on a yacht with some rich people, nyme of—of Dahl’ouse, I think I ’eard them sihy.”

“Raymond Dahlhouse?” said Ramm alertly. “What port, d’ye know? Bombay? Madras?”

“None o’ them.” The proprietor scratched his chin. “Wait a bit. ’Ere, Alf, what was the nyme of the plyce they said they was going?”

“Goa.”

“Goa,” relayed the proprietor. “Never ’eard of it meself, but that’s it.”

Ramm poked an excited finger into the proprietor’s pink-striped shirt. “Look here, tell me something else. While she

was working for you, did she—you didn't happen to notice a pin on her, about this shape and size? The reason I'm asking, see, is that I want to make sure it's the same girl."

The proprietor pinched two fingers together to illustrate. "With a great big spike of glars coming out of it? Oh yus, yus, she 'ad that on every time she come out on the floor. I'd think it was vallyble she 'ung onto it so! All she 'ad, I daresy."

"That's all I wanted to know!" Ramm snapped. He stopped at the first cable-office he could find after leaving the Bon Ton, drew out a blank form and engaged in a great deal of laborious composition. Finally he shoved the result over the sill at the clerk. "Send this collect, and make the sparks fly!"

His Highness the Maharajah of Maipur,
Maipur State,
India.

Missed our friend. She is at sea on way to Goa aboard Raymond Dahlhouse yacht. Suggest you make acquaintance of party and offer hospitality before they leave again for next place. She' still wears her hair the same way. Cable some money. Am taking the next plane up from here myself.

Ramm.

IV

India, 1939

Maxine Murray was leaning over the rail of the *Aurora* staring pensively at the shore-lights of Goa glimmering like fireflies across the greenish-white phosphorescent roadstead, when a muffled tread passed along the deck behind her. The brilliant disk of the moon cast the yacht's shadow shoreward. She turned, saw the white blur of a shirt and the glow of a cigarette-coal. It was Bud Gordon, coatless in the insufferable heat.

“Terrible, even out here, isn’t it?” she said involuntarily, though an instant before she had fully intended to keep silent.

He stopped short, surprised. “Oh—I didn’t know you’d stayed aboard. I wouldn’t have ordered the deck-lights turned off if I’d known—”

“Leave them that way for a change. I like it dark, it’s cooler.” She added reflectively: “You try to save all the expense you can for him, don’t you, even though he throws his money away all the time?”

He didn’t answer the remark. “How’ is it you’re not ashore with the others?”

“They’re sampling the city’s night-life and that’s no treat to me. I’ve worked in too many of those places to get any kick out of pub-crawling.”

He just grunted, half-turned to go on again.

She made a half-formed gesture toward him in the dark. “Won’t you stay and talk a minute—even though I’m a parasite, a gold-digger? I’m lonely—” Then as though repenting the appeal, “Sorry, I forgot. We’re enemies.”

He moved over to the rail, rested his muscular forearms on it, stood there parallel to her but the length of a deck-stanchion away. He blew smoke thoughtfully downward and watched it winnow away.

“I’m making you do this. You don’t really want to.”

He didn’t answer.

“I can’t make you out,” Maxine went on. “You’re civil to Marge and the other girl, and I’m not doing any more than they are—”

“You don’t hold it against cats for thieving cream; that’s their nature, they don’t know any better. But when someone who does know better—well, it’s harder to make allowances, that’s all.”

“I see your point—” She stared down at the dark sea, shook her head as though unconvinced. “A man like you doesn’t care so greatly “whether a girl is ethical or not—

there must be more to it than that." She changed the subject abruptly. "Are there sharks in these waters?"

"I wouldn't go in for a dip if I were you . . . Well—I've got some charts to go over." The faint gleam of his broad, white-shirted back receded down the deck.

She made a furious sibilant sound with her breath, turned and ran up the other way toward the companionway that led to the cabins, marked by a dark-red bulb.

A few moments later a dark shadow, silent as a fish underwater, approached the anchored yacht from the direction of the shore. Now it was swallowed up in the shadow of the larger craft. There was a faint scraping sound of wood against steel, a warning whisper somewhere at the water-line, a creak from the Jacob's ladder that awaited the merrymakers' return. A figure crept stealthily up the ladder, scanned the deserted deck, then stepped aboard. The intruder crouched low and darted furtively on soundless native slippers toward the red bulb of the companionway.

The stairs inside, and the below-deck passageway that gave into the various cabins, were lighted. The intruder descended, turned into the first cabin-door he came to, closed it after him. The mirror inside, as he touched the light-switch, gave back the reflection of Mr. Johan Ramm.

He came out again in a moment or two, leaving the cabin a shambles behind him, and darted into the one next-door. A heavy tread sounded outside while he was in there. He quickly snapped out the light, edged up behind the door, fumbled in his clothing for the hilt of his thin-bladed knife.

The footsteps went on by. He eased the door open on a crack, peered out, saw the back of one of Gordon's crew go by. He shut the door again, and counted slowly to one hundred before he put on the lights and resumed his task of dismantling the cabin.

He had worked his way to the end of the short passage—all the cabins opened onto it—and was rifling the last one of all, when there was a faint scream outside the open porthole, sounding as if it had risen from the surface of the water itself. Instantly, from the opposite side of the ship, where the moon threw its shadow, came a low-pitched but unmistakable whistle of warning.

Ramm could hear bare feet running along the deck directly over him now, and a shout of “Man overboard! Sharks!” Other footsteps, rubber-soled, joined them. There was a pause, and then a gun boomed.

A voice said hoarsely: “Here, take this and keep them off if you can! I’m going in after her!” There was a heavy splash almost immediately afterwards, so near at hand that a jet of spray sprinkled through the low porthole.

Johan Ramm didn’t wait to hear any more. He doused the cabin-light, whisked out and up the companionway, and crossed the deck like a shadow. It was as deserted as before; the sounds came from around on the other side. The gun went off a second time as he plunged out of sight down the Jacob’s ladder.

A moment later a native skiff shot out of the yacht’s protective shadow into the phosphorescent glare of the moonlight. It darted shoreward with remarkable speed, leaving a trail of carbonated bubbles in its wake as though it were coursing over mineral water.

A short while later Bud Gordon shouldered the door of the last cabin Ramm had invaded. He staggered in dripping, holding Maxine in his arms. She was badly frightened, but unhurt. She kept staring at him peculiarly through ‘the trickle of water that dripped from her taffy-colored hair.

He set her down on the divan, pushed his own hair back out of his eyes, and blew spray off his upper lip. “You all right?” he grunted.

Her eyes wouldn't leave his face. "Yes, I didn't go down. It was just the—well, one minute they weren't there, the next they were coming up behind me from all directions like—like arrows."

"What'd you go in for?" he demanded roughly. "You want to lose a leg?"

"No," she said, still staring. "I went in because it was the only way I could test you out. Remember I told you I couldn't figure why you were so dead-against me, more than the others? Well now I can. You're in love with me. That's why you're so sore at me—and yourself, because you hate to admit it!"

"Why, you—!" He buckled his arm threateningly at her as if he were going to let it fly backhand. "So I'm in love with you, am I! Well, try to make something out of it!" He banged the cabin-door after him so forcefully it nearly sprang its hinges.

She crossed her ankles and hugged her arms around them, smiled meditatively. "He said 'Oh, darlin', are you all right?' when he came up next to me, but he doesn't remember it any more," she murmured softly.

It was minutes later before she noticed that the cabin had been ransacked, drawers pulled out of the dresser, her belongings scattered over the floor. "Thieves from the harbor," she thought unconcernedly. Nothing much mattered, compared to the discovery she had made; she didn't have anything in here worth taking, anyway.

She set about ridding herself of her wet bathing-suit, reached up to the shoulder-strap, unfastened the brooch she had used, for lack of anything better, to hold the strap together where a button was missing.

It was the red-headed girl, Marge, and not Dahlhouse for once, who discovered the roulette-wheels in the Portuguese hotel where they had all stopped for cooling drinks to break

the monotony of sightseeing on the following afternoon. She came flying excitedly back, high heels tapping across the tiled floor, fingers clawing the air in an exaggerated gesture of avarice. “Ray!” she shrieked. “Gimme money, quick! Your favorite fruit! Roulette—right back there!”

There was a stampede after her. An instant later the big circular wicker table was deserted except for six gin-slings and Maxine Murray, fanning herself demurely with a palm-leaf.

Dahlhouse came back for her, dragged her along with him by the wrist. “C’mon, my proud beauty. Why do I always have to coax you?” He thrust one of his usual hundreds, tightly folded, into her hand. “Here’s a stake.”

“Mr. Dahlhouse, I can’t keep doing this! They all give me such lower-than-dirt looks every time they see you—”

“You never saw them turn one down themselves, did you?” he said with one of his rare flashes of insight. “Give the wheel a little flutter—it won’t bite you.” She left him a moment to get the bill changed into local currency at the hotel-desk. By the time she had rejoined them in the gambling room, she couldn’t find a place at the main table; a gallery had formed around the Americans like a solid wall. She edged up to a second, slightly smaller table among a number of strangers. On the third spin she hesitantly put down a handful of *escudos* on the first numbered square within reach, which happened to be the 17, red.

She had never played roulette before; not only that, she didn’t even have an accurate idea of the exact sum her wager represented. She kept her eyes on the blur of the spinning wheel. It crystallized into sharp outlines, the ball clicked. A languid voice intoned in two languages: *“Vinte-dos, negro*—twenty-two, black.” Her little sheaf of *escudos* were raked in.

Maxine thought she had remembered closing her bag after taking out the first sum; when she returned to it to take out more, it was open again. But its contents were

untouched, just that brooch she was carrying in it had fallen partly out of its own weight. She thrust the bauble aside, took out a second handful of notes and placed them on the same square. Again the bank raked them in.

She dipped in for more money, found she had no more. As she was turning to move back from the table—she was pinned there by those pressing behind—a well-bred voice said: “Pardon me, may I be of any assistance?” She looked up quickly, but instead of the Englishman she had expected, a native nobleman in brocaded satin jacket was extending a well-filled wallet.

“No, thank you, I couldn’t do that,” she said, taken aback.

“Don’t take it personally. It is simply that your system interests me. I would like to enable you to continue.”

“But I haven’t been using any system that I know of!”

“Well, unconsciously then, you have been following the most sensible system I know. That is, to play the same number consistently until it finally comes in. You are bound to win eventually, you know, but it takes patience and a very elastic bankroll.”

“Then why don’t you try it yourself?”

“I would like nothing better,” he sighed, “but unfortunately I am not in Europe now. It is politically inadvisable for me to be seen gambling in my own country. Allow me to introduce myself, the Maharajah of Maipur. Now please use this for your wagers.”

The girl paled.

“But I have no security to offer, in case I lose it all. I can’t just take your money and—”

“Oh well, if it will make you feel more comfortable,” he said with elaborate indifference, “any nominal belonging or —ornament—will do.”

She flushed embarrassedly, turned out the contents of her bag. “But I haven’t even anything of that sort of any value . . . Only this old brooch, and of course that won’t do —”

He pursed his lips. “Why not?” he said, scarcely looking at it. “Anything will do, just as a token that the money is borrowed and not gifted. It is the betting system that interests me.” He drew the brooch slightly toward him along the edge of the table, allowing it to rest there.

“Well, here goes, then.” She placed the entire sum he had advanced her on the same square as before: the seventeen, red.

The Maharajah’s fingers, drumming tensely on the edge of the table, underscored the whine of the whirring wheel. They shifted over toward the brooch, then back again, like a pianist playing the scales.

“There was a click. A pause. *“Diez-e-siete, Colorado;* sev-ven-tinn, red.” A haymow of currency suddenly reared itself over her original bet. The rake kept pushing toward her” now, not pulling away.

The maharajah was smiling composedly as she turned toward him, open-mouthed. A thread of moisture glistened on his smooth cheek. “You see?” he said, speaking with a little difficulty. “A very good system to follow. I don’t suppose you would care to try it out any further? It would be interesting to see just how often—”

“With this antique still as your only security?” She didn’t want to gamble further, but it was his stake after all. “Very well; I know it’s considered poor sportsmanship to quit while you’re ahead—” She put the entire windfall back on 17, red, once more.

“You will break the bank if you win,” he purred.

“And if I don’t, I’ll be just where I was before.”

“Except that you won’t have the brooch.”

She’ stood with her face turned away from the croupier, looking at the maharajah instead. “I can’t bear to watch. It gives you a choked sensation in the throat.”

His eyelids drooped nearly closed; he was looking down at the brooch between them. There was a click as the ball dropped home. A pause. “Seventeen, red.” A gasp went up.

The maharajah looked slightly paler than before, when she had returned the original amount he had backed her with, put the rest in her handbag, and almost as an afterthought, dropped the brooch in on top of it.

“Won’t you come in and meet my friends?” she said. “I see they have left the tables already. Perhaps they aren’t as lucky as I am.”

“Ah yes,” he answered suavely. “I was told Mr. Dahlhouse’s yacht was in port. Even here in India we have heard of him, you see.”

When the introductions had been made, the maharajah joined them at the round wicker table. After Maxine’s phenomenal run of luck had been exhausted as a topic of conversation, Dahlhouse observed to the maharajah, “No offense, but can’t you do something about the, climate here? That’s the only thing I’ve got against the place.”

“I suppose you expect to hear me say that weather-conditions are unfortunately beyond my control,” the latter smiled affably. “However, it so happens that I *can* do something to relieve your sufferings. Why not be my guests for a few days in Maipur? It is just overnight from here, and yet you will find yourself in a different world. The hill-country, you know. Cool at nights, I can assure you. I could arrange a tiger-hunt if you would be interested, Mr. Dahlhouse?”

“Ah,” said Dahlhouse, his eyes lighting up, “count me in!”

“And the ladies?”

“Brrh! No tigers for me,” one answered quickly. “I’d rather stay here and put up with the heat.”

“Open a charge-account for us in the bazaars before you go, Ray, that’s all we ask,” the redhead suggested facetiously. “We won’t even miss you!”

“And the third young lady?” asked the maharajah, peering intently over at Maxine.

“It sounds exciting,” she answered. “Yes, I’ll come.”

“Aren’t you afraid of getting clawed to pieces?” sneered the redhead.

“Sure,” she answered demurely, “that’s why “I’m going.”

Dahlhouse brayed with laughter at the thrust. “Listen, Sir Hari,” he went, on familiarly, as though he had known the other all his life, “if there’s going to be any hunting, you’d better let me bring my captain along. He’s a dead-shot and I’d feel a lot safer with him on the next-elephant-over. Why, I’ve seen him hit a bottle in the water at a distance of—”

“By all means,” answered the maharajah blandly, without paying much further attention to what he was saying, now that his main object had been achieved.

V

The maharajah’s private limousine met them late the next day at the little wayside station that was the only stop the coastal train made in his domain. A tall man in a pith-helmet stepped forward as they stood staring curiously about on the station-platform. “Mr. Dahlhouse and party? I’m Johan Ramm, his highness’ secretary, sir. If you’ll be good enough to step into the car, I’ll have you up at the residence in a jiffy.”

“What about equipment?”

“His highness will put all you need at your disposal,” Ramm assured them.

As they started off, Maxine turned to peer at him curiously. “Didn’t I once run into you in London, at the Puss-Kat Club, Mr. Ramm? Your face is strangely familiar.”

“No miss, hardly likely. I haven’t been in London for years —”

“I could have sworn—” she said doubtfully, but didn’t pursue the subject further.

“I feel cooler already,” Dahlhouse said, as the high-powered car began to climb slowly but steadily along a winding gravel-road that led up into the hills. “Why so quiet, Bud?” he asked Gordon jovially. “Hate to be separated from your ship for even a couple of days, don’t you?”

“Captain Gordon will probably brace right up as soon as the hunt itself is under way,” Maxine said wickedly, “without my company.”

Ramm stuck his hand out the open car-window, pointing to a wide expanse of velvety blue-green that was becoming visible below them as they ascended. “See that? That’s all jungle. There’s where your tigers are. Practically trackless, most of it. And when we get up a little higher, you’ll be able to see the sea. His highness’ territory takes in a strip of coastline along here, where the ruined city of Mitapur used to be.”

Something flashed in the setting sun at the end of his pointing finger, and Gordon’s eyes, drawn down to it from where he had been staring out along their guide’s arm, saw a silver ring with a flat, highly-polished head. The glitter touched a chord in his memory.

The maharajah was waiting to greet them in a large open courtyard surrounded on three sides by a rambling stucco building. His retinue was gathered around him and ceremonial torches were ablaze, for the swift tropic dusk had already fallen. His hill-residence turned out to be a group of detached wooden guest-bungalows scattered at varying distances around a main building or compound, which included garage, stables, and commissary.

Inside, they had the rare experience of being served with Martinis and canapés that London couldn’t have improved

on, while reclining on cushions on a mosaic floor.

John Ramm sought out the maharajah in his private quarters shortly before midnight.

"Have our guests retired, Ramm?"

"Yes, all fagged-out from the train-trip. I turned over the nearest bungalow to Dahlhouse, put the yacht-captain in one of the intermediate ones, and installed the girl in the one highest up and furthest from here, explaining that it had the best view and caught more breeze."

"Perfect. That's just the way I want them situated."

Ramm smiled thinly. "What are your intentions, Sir Hari?"

The maharajah gestured with his cigarette. "Of course, it would be tactless to speak of concrete intentions. However, let us contemplate *possibilities.* Don't you think it is *possible a,* fire might break out in that farthest off bungalow, say tomorrow night. You can see how difficult it would be to save anything in it, it is so far removed from the water-supply. There would be no time for the occupant to rescue any of her belongings, certainly not a mere trinket—"

"You want that brooch very badly, don't you?" Ramm drawled.

"It is no longer a case of wanting; I *must* have it. There were riots today in the bazaars down in the capital. Agitators are working my subjects up against me. I have been too modern for my own good, spent too much time in Europe. The only thing that can save me, that can strengthen my hold and renew my popularity, is to play upon their superstitions. I must show them that their gods are supporting me—"

"But why just this certain diamond? You have others."

Sir Hari's plump face was etched with thoughtful lines. "It is the size of it," he said. "I recognized the importance of that from the first. Did you know I was a student of our native folk-lore, Ramm? Whatever my personal belief in

such things, politically I cannot afford to flout them. There is a story of an image of the fire-god in Mitapur whose eye was stolen from it, a diamond much like this. He who restores it will be blessed above all men; what is more to the point, he will Hold these people in the hollow of his hand. And so tomorrow night the fire-god will reveal himself to me, in that hill-bungalow. I will have the revelation well-advertised. And when the ashes are sifted afterwards—lo! a miracle. The legendary eye of the god. I will build a new shrine—the old one was swallowed up in the jungle long ago. No more unrest, no more mutterings against me in the bazaars."

He chuckled in his throat.

"Tomorrow night then?" Ramm asked. "Yes. That will give me twenty-four hours to lay the ground-work for the coming revelation among my subjects. You will be able to obtain waste and oil from the garage. Be very careful how you go about it; this fire must seem to be a supernatural visitation. Goodnight."

Johan Ramm went out, helping himself absent-mindedly to one of the maharajah's cigarettes from a box near the door.

"So that's what was back of it all the time," he muttered. "Not just a diamond—political pull. And if someone else should turn up and return their bloomin' idol's eye—that man would have the pull instead. Could I get away with it? Why not—the Brooke family's been ruling Sarawak for a hundred years. I wouldn't have to last that long just long enough to feather my nest. Then hop a plane some night—" He kissed his fingertips mockingly, "Here's your country back, folks, thanks for the use of it."

He threw down his cigarette in sudden determination, trod it out, looked around the compound. The pinpoints of light behind the lattices of the maharajah's private apartments had already gone out. He started toward the

garage. “Tomorrow night, hell!” he muttered grimly. “Tonight’s the night!”

The distant howl of some jungle-creature on the still night-air first put the idea into Gordon’s head. It was far-off and he wouldn’t have lost any sleep over it himself, but it occurred to him that Maxine might be nervous up there alone in that exposed bungalow. After all. one of the brutes might just take it into its head to prowl around a human habitation. Wouldn’t be the first time such a thing happened in India. There was an old Colt’s revolver that he’d been carrying around for years aship and ashore with him; he decided to take it up and leave it with the girl. Stubborn to the bitter end, he refused to admit to himself that the chance of having a word alone with her had anything to do with it. As a matter of fact, if he hadn’t had the gun for an excuse, he probably would have found another—matches or the loan of a needle and thread, or something.

He found the Colt at the bottom of his duffle-bag, pocketed it, came out of his bungalow, and started up the hill—in his usual footgear, canvas sneakers without socks.

Clumps of small fir-trees and scrub-pines screened her bungalow until he was nearly at the crest of the rise. There was no path or road as such, simply a sort of rut that in the rainy season must have formed a perfect spillway. But then this place was not used in the rainy season, anyway. The Oriental sky was a jewelled tapestry of stars, he’d never seen so many even out at sea, and the air was nearly as cool as back home on an early Fall night, just before the frost set in. He was thinking of Maxine back home with him on a night like this, wondering if he’d ever have the nerve to ask her, when there was a muffled clash of tin from the underbrush just ahead and some sort of vague light began to glow out. For a minute he thought she’d lit the lamp in her bungalow, but the glow was too irregular.

He broke into a run. The bungalow came into sight, and he was just in time to see a man's figure outlined for an instant under the veranda-shed. It was a tall man, and he rested his hand against one of the veranda-posts, pausing to look back inside.' Now, as the light through the screen-door brightened, something flashed on one of his fingers. Gordon remembered the maharajah's car that afternoon, and Johan Ramm pointing out at the sunset jungle.

He yelled "Hey—what are you doing there?" and bolted forward. The dim figure leaped from the veranda, slipped around the corner of the bungalow. There was a brief crackle of underbrush, then all other sound was swallowed up in the increasing roar of the flames.

It was more important to get her out of there first; Gordon knew who'd done it now, anyway. He turned back, plunged inside. Maxine was just starting awake, coughing dazedly under a tangled mesh of mosquito-netting that had already ignited at one edge from the criss-cross lines of fire. Gordon, ripped away the flimsy cloth, trampled it, lifted the girl and carried her out.

He touched her bare feet to the ground just beyond the veranda. "I'll see if I can get some of your things," he said, and went lunging back again. The back wall of the house was a solid curtain of flame now and the heat was punishing. He snatched up a dress and a pair of shoes, and came out again with his eyes stinging. He was ready to turn around and go in a third time, but Maxine held him fast by one arm.

There was a bang like a gun and a blazing roof-timber sagged V-shaped down into the room.

She struggled into the dress over her night-gown. "What did I do, leave the lamp on or something?" she asked.

"No, you didn't leave the lamp on." He decided not to frighten her for the present by telling her what he'd seen.

“Well, I didn’t have anything much in there anyway. A couple of extra dresses, and a bottle of perfume Ray bought me at Batavia, and that glass thingamabob. No, wait a minute—” She looked down at the neckline of her dress. “I remember pinning it on this dress when I took my things off. Must have dropped off in there. Never mind, it’s not worth anything anyway.”

He took her by the arm. “Come on. We’ll just have to let the fire burn itself out, I guess. Funny that the servants aren’t swarming around . . . I’ll turn my place over to you and bunk up with Dahlhouse for tonight. But first there’s someone—I want to see.”

He handed her the revolver at the door of his own bungalow. “Keep this with you.”

He went down to the compound, looked around. Sleep and silence and darkness prevailed; the fire had evidently not been noticed down here. A slight pinkish halo up at the top of the hill was all that could be seen from this distance.

He woke up one of the maharajah’s sleeping foot-soldiers in a doorway, ascertained where Ramm’s quarters were. He tried the door first, without bothering to knock. It was bolted fast, so he thumped his fist against it.

A bolt slid out with amenable haste and the door opened. Johan Ramm was the perfect picture of a man awakened from deep sleep, pajamas, tousled hair, and all. Gordon pushed him out of the way; closed the door, then turned and caught the half-caste by the throat.

His voice rumbled deep in his chest with pent-up rage. “What’s the idea setting fire to Miss Murray’s bungalow—and with her in it—you dirty thieving murderer? Answer me! What’d you do it for?”

A small native coffee-table went over as Ramm tried to free himself. “I don’t know what you’re talking about! I’ve been asleep in bed here for the past—”

“You liar! Hold your hand in front of that lamp! Hold it out or I’ll bust you apart!”

Ramm thrust it out. The middle finger-flashed in the lamplight, not once but repeatedly, it was shaking so with fright.

Gordon narrowed his eyes to murderous slits. “Sure. I knew it was you anyway.” Johan Ramm quailed as he saw him roll up a fist. “Now listen—now see here—”

“So you don’t want the maharajah to know, huh? Well, I won’t wake him up at this hour of the night, but he’s going to hear about it the first thing in the morning, you can bet your bottom dollar. And if he don’t kick you off his payroll and out of here, I’ll do it myself! Until then, here’s a night-cap!”

His fist pounded out, sent Ramm spread-eagling back across the tiled floor.

Dahlhouse, accustomed to late hours even on a tiger-hunting expedition, was still sleeping when Gordon got up the next morning. He dressed quietly without waking the other man, slipped out and went over to the other bungalow, his own former one, to see how Maxine was getting along.

She wasn’t in it.

He turned around and went down to the compound again. It was all pink and blue in the early sunlight, like a confectionery palace. Some of the maharajah’s humbler subjects were stirring already. He saw some of the household women scrubbing clothes on flat stones beside a small, stream, met a stableman coming up with brimming buckets of water.

“Where girl? You know—girl?”

The man showed his teeth, proud that he knew a few words of English “Mem-sahib go horse-ride in joongle.”

“In the jungle! Alone?”

“With Sahib.”

It must be Ramm. Dahlhouse was still asleep; he was the only other white man in the party. Gordon's face got a little tighter, but he gave no other sign of excitement. "Saddle me a horse, quick! Which way did they go?"

The man gestured vaguely to the west, to where mists were already streaming upward from the blue-green moss-bed Ramm had pointed out yesterday. "Let horse loose. Horse follow others."

"She'll never come back alive!" Bud Gordon thought, throwing his leg over a fine black mare the stableman had led out for him. "That devil!" He smacked the sleek rump with his bare hand, started cantering down to the small stream that ran by the compound, and kept along beside that until the jungle-walls had closed in on both banks and nearly met overhead, like a great tunnel.

Maxine and Johan Ramm had come this way before him. An occasional horse-dropping, hoofprints in the soft soil at the creek's edge, slashed creepers, and broken fronds—these signs pointed the trail. But he couldn't go very fast without risking being unhorsed or strangled by one of the tenacious vines or lianas frequently laced across the stream-bed.

After about three-quarters of an hour's splashing and stumbling, half in the stream-bed, half on its slippery banks, the horse whinnied and pricked up its ears. Something or somebody just ahead! He rounded an unexpected bend in the stream and came upon a motionless tableau.

Ramm was sitting perfectly still, his horse's head turned as though he had coolly waited for Gordon to overtake him. Maxine was on another mount so close beside the half-caste that their stirrups were touching. Her hands were held out of sight, and she was arched helplessly over toward Ramm. His open hand was pressed over her mouth to silence her. All Gordon could see were her eyes. They were rolling

mutely upwards. He didn't understand the message in time, spurred angrily forward to free her.

Something dropped heavily from the leafy covert overhead, unhorsing him. He went rolling into the stream-bed with a native groom on top of him. There was a knife in the attacker's hand and now the blade was menacing Gordon's throat.

"Well done," said Johan Ramm. "Tie his hands, Bikar."

His wrists were lashed tightly, and a moment later the groom had flung him unceremoniously back on his horse. The brown man kept the reins in his own hand as he remounted his own, which had been tethered out of sight.

"Now come on," Ramm said, leading Maxine's horse after him by the bridle. "We'll go in a little deeper—where a shot isn't likely to be heard."

Gordon said, "What's the idea? You can't get away with this."

"This is the idea," chuckled Johan Ramm. There was a glitter as he removed some object from his waistband, tossed it up, deftly caught it in the hollow of his hand again. Gordon recognized that brooch he had seen on Maxine so often. "And as for getting away with it—don't you think it's likely that if two greenhorns like you and the little lady went riding too deep in the jungle you might lose your way and never come out alive again? Your horses will find their way back in a day or two—and everyone'll be able to read the signs."

"You murdering rat," Gordon gritted.

It was high noon when Ramm finally drew up in a sun-spotted glade, walled at one end by a sharply-upthrust mound, almost cone-shaped. "This is a good place—the old temple ruins. They're scared to come too near here—haunted by the gods." He reined-in the girl's horse and the groom did likewise with Gordon's. They pulled their two captives off the saddles by main force. Ramm took an automatic out of a holster hanging by his saddle, broke it,

blew into it meaningfully, clapped it shut again. “Tie our horses so they won’t bolt,” he ordered. “Let the other two shift for themselves.” The groom led two of the horses to the upper end of the glade, threshed about among the cane-brakes.

Bud Gordon had been working desperately at his bonds the whole morning. He’d undone them long ago, but kept the cords around his wrists. No mere native groom could expect to show a seaman anything in the way of insoluble knots.

“Right here and now?” he asked quietly, shifting closer to the girl.

“Right you are,” Ramm assured him remorselessly.

“Let’s see what kind of a man you are,” Gordon improvised. “The condemned are always given one last cigarette before they die. I haven’t had a smoke all morning.”

“All right,” said the half-caste accommodatingly. “If she can stand the strain of waiting, so can I.” He took out one of the maharajah’s monogrammed silk-tips, thrust it between Gordon’s lips, still holding the automatic warily.

“There’s a lighter in my jacket-pocket,” Gordon said hopefully, still keeping his hands behind him. He had managed to catch Maxine’s eye for an instant and to gesture her toward the moss-covered mound that reared behind them.

Ramm had taken out the oblong lighter, was holding it up carelessly. Gordon knew that lighter well. He was counting on its habit of flaming defectively when its fuel-content had been agitated too much, as now by his long horseback-ride. “Just push the little thumb-catch down,” he instructed.

A fan-shaped gush of thin flame pinwheeled between their two faces. Gordon blew out his breath with all the lung-power he could master. It deflected it straight into the

brown eyes of Johan Ramm. The half-caste gave a scream as he jolted back, momentarily singed and half-blinded. Gordon's hands whipped out, ripped the automatic out of his relaxed grasp muzzle-first. It exploded through his cuff, burning his wrist, but he did not even feel the pain. He was too intent on his own left fist that smashed into Ramm's face and knocked him flat.

"The groom, Bud!" Maxine screamed. Gordon twisted around and saw the second man at the far end of the clearing. He was unslinging a rifle from one of the saddle girths.

"Get behind that mound," Gordon shouted. He snapped a shot at the groom that gashed the bark of a tree just behind the man's head, then stumbled after Maxine around the slippery uneven base of the massive protuberance, which seemed to be partly rotting logs, partly hewn blocks of granite, and partly topsoil.

"Give me that rifle!" Ramm was yelling to the groom. "You don't know the first thing about handling it!"

The two Americans were out of sight now. Bud Gordon knew how slight their chances were in a duel of automatic versus rifle, but there was a ray of hope at least. He was a crack shot and he knew he would not miss if Ramm could be lured within range. His fingers gripped tight on Maxine's arm as he led her among the vine-tangled ruins where a number of peculiar monoliths reared upright, like thick headstones.

"Get down behind one of those," Gordon warned. He tried to climb up the rear of the chief one, to get the drop on Ramm who was stalking them from the other side. Its smooth, mossy slope defeated him, sent him slipping down again.

At the same instant the rifle boomed out, the sound echoing around them with a vibrant roar. The bullet thudded not far above Gordon's head and a black fissure, like a snake, leaped halfway up the protecting bulwark and

unravelled into a spidery network of cracks. Some loose earth and little stones went cascading down. Gordon drew back, mystified. He began to work his way warily sidewise among the upright and fallen monoliths.

But Johan Ramm, close up under the front of the tumulus, must have seen him first. The rifle boomed out again, sent chips of stone flying sickeningly close to Gordon's concealed face.

Then there was a sudden explosive crack—a sound that didn't come from the rifle. Bud Gordon heard Ramm's voice shrill out in a scream and caught a glimpse of the man's distorted face and his arms upraised as if to ward off attack from the sky above. The whole top of the mound seemed to have shifted out over Johan Ramm, while its base, around on the other side, reared up into' the air like an overturned pedestal. A moment later the whole mound disintegrated into a flux of cascading boulders that leveled itself with a rumble like heavy artillery. The ground shook sickeningly and a great haze of dust blotted out the whole glade.

When the dust had finally dissipated into a brownish haze they could make out one of Ramm's legs protruding motionless from a heap of rubble. The moaning sound they heard was the voice of the groom, rendered helpless by abysmal superstitious terror, wailing and beating his head to the ground at the far end of the clearing.

Bud Gordon wet his lips. The towering mound, he saw now, must have been some great idol of the temple that the jungle ages had mossed over. Ramm's bullets had brought it toppling down upon him.

The wailing groom had vanished into the jungle. They found the tethered horses and mounted. Neither of them spoke until they drew rein at the edge of the clearing for a final glance behind.

“What did he want with that brooch of mine?” Maxine asked, mystified.

Gordon shook his head, equally baffled. “I don’t understand the whole thing, myself, from beginning to end.”

He touched her hand and they rode away. Behind them the ancient dust settled and a silence reigned in the jungle clearing where the eyeless idol had reclaimed its own.

THE BOOK THAT SQUEALED

The outside world never intruded into the sanctum where Prudence Roberts worked. Nothing violent or exciting ever happened there, or was ever likely to. Voices were never raised above a whisper, or at the most a discreet murmur. The most untoward thing that could possibly occur would be that some gentleman browser became so engrossed he forgot to remove his hat and had to be tactfully reminded. Once, it is true, a car backfired violently somewhere outside in the street and the whole staff gave a nervous start, including Prudence, who dropped her date stamp all the way out in the aisle in front of her desk; but that had never happened again after that one time.

Things that the papers printed, holdups, gang warfare, kidnappings, murders, remained just things that the papers printed. They never came past these portals behind which she worked.

Just books came in and went out again. Harmless, silent books.

Until, one bright June day—

The Book showed up around noon, shortly before Prudence Roberts was due to go off duty for lunch. She was on the Returned Books desk. She turned up her nose with unqualified inner disapproval at first sight of the volume. Her taste was severely classical; she had nothing against light reading in itself, but to her, light reading meant Dumas, Scott, Dickens. She could tell this thing before her

was trash by the title alone, and the author's pen name: "Manuela Gets Her Man," by Orchid Ollivant.

Furthermore it had a lurid orange dust cover that showed just what kind of claptrap might be expected within. She was surprised a city library had added such worthless tripe to its stock; it belonged more in a candy-store lending library than here. She supposed there had been a great many requests for it among a certain class of readers; that was why.

Date stamp poised in hand she glanced up, expecting to see one of these modern young hussies, all paint and boldness, or else a faded middle-aged blonde of the type that lounged around all day in a wrapper, reading such stuff and eating marshmallows. To her surprise the woman before her was drab, looked hardworking and anything but frivolous. She didn't seem to go with the book at all.

Prudence Roberts didn't say anything, looked down again, took the book's reference card out of the filing drawer just below her desk, compared them.

"You're two days overdue with this," she said; "it's a one-week book. That'lI be four cents."

The woman fumbled timidly in an old-fashioned handbag, placed a nickel on the desk.

"My daughter's been reading it to meat nights," she explained, "but she goes to night school and some nights she couldn't; that's what delayed me. Oh, it was grand." She sighed. "It brings back all your dreams of romance."

"Humph," said Prudence Roberts, still disapproving as much as ever. She returned a penny change to the borrower, stamped both cards. That should have ended the trivial little transaction.

But the woman had lingered there by the desk, as though trying to summon up courage to ask something. "Please," she faltered timidly when Prudence had glanced up a second time, "I was wondering, could you tell me what

happens on page 42? You know, that time when the rich man lures her on his yasht?"

"Yacht," Prudence corrected her firmly. "Didn't you read the book yourself?"

"Yes, my daughter read it to me, but Pages 41 and 42 are missing, and we were wondering, we'd give anything to know, if Ronald got there in time to save her from that awful —"

Prudence had pricked up her official ears at that. "Just a minute," she interrupted, and retrieved the book from where she had just discarded it. She thumbed through it rapidly. At first glance it seemed in perfect condition; it was hard to tell anything was the matter with it. If the borrower hadn't given her the exact page number—but Pages 41 and 42 were missing, as she had said. A telltale scalloping of torn paper ran down the seam between Pages 40 and 43. The leaf had been plucked out bodily, torn out like a sheet in a notebook, not just become loosened and fallen out. Moreover, the condition of the book's spine showed that this could not have happened from wear and tear; it was still too new and firm. It was a case of out-and-out vandalism. Inexcusable destruction of the city's property.

"This book's been damaged," said Prudence ominously. "It's only been in use six weeks, it's still a new book, and this page was deliberately ripped out along its entire lenth. I'll have to ask you for your reader's card back. Wait here, please."

She took the book over to Miss Everett, the head librarian, and showed it to her. The latter was Prudence twenty years from now, if nothing happened in between to snap her out of it. She sailed back toward the culprit, steel-rimmed spectacles glittering balefully.

The woman was standing there cringing, her face as white as though she expected to be executed on the spot. She had the humble person's typical fear of anyone in authority. "Please, lady, I didn't do it," she whined.

“You should have reported it before taking it out,” said the inexorable Miss Everett. “I’m sorry, but as the last borrower, we’ll have to hold you responsible. Do you realize you could go to jail for this?”

The woman quailed. “It was that way when I took it home,” she pleaded; “I didn’t do it.”

Prudence relented a little. “She did call my attention to it herself, Miss Everett,” she remarked. “I wouldn’t have noticed it otherwise.”

“You know the rules as well as I do, Miss Roberts,” said her flinty superior. She turned to the terrified drudge. “You will lose your card and all library privileges until you have paid the fine assessed against you for damaging this book.” She turned and went careening off again.

The poor woman still hovered there, pathetically anxious. “Please don’t make me do without my reading,” she pleaded. “That’s the only pleasure I got. I work hard all day. How much is it? Maybe I can pay a little something each week.”

“Are you sure you didn’t do it?” Pruence asked her searchingly. The lack of esteem in which she held this book was now beginning to incline her in the woman’s favor. Of course, it was the principle of the thing, it didn’t matter how trashy the book in question was. On the other hand, how could the woman have been expected to notice that a page was gone, in time to report it, before she had begun to read it?

“I swear I didn’t,” the woman protested. “I love books, I wouldn’t want to hurt one of them.”

“Tell you what I’ll do,” said Prudence, lowering her voice and looking around to make sure she wasn’t overheard. “I’ll pay the fine for you out of my own pocket, so you can go ahead using the library meanwhile. I think it’s likely this was done by one of the former borrowers, ahead of you. If such proves not to be the case, however, then you’ll simply have to repay me a little at a time.”

The poor woman actually tried to take hold of her hand to kiss it. Prudence hastily withdrew it, marked the fine paid, and returned the card to her.

"And I suggest you try to read something a little more worth while in future," she couldn't help adding.

She didn't discover the additional damage until she had gone upstairs with the book, when she was relieved for lunch. It was no use sending it back to be rebound or repaired; with one entire page gone like that, there was nothing could be done with it; the book was worthless. Well, it had been that to begin with, she thought tartly.

She happened to flutter the leaves scornfully and light filtered through one of the pages, in dashes of varying length, like a sort of Morse code. She looked more closely, and it was the fortythird page, the one immediately after the missing leaf. It bore innumerable horizontal slashes scattered all over it from top to bottom, as though some moron had underlined the words on it, but with some sharp-edged instrument rather than the point of a pencil. They were so fine they were almost invisible when the leaf was lying flat against the others, white on white; it was only when it was up against the light that they stood revealed. The leaf was almost threadbare with them. The one after it had some too, but not nearly so distinct; they hadn't pierced the thickness of the paper, were just scratches on it.

She had heard of books being defaced with pencil, with ink, with crayon, something visible at least—but with an improvised stylus that just left slits? On the other hand, what was there in this junky novel important enough to be emphasized—if that was why it had been done?

She began to read the page, to try to get some connected meaning out of the words that had been underscored. It was just a lot of senseless drivel about the heroine who was being entertained on the villain's yacht. It couldn't have been done for emphasis, then, of that Prudence was positive.

But she had the type of mind that, once something aroused its curiosity, couldn't rest again until the matter had been solved. If she couldn't remember a certain name, for instance, the agonizing feeling of having it on the tip of her tongue but being unable to bring it out would keep her from getting any sleep until the name had come back to her.

This now took hold of her in the same way. Failing to get anything out of the entire text, she began to see if she could get something out of the gashed words in themselves. Maybe that was where the explanation lay. She took a pencil and paper and began to transcribe them one by one, in the same order in which they came in the book. She got:

hardly anyone going invited merrily

Before she could go any farther than that, the lunch period was over, it was time to report down to her desk again.

She decided she was going to take the book home with her that night and keep working on it until she got something out of it. This was simply a matter of self-defense; she wouldn't be getting any sleep until she did. She put it away in her locker, returned downstairs to duty, and put the money with which she was paying Mrs. Trasker's fine into the till. That was the woman's name, Mrs. Trasker.

The afternoon passed as uneventfully as a hundred others had before it, but her mind kept returning to the enigma at intervals. "There's a reason for everything in this world," she insisted to herself, "and I want to know the reason for this: why were certain words in this utterly unmemorable novel underscored by slashes as though they were Holy Writ or something? And I'm going to find out if it takes me all the rest of this summer!"

She smuggled the book out with her when she left for home, trying to keep it hidden so the other members of the

staff wouldn’t notice. Not that she would have been refused permission if she had asked for it, but she would have had to give her reasons for wanting to take it, and she was afraid they would all laugh at her or think she was becoming touched in the head if she told them. After all, she excused herself, if she could find out the meaning of what had been done, that might help the library to discover who the guilty party really was and recover damages, and she could get back her own money that she had put in for poor Mrs. Trasker.

Prudence hurried up her meal as much as possible, and returned to her room. She took a soft pencil and lightly went over the slits in the paper, to make them stand out more clearly. It would be easy enough to erase the pencil marks later. But almost as soon as she had finished and could get a comprehensive view of the whole page at a glance, she saw there was something wrong. The underscorings weren’t flush with some of the words. Sometimes they only took in half a word, carried across the intervening space, and then took in half of the next. One of them even fell where there was absolutely no word at all over it, in the blank space between two paragraphs.

That gave her the answer; she saw in a flash what her mistake was. She’d been wasting her time on the wrong page. It was the leaf before, the missing Page 41, that had held the real meaning of the slashed words. The sharp instrument used on it had simply carried through to the leaf under it, and even, very lightly, to the third one following. No wonder the scorings overlapped and she hadn’t been able to make sense out of them! Their real sense, if any, lay on the page that had been removed.

Well, she’d wasted enough time on it. It probably wasn’t anything anyway. She tossed the book contemptuously aside, made up her mind that was the end of it. A moment or so later her eyes strayed irresistibly, longingly over to it

again. “I know how I could find out for sure,” she tempted herself.

Suddenly she was putting on her things again to go out. To go out and do something she had never done before: buy a trashy, frothy novel. Her courage almost failed her outside the bookstore window, where she finally located a copy, along with bridge sets, ash trays, statuettes of Dopey, and other gew-gaws. If it had only had a less . . . er . . . compromising title. She set her chin, took a deep breath, and plunged in.

“I want a copy of ‘Manuela Gets Her Man,’ please,” she said, flushing a little.

The clerk was one of these brazen blondes painted up like an Iroquois. She took in Prudence’s shell-rimmed glasses, knot of hair, drab clothing. She smirked a little, as if to say “So you’re finally getting wise to yourself?” Prudence Roberts gave her two dollars, almost ran out of the store with her purchase, cheeks flaming with embarrassment.

She opened it the minute she got in and avidly scanned Page 41. There wasn’t anything on it, in itself, of more consequence than there had been on any of the other pages, but that wasn’t stopping her this time. This thing had now cost her over three dollars of her hard-earned money, and she was going to get something out of it.

She committed an act of vandalism for the first time in her life, even though the book was her own property and not the city’s. She ripped Pages 41 and 42 neatly out of the binding, just as the leaf had been torn from the other book. Then she inserted it in the first book, the original one. Not over Page 43, where it belonged, but under it. She found a piece of carbon paper, cut it down to size, and slipped that between the two. Then she fastened the three sheets together with paper clips, carefully seeing to it that the borders of the two printed pages didn’t vary by a hair’s breadth. Then she took her pencil and once more traced the gashes on Page 43, but this time bore down heavily on

them. When she had finished, she withdrew the loose Page 41 from under the carbon and she had a haphazard array of underlined words sprinkled over the page. The original ones from the missing page. Her eye traveled over them excitedly. Then her face dropped again. They didn't make sense any more than before. She opened the lower half of the window, balanced the book in her hand, resisted an impulse to toss it out then and there. She gave herself a fight talk instead. "I'm a librarian. I have more brains than whoever did this to this book, I don't care who they are! I can get out whatever meaning they put into it, if I just keep cool and keep at it." She closed the window, sat down once more.

She studied the carbon-scored page intently, and presently a belated flash of enlightenment followed. The very arrangement of the dashes showed her what her mistake had been this time. They were too symmetrical, each one had its complement one line directly under it. In other words they were really double, not single lines. Their vertical alignment didn't vary in the slightest. She should have noticed that right away. She saw what it was now. The words hadn't been merely underlined, they had been cut out of the page bodily by four gashes around each required one, two vertical, two horizontal, forming an oblong that contained the wanted word. What she had mistaken for dashes had been the top and bottom lines of these "boxes." The faint side lines she had overlooked entirely.

She canceled out every alternate line, beginning with the top one, and that should have given her the real kernel of the message. But again she was confronted with a meaningless jumble, scant as the residue of words was. She held her head distractedly as she took it in:

cure
wait
poor

honey to
grand
her
health
your
fifty
instructions

“The text around them is what’s distracting me,” she decided after a futile five or ten minutes of poring over them. “Subconsciously I keep trying to read them in the order in which they appear on the page. Since they were taken bodily out of it, that arrangement was almost certainly not meant to be observed. It is, after all, the same principle as a jig-saw puzzle. I have the pieces now, all that remains is to put each one in the right place.”

She took a small pair of nail scissors and carefully clipped out each boxed word, just as the unknown predecessor had whose footsteps she was trying to unearth. That done, she discarded the book entirely, in order to be hampered by it no longer. Then she took a blank piece of paper, placed all the little paper cut-outs on it, careful that they remained right side up, and milled them about with her finger, to be able to start from scratch.

“I’ll begin with the word ‘fifty’ as the easiest entering wedge,” she breathed absorbedly. “It is a numerical adjective, and therefore simply must modify one of those three nouns, according to all the rules of grammar.” She separated it from the rest, set to work. Fifty health—no, the noun is in the singular. Fifty honey—no, again singular. Fifty instructions—yes, but it was an awkward combination, something about it didn’t ring true, she wasn’t quite satisfied with it. Fifty grand? That was it! It was grammatically incorrect, it wasn’t a noun at all, but in slang it was used as one. She had often heard it herself, used by

people who were slovenly in their speech. She set the two words apart, satisfied they belonged together.

“Now a noun, in any kind of a sentence at all,” she murmured to herself, “has to be followed by a verb.” There were only two to choose from. She tried them both. Fifty grand wait. Fifty grand cure. Elliptical, both. But that form of the verb had to take a preposition, and there was one there at hand: “to.” She tried it that way. Fifty grand to wait. Fifty grand to cure. She chose the latter, and the personal pronoun fell into place almost automatically after it. Fifty grand to cure her. That was almost certainly it.

She had five out of the eleven words now. She had a verb, two adjectives, and three nouns left: wait, your, poor, honey, health instructions. But that personal pronoun already in place was a stumbling block, kept baffling her. It seemed to refer to some preceding proper name, it demanded one to make sense, and she didn’t have any in her six remaining words. And then suddenly she saw that she did have. Honey. It was to be read as a term of endearment, not a substance made by bees.

The remaining words paired off almost as if magnetically drawn toward one another. Your honey, poor health, wait instructions. She shifted them about the basic nucleus she already had, trying them out before and after it, until, with a little minor rearranging, she had them satisfactorily in place.

your honey poor health fifty grand to cure her wait instructions

There it was at last. It couldn’t be any more lucid than that. She had no mucilage at hand to paste the little paper oblongs down flat and hold them fast in the position she had so laboriously achieved. Instead she took a number of pins and skewered them to the blank sheets of paper. Then she sat back looking at them.

It was a ransom note. Even she, unworldly as she was, could tell that at a glance. Printed words cut bodily out of a book, to avoid the use of handwriting or typewriting that might be traced later. Then the telltale leaf with the gaps had been torn out and destroyed. But in their hurry they had overlooked one little thing, the slits had carried through to the next page. Or else they had thought it didn't matter, no one would be able to reconstruct the thing once the original page was gone. Well, she had.

There were still numerous questions left unanswered. To whom had the note been addressed? By whom? Whose "honey" was it? And why, with a heinous crime like kidnaping for ransom involved, had they taken the trouble to return the book at all? Why not just destroy it entirely and be done with it? The answer to that could very well be that the actual borrower—one of those names on the book's reference card—was someone who knew them, but wasn't aware what they were doing, what the book had been used for, hadn't been present when the message was concocted; had all unwittingly returned the book.

There was of course a question as to whether the message was genuine or simply some adolescent's practical joke, yet the trouble taken to evade the use of handwriting argued that it was anything but a joke. And the most important question of all was: should she go to the police about it? She answered that then and there, with a slow but determined yes!

It was well after eleven by now, and the thought of venturing out on the streets alone at such an hour, especially to and from a place like a police station, filled her timid soul with misgivings. She could ring up from here, but then they'd send someone around to question her most likely, and that would be even worse. What would the

landlady and the rest of the roomers think of her, receiving a gentleman caller at such an hour, even if he was from the police? It looked so . . . er . . . rowdy.

She steeled herself to go to them in person, and it required a good deal of steeling and even a cup of hot tea, but finally she set out, book and transcribed message under her arm, also a large umbrella with which to defend herself if she were insulted on the way.

She was ashamed to ask anyone where the nearest precinct house was, but luckily she saw a pair of policemen walking along as if they were going off duty, and by following them at a discreet distance, she finally saw them turn and go into a building that had a pair of green lights outside the entrance. She walked past it four times, twice in each direction, before she finally got up nerve enough to go in.

There was a uniformed man sitting at a desk near the entrance and she edged over and stood waiting for him to look up at her. He didn't, he was busy with some kind of report, so after standing there a minute or two, she cleared her throat timidly.

"Well, lady?" he said in a stentorian voice that made her jump and draw back.

"Could I speak to a . . . a detective, please?" she faltered.

"Any particular one?"

"A good one."

He said to a cop standing over by the door: "Go in and tell Murph there's a young lady out here wants to see him."

A square-shouldered, husky young man came out a minute later, hopefully straightening the knot of his tie and looking around as if he expected to see a Fifth Avenue model at the very least. His gaze fell on Prudence, skipped over her, came up against the blank walls beyond her, and then had to return to her again.

"You the one?" he asked a little disappointedly.

“Could I talk to you privately?” she said. “I believe I have made a discovery of the greatest importance.”

“Why . . . uh . . . sure,” he said, without too much enthusiasm. “Right this way.” But as he turned to follow her inside, he slurred something out of the corner of his mouth at the smirking desk sergeant that sounded suspiciously like “I’ll fix you for this, kibitzer. It couldn’t have been Dolan instead, could it?”

He snapped on a cone light in a small office toward the back, motioned Prudence to a chair, leaned against the edge of the desk.

She was slightly flustered; she had never been in a police station before. “Has . . . er . . . anyone been kidnaped lately, that is to say within the past six weeks?” she blurted out.

He folded his arms, flipped his hands up and down against his own sides, “Why?” he asked noncommitally.

“Well, one of our books came back damaged today, and I think I’ve deciphered a kidnap message from its pages.”

Put baldly like that, it did sound sort of far-fetched, she had to admit that herself. Still, he should have at least given her time to explain more fully, not acted like a jackass just because she was prim-looking and wore thick-lensed glasses.

His face reddened and his mouth started to quiver treacherously. He put one hand up over it to hide it from her, but he couldn’t keep his shoulders from shaking. Finally he had to turn away altogether and stand in front of the water cooler a minute. Something that sounded like a strangled cough came from him.

“You’re laughing at me!” she snapped accusingly. “I come here to help you, and that’s the thanks I get!”

He turned around again with a carefully straightened face. “No, ma’am,” he lied cheerfully right to her face, “I’m not laughing at you. I . . . we . . . appreciate your co-operation. You leave this here and we . . . we’ll check on it.”

But Prudence Roberts was nobody's fool. Besides, he had ruffled her plumage now, and once that was done, it took a great deal to smooth it down again. She had a highly developed sense of her own dignity. "You haven't the slightest idea of doing anything of the kind!" she let him know. "I can tell that just by looking at you! I must say I'm very surprised that a member of the police department of this city—"

She was so steamed up and exasperated at his facetious attitude, that she removed her glasses, in order to be able to give him a piece of her mind more clearly. A little thing like that shouldn't have made the slightest difference—after all this was police business, not a beauty contest—but to her surprise it seemed to.

He looked at her, blinked, looked at her again, suddenly began to show a great deal more interest in what she had come here to tell him. "What'd you say your name was again, miss?" he asked, and absently made that gesture to the knot of his tie again.

She hadn't said what it was in the first place. Why, this man was just a common—a common masher; he was a disgrace to the shield he wore. "I am Miss Roberts of the Hillcrest Branch of the Public Library," she said stiffly. "What has that to do with this?"

"Well . . . er . . . we have to know the source of our information," he told her lamely. He picked up the book, thumbed through it, then he scanned the message she had deciphered. "Yeah"—Murphy nodded slowly—"that does read like a ransom note."

Mollified, she explained rapidly the process by which she had built up from the gashes on the succeeding leaf of the book.

"Just a minute, Miss Roberts," he said, when she had finished. "I'll take this in and show it to the lieutenant."

But when he came back, she could tell by his attitude that his superior didn't take any more stock in it than he had

himself. “I tried to explain to him the process by which you extracted it out of the book, but . . . er . . . in his opinion it’s just a coincidence, I mean the gashes may not have any meaning at all. F’r instance, someone may have been just cutting something out on top of the book, cookies or pie crust and—”

She snorted in outrage. “Cookies or pie crust! I got a coherent message. If you men can’t see it there in front of your eyes—”

“But here’s the thing, Miss Roberts,” he tried to soothe her. “We haven’t any case on deck right now that this could possibly fit into. No one’s been reported missing. And we’d know, wouldn’t we? I’ve heard of kidnap cases without ransom notes, but I never heard of a ransom note without a kidnap case to go with it.”

“As a police officer doesn’t it occur to you that in some instances a kidnaped persons’ relatives would purposely refrain from notifying the authorities to avoid jeopardizing their loved ones? That may have happened in this case.”

“I mentioned that to the lieutenant myself, but he claims it can’t be done. There are cases where we purposely hold off at the request of the family until after the victim’s been returned, but it’s never because we haven’t been informed what’s going on. You see, a certain length of time always elapses between the snatch itself and the first contact between the kidnapers and the family, and no matter how short that is, the family has almost always reported the person missing in the meantime, before they know what’s up themselves. I can check with Missing Persons if you want, but if it’s anything more than just a straight disappearance, they always turn it over to us right away, anyway.”

But Prudence didn’t intend urging or begging them to look into it as a personal favor to her. She considered she’d done more than her duty. If they discredited it, they discredited it. Shedidn’t, and she made up her mind to

pursue the investigation, single-handed and without their help if necessary, until she had settled it one way or the other. “Very well,” she said coldly, “I’ll leave the transcribed message and the extra copy of the book here with you. I’m sorry I bothered you. Good evening.” She stalked out, still having forgotten to replace her glasses.

Her indignation carried her as far as the station-house steps, and then her courage began to falter. It was past midnight by now, and the streets looked so lonely; suppose —suppose she met a drunk? While she was standing there trying to get up her nerve, this same Murphy came out behind her, evidently on his way home himself. She had put her glasses on again by now.

“You look a lot different without them,” he remarked lamely, stopping a step below her and hanging around.

“Indeed,” she said forbiddingly.

“I’m going off duty now. Could I . . . uh . . . see you to where you live?”

She would have preferred not to have to accept the offer, but those shadows down the street looked awfully deep and the light posts awfully far apart. “I am a little nervous about being out alone so late,” she admitted, starting out beside him. “Once I met a drunk and he said, ‘H’lo, babe.’ I had to drink a cup of hot tea when I got home, I was so upset.”

“Did you have your glasses on?” he asked cryptically.

“No. Come to think of it, that was the time I’d left them to be repaired.”

He just nodded knowingly, as though that explained everything.

When they got to her door, he said: “Well, I’ll do some more digging through the files on that thing, just to make sure. If I turn up anything . . . uh . . . suppose I drop around tomorrow night and let you know. And if I don’t, I’ll drop around and let you know that too. Just so you’ll know what’s what.”

“That’s very considerate of you.”

“Gee, you’re refined,” he said wistfully. “You talk such good English.”

He seemed not averse to lingering on here talking to her, but someone might have looked out of one of the windows and it would appear so unrefined to be seen dallying there at that hour, so she turned and hurried inside.

When she got to her room, she looked at herself in the mirror. Then she took her glasses off and tried it that way. “How peculiar,” she murmured. “How very unaccountable!”

The following day at the library she got out the reference card on “Manuela Gets Her Man” and studied it carefully. It had been out six times in the six weeks it had been in stock. The record went like this:

Doyle, Helen (address) Apr. 15-Apr. 22
Caine, Rose Apr. 22-Apr. 29
Dermuth, Alvin Apr. 29-May 6
Turner, Florence May 6-May 18
Baumgarten, Lucille May 18-May 25
Trasker, Sophie May 25-June 3

Being a new book, it had had a quick turnover, had been taken out again each time the same day it had been brought back. Twice it had been kept out overtime, the first time nearly a whole week beyond the return limit. There might be something in that. All the borrowers but one, so far, were women; that was another noticeable fact. It was, after all, a woman’s book. Her library experience had taught her that what is called a “man’s book” will often be read by women, but a “woman’s book” is absolutely never, and there are few exceptions to this rule, read by men. That might mean something, that lone male borrower. She must have seen him at the time, but so many faces passed her

desk daily she couldn't remember what he was like any more, if she had. However, she decided not to jump to hasty conclusions, but investigate the list one by one in reverse order. She'd show that ignorant, skirt-chasing Murphy person that where there's smoke there's fire, if you only take the trouble to look for it!

At about eight thirty, just as she was about to start out on her quest—she could only pursue it in the evenings, of course, after library hours—the doorbell rang and she found him standing there. He looked disappointed when he saw that she had her glasses on. He came in rather shyly and clumsily, tripping over the threshold and careening several steps down the hall.

"Were you able to find out anything?" she asked eagerly.

"Nope, I checked again, I went all the way back six months, and I also got in touch with Missing Persons. Nothing doing, I'm afraid it isn't a genuine message, Miss Roberts; just a fluke, like the lieutenant says."

"I'm sorry, but I don't agree with you. I've copied a list of the borrowers and I intend to investigate each one of them in turn. That message was not intended to be readily deciphered, or for that matter deciphered at all; therefore it is not a practical joke or some adolescent's prank. Yet it has a terrible coherence; therefore it is not a fluke or a haphazard scarring of the page, your lieutenant to the contrary. What remains? It is a genuine ransom note, sent in deadly earnest, and I should think you and your supsuperiors would be the first to—"

"Miss Roberts," he said soulfully, "you're too refined to . . . to dabble in crime like this. Somehow it don't seem right for you to be talking shop, about kidnapings and—" He eased his collar. "I . . . uh . . . it's my night off and I was wondering if you'd like to go to the movies."

"So that's why you took the trouble of coming around!" she said indignantly. "I'm afraid your interest is entirely too personal and not nearly official enough!"

“Gee, even when you talk fast,” he said admiringly, “you pronounce every word clear, like in a p0-em.”

“Well, you don’t. It’s poem, not p0-em. I intend going ahead with this until I can find out just what the meaning of that message is, and who sent it! And I don’t go to movies with people the second time I’ve met them!”

He didn’t seem at all fazed. “Could I drop around sometime and find out how you’re getting along?” he wanted to know, as he edged through the door backward.

“That will be entirely superfluous,” she said icily. “If I uncover anything suspicious, I shall of course report it promptly. It is not my job, after all, but . . . ahem . . . other people’s.”

“Movies! The idea!” She frowned after she had closed the door on him. Then she dropped her eyes and pondered a minute. “It would have been sort of frisky, at that.” She smiled.

She took the book along with her as an excuse for calling, and set out, very determined on the surface, as timid as usual underneath. However, she found it easier to get started because the first name on the list, the meek Mrs. Trasker, held no terror even for her. She was almost sure she was innocent, because it was she herself who had called the library’s attention to the missing page in the first place, and a guilty person would hardly do that. Still there was always a possibility it was someone else in her family or household, and she meant to be thorough about this if nothing else.

Mrs. Trasker’s address was a small old-fashioned apartment building of the pre-War variety. It was not expensive by any means, but still it did seem beyond the means of a person who had been unable to pay even a two-dollar fine, and for a moment Prudence thought she scented suspicion in this. But as soon as she entered the lobby and asked for Mrs. Trasker, the mystery was explained.

“You’ll have to go to the basement for her,” the elevator boy told her, “she’s the janitress.”

A young girl of seventeen admitted her at the basement entrance and led her down a bare brick passage past rows of empty trash cans to the living quarters in the back.

Mrs. Trasker was sitting propped up in bed, and again showed a little alarm at sight of the librarian, a person in authority. An open book on a chair beside her showed that her daughter had been reading aloud to her when they were interrupted.

“Don’t be afraid,” Prudence reassured them. “I just want to ask a few questions.”

“Sure, anything, missis,” said the janitress, clasping and unclasping her hands placatingly.

“Just the two of you live here? No father or brothers?”

“Just mom and me, nobody else,” the girl answered.

“Now tell me, are you sure you didn’t take the book out with you anywhere, to some friend’s house, or lend it to someone else?”

“No, no, it stayed right here!” They both said it together and vehemently.

“Well, then, did anyone call on you down here, while it was in the rooms?”

The mother answered this. “No, no one. When the tenants want me for anything, they ring down for me from upstairs. And when I’m working around the house, I keep our place locked just like anyone does their apartment.So I know no one was near the book while we had it.”

“I feel pretty sure of that myself,” Prudence said, as she got up to go. She patted Mrs. Trasker’s toil-worn hand reassuringly. “Just forget about my coming here like this. Your fine is paid and there’s nothing to worry about. See you at the library.”

The next name on the reference card was Lucille Baumgarten. Prudence was emboldened to stop in there because she noticed the address, though fairly nearby, in

the same branch-library district, was in a higher-class neighborhood. Besides, she was beginning to forget her timidity in the newly awakened interest her quest was arousing in her. It occurred to her for the first time that detectives must lead fairly interesting lives.

A glance at the imposing, almost palatial apartment building Borrower Baumgarten lived in told her this place could probably be crossed off her list of suspects as well. Though she had heard vaguely somewhere or other that gangsters and criminals sometimes lived in luxurious surroundings, these were more than that. These spelled solid, substantial wealth and respectability that couldn't be faked. She had to state her name and busines to a uniformed houseman in the lobby before she was even allowed to go up.

"Just tell Miss Baumgarten the librarian from her branch library would like to talk to her a minute."

A maid opened the upstairs door, but before she could open her mouth, a girl slightly younger than Mrs. Trasker's daughter had come skidding down the parquet hall, swept her aside, and displaced her. She was about fifteen at the most and really had no business borrowing from the adult department yet. Prudence vaguely recalled seeing her face before, although then it had been liberally rouged and lipsticked, whereas now it was properly without cosmetics.

She put a finger to her lips and whispered conspiratorially, "Sh! Don't tell my—"

Before she could get any further, there was a firm tread behind her and she was displaced in turn by a stout matronly lady wearing more diamonds than Prudence had ever seen before outside of a jewelry-store window.

"I've just come to check up on this book which was returned to us in a damaged condition," Prudence explained. "Our record shows that Miss Lucille Baumgarten had it out between—"

“Lucille?” gasped the bediamoned lady. “Lucille? There’s no Lucille—” She broke off short and glanced at her daughter, who vainly tried to duck out between the two of them and shrink away unnoticed. “Oh, so that’s it!” she said, suddenly enlightened. “So Leah isn’t good enough for you any more!”

Prudence addressed her offspring, since it was obvious that the mother was in the dark about more things than just the book. “Miss Baumgarten, I’d like you to tell me whether there was a page missing when you brought the book home with you.” And then she added craftily: “It was borrowed again afterward by several other subscribers, but I haven’t got around to them yet.” If the girl was guilty, she would use this as an out and claim the page had still been in, implying it had been taken out afterward by someone else. Prudence knew it hadn’t, of course.

But Lucille-Leah admitted unhesitatingly: “Yes, there was a page or two missing, but it didn’t spoil the fun much, because I could tell what happened after I read on a little bit.” Nothing seemed to hold any terrors for her, compared to the parental wrath brewing in the heaving bosom that wedged her in inextricably.

“Did you lend it to anyone else, or take it out of the house with you at any time, while you were in possesion of it?”

The girl rolled her eyes meaningly. “I should say not! I kept it hidden in the bottom drawer of my bureau the whole time; and now you had to come around here and give me away!”

“Thank you,” said Prudence, and turned to go. This place was definitely off her list too, as she had felt it would be even before the interview. People who lived in such surroundings didn’t send kidnap notes or associate with people who did.

The door had closed, but Mrs. Baumgarten’s shrill, punitive tones sounded all too clearly through it while Prudence stood there waiting for the elevator to take her

down. “I’ll give you Lucille! Wait’ll your father hears about this! I’ll give you such a frass, you won’t know whether you’re Lucille or Gwendolyn!” punctuated by a loud, popping slap on youthful epidermis.

The next name on the list was Florence Turner. It was already well after ten by now, and for a moment Prudence was tempted to go home, and put off the next interview until the following night. She discarded the temptation resolutely. “Don’t be such a ‘fraid-cat,” she lectured herself. “Nothing’s happened to you so far, and nothing’s likely to happen hereafter either.” And then too, without knowing it, she was already prejudiced; in the back of her mind all along there lurked the suspicion that the lone male borrower, Dermuth, was the one to watch out for. He was next but one on the list, in reverse order. As long as she was out, she would interview Florence Turner, who was probably harmless, and then tackle Dermuth good and early tomorrow night—and see to it that a policeman waited for her outside his door so she’d be sure of getting out again unharmed.

The address listed for Library Member Turner was not at first sight exactly prepossessing, when she located it. It was a rooming house, or rather that newer variation of one called a “residence club,” which has sprung up in the larger cities within the past few years, in which the rooms are grouped into detached little apartments. Possibly it was the sight of the chop-suey place that occupied the ground floor that gave it its unsavory aspect in her eyes; she had peculiar notions about some things.

Nevertheless, now that she had come this far, she wasn’t going to let a chop-suey restaurant frighten her away without completing her mission. She tightened the book under her arm, took a good deep breath to ward off possible hatchet men and opium smokers, and marched into the building, whose entrance adjoined that of the restaurant.

She rang the manager's bell and a blowsy-looking, middle-aged woman came out and met her at the foot of the stairs. "Yes?" she said gruffly.

"Have you a Florence Turner living here?"

"No. We did have, but she left."

"Have you any idea where I could reach her?"

"She left very suddenly, didn't say where she was going."

"About how long ago did she leave, could you tell me?"

"Let's see now." The woman did some complicated mental calculation. "Two weeks ago Monday, I think it was. That would bring it to the 17th. Yes, that's it, May 17th."

Here was a small mystery already. The book hadn't been returned until the 18th. The woman's memory might be at fault, of course. "If you say she left in a hurry, how is it she found time to return this book to us?"

The woman glanced at it. "Oh, no, I was the one returned that for her," she explained. "My cleaning maid found it in her room the next morning after she was gone, along with a lot of other stuff she left behind her. I saw it was a liberry book, so I sent Beulah over with it, so's it wouldn't roll up a big fine for her. I'm economical that way. How'd you happen to get hold of it?" she asked in surprise.

"I work at the library," Prudence explained. "I wanted to see her about this book. One of the pages was torn out." She knew enough not to confide any more than that about what her real object was.

"Gee, aren't you people fussy," marveled the manager.

"Well, you see, it's taken out of my salary," prevaricated Prudence, trying to strike a note she felt the other might understand.

"Oh, that's different. No wonder you're anxious to locate her. Well, all I know is she didn't expect to go when she did; she even paid for her room ahead, I been holding it for her ever since, till the time's up. I'm conshenshus that way."

"That's strange," Prudence mused aloud. "I wonder what could have—"

“I think someone got took sick in her family,” confided the manager. “Some friends or relatives, I don’t know who they was, called for her in a car late at night and off she went in a rush. I just wanted to be sure it wasn’t no one who hadn’t paid up yet, so I opened my door and looked out.”

Prudence picked up her ears. The fatal curiosity of hers was driving her on like a spur. She had suddenly forgotten all about being leery of the nefarious chop-suey den on the premises. She was starting to tingle all over, and tried not to show it. Had she unearthed something at last, or wasn’t it anything at all? “You say she left some belongings behind? Do you think she’ll be back for them?”

“No, she won’t be back herself, I don’t believe. But she did ask me to keep them for her; she said she’d send someone around to get them as soon as she was able.”

Prudence suddenly decided she’d give almost anything to be able to get a look at the things this Turner girl had left behind her; why, she wasn’t quite sure herself. They might help her to form an idea of what their owner was like. She couldn’t ask openly; the woman might suspect her of trying to steal something. “When will her room be available?” She asked offhandedly. “I’m thinking of moving, and as long as I’m here, I was wondering—”

“Come on up and I’ll show it to you right now,” offered the manager with alacrity. She evidently considered librarians superior to the average run of tenants she got.

Prudence followed her up the stairs, incredulous at her own effrontery. This didn’t seem a bit like her; she wondered what had come over her.

“Murphy should see me now!” she gloated.

The manager unlocked a door on the second floor.

“It’s real nice in the daytime,” she said. “And I can turn it over to you day after tomorrow.”

“Is the closet good and deep?” asked Prudence, noting its locked doors.

“I’ll show you.” The woman took out a key, opened it unsuspectingly for her approval.

“My,” said the subtle Prudence, “she left lots of things behind!”

“And some of them are real good too,” agreed the landlady. “I don’t know how they do it, on just a hat check girl’s tips. And she even gave that up six months ago.”

“Hm-m-m,” said Prudence absently, deftly edging a silver slipper she noted standing on the floor up against one of another pair, with the tip of her own foot. She looked down covertly; with their heels in true with one another, there was an inch difference in the toes. Two different sizes! She absently fingered the lining of one of the frocks hanging up, noted its size tag. A 34. “Such exquisite things,” she murmured, to cover up what she was doing. Three hangers over there was another frock. Size 28.

“Did she have anyone else living here with her?” she asked.

The manager locked the closet, pocketed the key once more. “No. These two men friends or relatives of hers used to visit with her a good deal, but they never made a sound and they never came one at a time, so I didn’t raise any objections. Now, I have another room, nearly as nice, just down the hall I could show you.”

“I wish there were some way in which you could notify me when someone does call for her things,” said Prudence, who was getting better as she went along. “I’m terribly anxious to get in touch with her. You see, it’s not only the fine, it might even cost me my job.”

“Sure I know how it is,” said the manager sympathetically. “Well, I could ask whoever she sends to leave word where you can reach her.”

“No, don’t do that!” said Prudence hastily. “I’m afraid they . . . er . . . I’d prefer if you didn’t mention I was here asking about her at all.”

“Anything you say,” said the manager amenably. “If you’ll leave your number with me, I could give you a ring and let you know whenever the person shows up.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t get over here in time; they might be gone by the time I got here.”

The manager tapped her teeth helpfully. “Why don’t you take one of my rooms then? That way you’d be right on the spot when they do show up.”

“Yes, but suppose they come in the daytime? I’d be at the library, and I can’t leave my job.”

“I don’t think they’ll come in the daytime. Most of her friends and the people she went with were up and around at night, more than in the daytime.”

The idea appealed to Prudence, although only a short while before she would have been aghast at the thought of moving into such a place. She made up her mind quickly without giving herself time to stop and get cold feet. It might be a wild-goose chase, but she’d never yet heard of a woman who wore two different sizes in dresses like this Florence Turner seemed to. “All right, I will,” she decided, “if you’ll promise two things. To let me know without fail the minute someone comes to get her things, and not to say a word to them about my coming here and asking about her.”

“Why not?” said the manager accommodatingly. “Anything to earn an honest dollar?”

But when the door of her new abode closed on her, a good deal of her new-found courage evaporated. She sat down limply on the edge of the bed and stared in bewilderment at her reflection in the cheap dresser mirror. “I must be crazy to do a thing like this!” she gasped. “What’s come over me anyway?” She didn’t even have her teapot with her to brew a cup of the fortifying liquid. There was nothing the matter with the room in itself, but that sinister Oriental den downstairs had a lurid red tube sign just under her window and its glare winked malevolently in at her. She imagined felt-slippered hirelings of some Fu-

Manchu creeping up the stairs to snatch her bodily from her bed. It was nearly daylight before she could close her eyes. But so far as the room across the hall was concerned, as might have been expected, no one showed up.

Next day at the library, between book returns, Prudence took out the reference card on Manuela and placed a neat red check next to Mrs. Trasker's name and Lucille Baumgarten's, to mark the progress of her investigation so far. But she didn't need this; it was easy enough to remember whom she had been to see and whom she hadn't, but she had the precise type of mind that liked everything neatly docketed and in order. Next to Florence Turner's name she placed a small red question mark.

She was strongly tempted to call up Murphy on her way home that evening, and tell him she already felt she was on the trail of something. But for one thing, nothing definite enough had developed yet. If he'd laughed at her about the original message itself, imagine how he'd roar if she told him the sum total of her suspicions was based on the fact that a certain party had two different-sized dresses in her clothes closet. And secondly, even in her new state of emancipation, it still seemed awfully forward to call a man up, even a detective. She would track down this Florence Turner first, and then she'd call Murphy up if her findings warranted it. "And if he says I'm good, and asks me to go to the movies with him," she threatened, "I'll . . . I'll make him ask two or three times before I do!"

She met the manager on her way in. "Did anyone come yet?" she asked in an undertone.

"No. I'll keep my promise. I'll let you know; don't worry."

A lot of the strangeness had already worn off her new surroundings, even after sleeping there just one night, and it occurred to her that maybe she had been in a rut, should

have changed living quarters more often in the past. She went to bed shortly after ten, and even the Chinese restaurant sign had no power to keep her awake tonight; she fell asleep almost at once, tired from the night before.

About an hour or so later, she had no way of telling how long afterward it was, a surreptitious tapping outside her door woke her. “Yes?” she called out forgetfully, in a loud voice.

The manager stuck her tousled head in.

“Shh!” she warned. “Somebody’s come for her things. You asked me to tell you, and I’ve been coughing out there in the hall, trying to attract your attention. He just went down with the first armful; he’ll be up again in a minute. You’d better hurry if you want to catch him before he goes; he’s working fast.”

“Don’t say anything to him,” Prudence whispered back. “See if you can delay him a minute or two, give me time to get downstairs.”

“Are you sure it’s just a liberry book this is all about?” the manager asked searchingly. “Here he comes up again.” She pulled her head back and swiftly closed the door.

Prudence had never dressed so fast in her life before. Even so, she managed to find time to dart a glance down at the street from her window. There was a black sedan drawn up in front of the house. “How am I ever going to—” she thought in dismay. She didn’t let that hold her up any. She made sure she had shoes on and a coat over her and let the rest go hang. There was no time to phone Murphy, even if she had wanted to, but the thought didn’t occur to her.

She eased her room door open, flitted out into the hall and down the stairs, glimpsing the open door of Florence Turner’s room as she sneaked by. She couldn’t see the man, whoever he was, but she could hear the landlady saying, “Wait a minute, until I make sure you haven’t left anything behind.”

Prudence slipped out of the street door downstairs, looked hopelessly up and down the street. He had evidently come alone in the car; there was no one else in it. He had piled the clothing on the back seat. For a moment she even thought of smuggling herself in and hiding under it, but that was too harebrained to be seriously considered. Then, just as she heard his tread start down the inside stairs behind her, the much-maligned chop-suey joint came to her aid. A cab drove up to it, stopped directly behind the first machine, and a young couple got out.

Prudence darted over, climbed in almost before they were out of the way.

"Where to, lady?" asked the driver.

She found it hard to come out with it, it sounded so unrespectable and fly-by-nightish. Detectives, she supposed, didn't think twice about giving an order like that, but with her it was different. "Er . . . would you mind just waiting a minute until that car in front of us leaves?" she said constrainedly. "Then take me wherever it goes."

He shot her a glance in his rear-sight mirror, but didn't say anything. He was probably used to getting stranger orders than that.

A man came out of the same doorway she had just left herself. She couldn't get a very good look at his face, but he had a batch of clothing slung over his arm. He dumped the apparel in the back of the sedan, got in himself, slammed the door closed, and started off. A moment later the cab was in motion as well.

"Moving out on ya, huh?" said the driver knowingly. "I don't blame ya for follying him."

"That will do," she said primly. This night life got you into more embarrassing situations! "Do you think you can manage it so he won't notice you coming after him?" she asked after a block or two.

"Leave it to me, lady," he promised, waving his hand at her. "I know this game backwards."

Presently they had turned into one of the circumferential express highways leading out of the city. “Now it’s gonna be pie!” he exulted. “He won’t be able to tell us from anyone else on here. Everyone going the same direction and no turning off.”

The stream of traffic was fairly heavy for that hour of the night; homeward-bound suburbanites for the most part. But then, as the city limits were passed and branch road after branch road drained it off, it thinned to a mere trickle. The lead car finally turned off itself, and onto a practically deserted secondary highway.

“Now it’s gonna be ticklish,” the cabman admitted. “I’m gonna have to hang back as far as I can from him, or he’ll tumble to us.”

He let the other car pull away until it was merely a red dot in the distance. “You sure must be carryin’ some torch,” he said presently with a baffled shake of his head, “to come all the way out this far after him.”

“Please confine yourself to your driving,” was the haughty reproof.

The distant red pin point had suddenly snuffed out. “He must’ve turned off up ahead some place,” said the driver, alarmed. “I better step it up!”

When they had reached the approximate place, minutes later, an even less-traveled bypass than the one they were on was revealed, not only lightless but even unsurfaced. It obviously didn’t lead anywhere that the general public would have wanted to go, or it would have been better maintained. They braked forthwith.

“What a lonely-looking road.” Prudence shuddered involuntarily.

“Y’wanna chuck it and turn back?” he suggested, as though he would have been only too willing to himself.

She probably would have if she’d been alone, but she hated to admit defeat in his presence. He’d probably laugh at her all the way back. “No, now that I’ve come this far, I’m

not going back until I find out exactly where he went. Don't stand here like this: you won't be able to catch up with him again!"

The driver gave his cap a defiant hitch. "The time has come to tell you I've got you clocked at seven bucks and eighty-five cents, and I didn't notice any pockybook in your hand when you got in. Where's it coming from?" He tapped his fingers sardonically on the rim of his wheel.

Prudence froze. Her handbag was exactly twenty or thirty miles away, back in her room at the residence club. She didn't have to answer; the driver was an old experienced hand at this sort of thing; he could read the signs.

"I thought so," he said, almost resignedly. He got down, opened the door. "Outside," he said. "If you was a man, I'd take it out of your jaw. Or if there was a cop anywhere within five miles, I'd have you run in. Take off that coat." He looked it over, slung it over his arm. "It'll have to do. Now if you want it back, you know what to do; just look me up with seven-eighty-five in your mitt. And for being so smart, you're gonna walk all the way back from here on your two little puppies."

"Don't leave me all alone, in the dark, in this God-forsaken place! I don't even know where I am!" she wailed after him.

"I'll tell you where you are," he called back remorselessly. "You're on your own!" The cab's taillight went streaking obliviously back the way they had just come.

She held the side of her head and looked helplessly all around her. Real detectives didn't run into these predicaments, she felt sure. It only happened to her! "Oh, why didn't I just mind my own business back at the library!" she lamented.

It was too cool out here in the wilds to stand still without a coat on, even though it was June. She might stand waiting here all night and no other machine would come along. The only thing to do was to keep walking until she came to a

house, and then ask to use the telephone. There must be a house somewhere around here.

She started in along the bypath the first car had taken, gloomy and forbidding as it was, because it seemed more likely there was a house some place farther along it, than out on this other one. They hadn't passed a single dwelling the whole time the cab was on the road, and she didn't want to walk still farther out along it; no telling where it led to. The man she'd been following must have had some destination. Even if she struck the very house he had gone to, there wouldn't really be much harm to it, because he didn't know who she was, he'd never seen her before. Neither had this Florence Turner, if she was there with him. She could just say she'd lost her way or something. Anyone would have looked good to her just then, out here alone in the dark the way she was.

If she'd been skittish of shadows on the city streets, there was reason enough for her to have St. Vitus' dance here; it was nothing but shadows. Once she came in sight of a little clearing, with a scarecrow fluttering at the far side of it, and nearly had heart failure for a minute. Another time an owl went "Who-o-o" up in a tree over her, and she ran about twenty yards before she could pull herself together and stop again. "Oh, if I ever get back to the nice safe library after tonight, I'll never—" she sobbed nervously.

The only reason she kept going on now was because she was afraid to turn back any more. Maybe that hadn't been a scarecrow after all—

The place was so set back from the road, so half hidden amidst the shrubbery, that she had almost passed it by before she even saw it there. She happened to glance to her right as she came to a break in the trees, and there was the unmistakable shadowy outline of a decrepit house. Not a chink of light showed from it, at least from where she was. Wheel ruts unmistakably led in toward it over the grass and weeds, but she wasn't much of a hand at this sort of lore, couldn't tell if they'd been made recently or long ago. The whole place had an appearance of not being lived in.

It took nearly as much courage to turn aside and start over toward it as it would have to continue on the road. It was anything but what she'd been hoping for, and she knew already it was useless to expect to find a telephone in such a ramshackle wreck.

The closer she got to it, the less inviting it became. True, it was two or three in the morning by now, and even if anyone had been living in it, they probably would have been fast asleep by this time, but it didn't seem possible such a forlorn, neglectedlooking place could be inhabited. Going up onto that ink-black porch and knocking for admittance took more nerve than she could muster. Heaven knows what she was liable to bring out on her; bats or rats or maybe some horrible hobos.

She decided she'd walk all around the outside of it just once, and if it didn't look any better from the sides and rear than it did from the front, she'd go back to the road and take her own chances on that some more. The side was no better than the front when she picked her way cautiously along it. Twigs snapped under her feet and little stones shifted, and made her heart miss a beat each time. But when she got around to the back, she saw two things at once that showed her she had been mistaken, there was someone in there after all. One was the car, the same car that had driven away in front of the residence club, standing at a little distance behind the house, under some

kind of warped toolshed or something. The other was a slit of light showing around three sides of a ground-floor window. It wasn't a brightly lighted pane by any means; the whole window still showed black under some kind of sacking or heavy covering; there was just this telltale yellow seam outlining three sides of it if you looked closely enough.

Before she could decide what to do about it, if anything, her gaze traveled a little higher up the side of the house and she saw something else that brought her heart up into her throat. She choked back an inadvertent scream just in time. it was a face. A round white face staring down at her from one of the upper windows, dimly visible behind the dusty pane.

Prudence Roberts started to back away apprehensively a step at a time, staring up at it spellbound as she did so, and ready at any moment to turn and run for her life, away from whomever or whatever that was up there. But before she could carry out the impulse, she saw something else that changed her mind, rooted her to the spot. Two wavering white hands had appeared, just under the ghost-like face. They were making signs to her, desperate, pleading signs. They beckoned her nearer, then they clasped together imploringly, as if trying to say, "Don't go away, don't leave me."

Prudence drew a little nearer again. The hands were warning her to silence now, one pointing downward toward the floor below, the other holding a cautioning finger to their owner's mouth.

It was a young girl; Prudence could make out that much, but most of the pantomime was lost through the blurred dust-caked pane. She gestured back to her with upcurved fingers, meaning, "Open the window so I can hear you."

It took the girl a long time. The window was either fastened in some way or warped from lack of use, or else it stuck just because she was trying to do it without making any noise. The sash finally jarred up a short distance, with

an alarming creaking and grating in spite of her best efforts. Or at least it seemed so in the preternatural stillness that reigned about the place. They both held their breaths for a wary moment, as if by mutual understanding.

Then as Prudence moved in still closer under the window, a faint sibilance came down to her from the narrow opening.

“Please take me away from here. Oh, please help me to get away from here.”

“What’s the matter?” Prudence whispered back.

Both alike were afraid to use too much breath even to whisper, it was so quiet outside the house. It was hard for them to make themselves understood. She missed most of the other’s answer, all but:

“They won’t let me go. I think they’re going to kill me. They haven’t given me anything to eat in two whole days now.”

Prudence inhaled fearfully. “Can you climb out through there and let yourself drop from the sill? I’ll get a seat cover from that car and put it under you.”

“I’m chained to the bed up here. I’ve pulled it over little by little to the window. Oh, please hurry and bring someone back with you; that’s the only way—”

Prudence nodded in agreement, made hasty encouraging signs as she started to draw away. “I’ll run all the way back to where the two roads meet, and stop the first car that comes al—”

Suddenly she froze, and at the same instant seemed to light up yellowly from head to foot, like a sort of living torch. A great fan of light spread out from the doorway before her, and in the middle of it a wavering shadow began to lengthen toward her along the ground.

“Come in, sweetheart, and stay a while,” a man’s voice said slurringly. He sauntered out toward her with lithe, springy determination. Behind him in the doorway were another man and a woman.

“Naw, don’t be bashful,” he went on, moving around in back of her and prodding her toward the house with his gun. “You ain’t going on nowheres else from here. You’ve reached your final destination.”

A well-dressed, middle-aged man was sitting beside the lieutenant’s desk, forearm supporting his head, shading his eyes with outstretched fingers, when Murphy and every other man jack available came piling in, responding to the urgent summons.

The lieutenant had three desk phones going at once, and still found time to say, “Close that door, I don’t want a word of this to get out,” to the last man in. He hung up—click, click, clack—speared a shaking finger at the operatives forming into line before him.

“This is Mr. Martin Rapf, men,” he said tensely. “I won’t ask him to repeat what he’s just said to me; he’s not in any condition to talk right now. His young daughter, Virginia, left home on the night of May 17th and she hasn’t been seen since. He and Mrs. Rapf received an anonymous telephone call that same night, before they’d even had time to become alarmed at her absence, informing them not to expect her back and warning them above all not to report her missing to us. Late the next day Mr. Rapf received a ransom note demanding fifty thousand dollars. This is it here.”

Everyone in the room fastened their eyes on it as he spun it around on his desk to face them. At first sight it seemed to be a telegram. It was an actual telegraph blank form, taken from some office pad, with strips of paper containing printed words pasted on it.

“It wasn’t filed, of course; it was slipped under the front door in an unaddressed envelope,” the lieutenant went on. “The instructions didn’t come for two more days, by

telephone again. Mr. Rapf had raised the amount and was waiting for them. They were rather amateurish, to say the least. And amateurs are more to be dreaded than professionals at this sort of thing, as you men well know. He was to bring the money along in a cigar box, he was to go all the way out to a certain seldom-used suburban crossroads, and wait there. Then when a closed car with its rear windows down drove slowly by and sounded its horn three times, two short ones and a long one, he was to pitch the cigar box in the back of it through the open window and go home.

"In about a quarter of an hour a closed car with its windows down came along fairly slowly. Mr. Rapf was too concerned about his daughter's safety even to risk memorizing the numerals on its license plates, which were plainly exposed to view. A truck going crosswise to it threatened to block it at the intersection, and it gave three blasts of its horn, two short ones and a long one. Mr. Rapf threw the cigar box in through its rear window and watched it pick up speed and drive away. He was too excited and overwrought to start back immediately, and in less than five minutes, while he was still there, a second car came along with its windows down and its license plates removed. It gave three blasts of its horn, without there being any obstruction ahead. He ran out toward it to try and explain, but only succeeded in frightening it off. It put on speed and got away from him. I don't know whether it was actually a ghastly coincidence, or whether an unspeakable trick was perpetrated on him, to get twice the amount they had originally asked. Probably just a hideous coincidence, though, because he would have been just as willing to give them one hundred thousand from the beginning.

"At any rate, what it succeeded in doing was to throw a hitch into the negotiations, make them nervous and skittish. They contacted him again several days later, refused to

believe his explanation, and breathed dire threats against the girl. He pleaded with them for another chance, and asked for more time to raise a second fifty thousand. He's been holding it in readiness for some time now, and they're apparently suffering from a bad case of fright; they cancel each set of new instructions as fast as they issue them to him. Wait'll I get through, please, will you, Murphy? It's five days since Mr. Rapf last heard from them, and he is convinced that—" He didn't finish it, out of consideration for the agonized man sitting there. Then he went ahead briskly: "Now here's Miss Rapf's description, and here's what our first move is going to be. Twenty years old, weight so-and-so, height so-and-so, light-brown hair—"

"She was wearing a pale-pink party dress and dancing shoes when she left the house," Rapf supplied forlornly.

"We don't pin any reliance on items of apparel in matters of this kind," the lieutenant explained to him in a kindly aside. "That's for amnesia cases or straight disappearances. They almost invariably discard the victim's clothes, to make accidental recognition harder. Some woman in the outfit will usually supply her with her own things."

"It's too late, lieutenant; it's too late," the man who sat facing him murmured grief-strickenly. "I know it; I'm sure of it."

"We have no proof that it is," the lieutenant replied reassuringly. "But if it is, Mr. Rapf, you have only yourself to blame for waiting this long to come to us. If you'd come to us sooner, you might have your daughter back by now—"

He broke off short. "What's the matter, Murphy?" he snapped. "What are you climbing halfway across the desk at me like that for?"

"Will you let me get a word in and tell you, lieutenant?" Murphy exclaimed with a fine show of exasperated insubordination. "I been trying to for the last five minutes! That librarian, that Miss Roberts that came in here the other night—It was this thing she stumbled over

accidentally then already. It must have been! It's the same message."

The lieutenant's jaw dropped well below his collar button. "Ho-ly smoke!" he exhaled. "Say, she's a smart young woman all right!"

"Yeah, she's so smart we laughed her out of the place, book and all," Murphy said bitterly. "She practically hands it to us on a silver platter, and you and me, both, we think it's the funniest thing we ever heard of."

"Never mind that now! Go out and get hold of her! Bring her in here fast!"

"She's practically standing in front of you!" The door swung closed after Murphy.

Miss Everett, the hatchet-faced librarian, felt called upon to interfere at the commotion that started up less than five minutes later at the usually placid new-membership desk, which happened to be closest to the front door.

"Will you kindly keep your voice down, young man?" she said severely, sailing over. "This is a library, not a—"

"I haven't got time to keep my voice down! Where's Prudence Roberts? She's wanted at headquarters right away."

"She didn't come to work this morning. It's the first time she's ever missed a day since she's been with the library. What is it she's wanted—" But there was just a rush of outgoing air where he'd been standing until then. Miss Everett looked startledly at the other librarian. "What was that he just said?"

"It sounded to me like 'Skip it, toots.' "

Miss Everett looked blankly over her shoulder to see if anyone else was standing there, but no one was.

In a matter of minutes Murphy had burst in on them again, looking a good deal more harried than the first time. "Something's happened to her. She hasn't been at her rooming house all night either, and that's the first time that happened too! Listen. There was a card went with that book

she brought to us, showing who had it out and all that. Get it out quick; let me have it!”

He couldn’t have remembered its name just then to save his life, and it might have taken them until closing time and after to wade through the library’s filing system. But no matter how much of a battle-ax this Miss Everett both looked and was, one thing must be said in her favor: she had an uncanny memory when it came to damaged library property. “The reference card on ‘Manuela Gets Her Man,’ by Ollivant,” she snapped succinctly to her helpers. And in no time it was in his hands.

His face lighted. He brought his fist down on the counter with a bang that brought every nose in the place up out of its book, and for once Miss Everett forgot to remonstrate or even frown. Thank God for her methodical mind! he exulted. Trasker, check Baumgarten, check; Turner, question mark. It’s as good as though she left full directions behind her!”

“What was it he said that time?” puzzled Miss Everett, as the doors flapped hectically to and fro behind him.

“It sounded to me like ‘Keep your fingers crossed.’ Only, I’m not sure if it was ‘fingers’ or—”

“It’s getting dark again,” Virginia Rapf whimpered frightenedly, dragging herself along the floor toward her fellow captive. “Each time night comes, I think they’re going to . . . you know! Maybe tonight they will.”

Prudence Roberts was fully as frightened as the other girl, but simply because one of them had to keep the other’s courage up, she wouldn’t let herself show it. “No, they won’t; they wouldn’t dare!” she said with a confidence she was far from feeling.

She went ahead tinkering futilely with the small padlock and chain that secured her to the foot of the bed. it was the

same type that is used to fasten bicycles to something in the owner's absence, only of course the chain had not been left in an open loop or she could simply have withdrawn her hand. It was fastened tight around her wrist by passing the clasp of the lock through two of the small links at once. it permitted her a radius of action of not more than three or four yards around the foot of the bed at most. Virginia Rapf was similarly attached to the opposite side.

"In books you read," Prudence remarked, "women prisoners always seem to be able to open anything from a strong box to a cell door with just a hairpin. I don't seem to have the knack, somehow. This is the last one I have left."

"If you couldn't do it before, while it was light, you'll never be able to do it in the dark."

"I guess you're right," Prudence sighed. "There it goes, out of shape like all the rest, anyway." She tossed it away with a little plink.

"Oh, if you'd only moved away from under that window a minute sooner, they wouldn't have seen you out there, you might have been able to—"

"No use crying over spilt milk," Prudence said briskly.

Sounds reached them from outside presently, after they'd been lying silent on the floor for a while.

"Listen," Virginia Rapf breathed. "There's someone moving around down there, under the window. You can hear the ground crunch every once in a while."

Something crashed violently, and they both gave a start.

"What was that, their car?" asked Virginia Rapf.

"No, it sounded like a tin can of some kind; something he threw away."

A voice called out of the back door: "Have you got enough?"

The answer seemed to come from around the side of the house. "No, gimme the other one too."

A few moments later a second tinny clash reached their tense ears. They waited, hearts pounding furiously under

their ribs. A sense of impending danger assailed Prudence.

"What's that funny smell?" Virginia Rapf whispered fearfully. "Do you notice it? Like—"

Prudence supplied the word before she realized its portent. "Gasoline." The frightful implication hit the two of them at once. The other girl gave a sob of convulsive terror, cringed against her. Prudence threw her arms about her, tried to calm her. "Shh! Don't be frightened. No, they wouldn't do that, they couldn't be that inhuman." But her own terror was half stifling her.

One of their captors' voices sounded directly under them, with a terrible clarity. "All right, get in the car, Flo. You too, Duke, I'm about ready."

They heard the woman answer him, and there was unmistakable horror even in her tones. "Oh, not that way, Eddie. You're going to finish them first, aren't you?"

He laughed coarsely. "What's the difference? The smoke'll finish them in a minute or two; they won't suffer none. All right, soft-hearted, have it your own way. I'll go up and give 'em a clip on the head apiece, if it makes you feel any better." His tread started up the rickety stairs.

They were almost crazed with fear. Prudence fought to keep her presence of mind.

"Get under the bed, quick!" she panted hoarsely.

But the other girl gave a convulsive heave in her arms, then fell limp. She'd fainted dead away. The oncoming tread was halfway up the stairs now. He was taking his time, no hurry. Outside in the open she heard the woman's voice once more, in sharp remonstrance.

"Wait a minute, you dope; not yet! Wait'll Eddie gets out first!"

The man with her must have struck a match. "He can make it; let's see him run for it," he answered jeeringly. "I still owe him something for that hot-foot he gave me one time, remember?"

Prudence had let the other girl roll lifelessly out of her arms, and squirmed under the bed herself, not to try to save her own skin but to do the little that could be done to try to save both of them, futile as she knew it to be. She twisted like a catepillar, clawed at her own foot, got her right shoe off. She'd never gone in for these stylish featherweight sandals with spindly heels, and she was glad of that now. It was a good strong substantial Oxford, nearly as heavy as a man's, with a club heel. She got a grasp on it by the toe, then twisted her body around so that her legs were toward the side the room door gave onto. She reared one at the knee, held it poised, backed up as far as the height of the bed would allow it to be.

The door opened and he came in, lightless. He didn't need a light for a simple little job like this—stunning two helpless girls chained to a bed. He started around toward the foot of it, evidently thinking they were crouched there hiding from him. Her left leg suddenly shot out between his two, like a spoke, tripping him neatly.

He went floundering forward on his face with a muffled curse. She had hoped he might hit his head, be dazed by the impact if only for a second or two. He wasn't; he must have broken the fall with his arm. She threshed her body madly around the other way again, to get her free arm in play with the shoe for a weapon. She began to rain blows on him with it, trying to get his head with the heel. That went wrong too. He'd fallen too far out along the floor, the chain wouldn't let her come out any farther after him. She couldn't reach any higher up than his muscular shoulders with the shoe, and its blows fell ineffectively there.

Raucous laughter was coming from somewhere outside, topped by warning screams. "Eddie, hurry up and get out, you fool! Duke's started it already!" They held no meaning for Prudence; she was too absorbed in this last despairing attempt to save herself and her fellow prisoner.

But he must have heard and understood them. The room was no longer as inky black as before. A strange wan light was beginning to peer up below the window, like a satanic moonrise. He jumped to his feet with a snarl, turned and fired down pointblank at Prudence as she tried to writhe hastily back under cover. The bullet his the iron rim of the bedstead directly over her eyes and glanced inside. He was too yellow to linger and try again. Spurred by the screamed warnings and the increasing brightness, he bolted from the room and went crashing down the stairs three at a time.

A second shot went off just as he reached the back doorway, and she mistakenly thought he had fired at his fellow kidnaper in retaliation for the ghastly practical joke played on him. Then there was a whole volley of shots, more than just one gun could have fired. The car engine started up with an abortive flurry, then died down again where it was without moving. But her mind was too full of horror at the imminent doom that threatened to engulf both herself and Virginia Rapf, to realize the meaning of anything she dimly heard going on below. Anything but that sullen hungry crackle, like bundles of twigs snapping, that kept growing louder from minute to minute. They had been left hopelessly chained, to be cremated alive!

She screamed her lungs out, and at the same time knew that screaming wasn’t going to save her or the other girl. She began to hammer futilely with her shoe at the chain holding her, so slender yet so strong, and knew that wasn’t going to save her either.

Heavy steps pounded up the staircase again, and for a moment she thought he’d come back to finish the two of them after all, and was glad of it. Anything was better than being roasted alive. She wouldn’t try to hide this time.

The figure that came tearing through the thickening smoke haze toward her was already bending down above her before she looked and saw that it was Murphy. She’d

seen some beautiful pictures in art galleries in her time, but he was more beautiful to her eyes than a Rubens portrait.

"All right, chin up, keep cool," he said briefly, so she wouldn't lose her head and impede him.

"Get the key to these locks! The short dark one has them."

"He's dead and there's no time. Lean back. Stretch it out tight and lean out of the way!" He fired and the small chain snapped in two. "Jump! You can't get down the stairs any more." His second shot, freeing Virginia Rapf, punctuated the order.

Prudence flung up the window, climbed awkwardly across the sill, feet first. Then clung there terrified as an intolerable haze of heat rose up under her from below. She glimpsed two men running up under her with a blanket or lap robe from the car stretched out between them.

"I can't; it's . . . it's right under me!"

He gave her an unceremonious shove in the middle of the back and she went hurtling out into space with a screech. The two with the blanket got there just about the same time she did. Murphy hadn't waited to make sure; a broken leg was preferable to being incinerated. She hit the ground through the lap robe and all, but at least it broke the direct force of the fall.

They cleared it for the next arrival by rolling her out at one side, and by the time she had picked herself dazedly to her feet, Virginia Rapf was already lying in it, thrown there by him from above.

"Hurry it up, Murph!" she heard one of them shout frightenedly, and instinctively caught at the other girl, dragged her off it to clear the way for him. He crouched with both feet on the sill, came sailing down, and even before he'd hit the blanket, there was a dull roar behind him as the roof caved in, and a great gush of sparks went shooting straight up into the dark night sky.

They were still too close; they all had to draw hurriedly back away from the unbearable heat beginning to radiate from it. Murphy came last, as might have been expected, dragging a very dead kidnaper—the one called Eddie—along the ground after him by the collar of his coat. Prudence saw the other one, Duke, slumped inertly over the wheel of the car he had never had time to make his getaway in, either already dead or rapidly dying. A disheveled blond scarcecrow that had been Florence Turner was apparently the only survivor of the trio. She kept whimpering placatingly, “I didn’t want to do that to them! I didn’t want to do that to them!” over and over, as though she still didn’t realize they had been saved in time.

Virginia Rapf was coming out of her long faint. It was kinder, Prudence thought, that she had been spared those last few horrible moments; she had been through enough without that.

“Rush her downtown with you, fellow!” Murphy said. “Her dad’s waiting for her; he doesn’t know yet, I shot out here so fast the minute I located that taxi driver outside the residence club, who remembered driving Miss Roberts out to this vicinity, that I didn’t even have time to notify headquarters, just picked up whoever I could on the way.”

He came over to where Prudence was standing, staring at the fire with horrified fascination.

“How do you feel? Are you O.K.?” he murmured, brow furrowed with a proprietary anxiety.

“Strange as it may be,” she admitted in surprise, “I seem to feel perfectly all right; can’t find a thing the matter with me.”

Back at the library the following day—and what a world away it seemed from the scenes of violence she had just lived through—the acidulous Miss Everett came up to her just before closing time with, of all things, a twinkle in her eyes. Either that or there was a flaw in her glasses.

“You don’t have to stay to the very last minute . . . er . . . toots,” she confided. “Your boy friend’s waiting for you outside; I just saw him through the window.”

There he was holding up the front of the library when Prudence Roberts emerged a moment or two later.

“The lieutenant would like to see you to personally convey his thanks on behalf of the department,” he said. “And afterward I . . . uh . . . know where there’s a real high-brow pitcher showing, awful refined.”

Prudence pondered the invitation. “No,” she said finally. “Make it a nice snappy gangster movie and you’re on. I’ve got so used to excitement in the last few days, I’d feel sort of lost without it.”

THE CASE OF THE TALKING EYES

The house was a pleasant two-story suburban set in its own plot of ground, not close enough to its neighbors to impair privacy and seclusion, but not far enough away to be lonely or isolated. You could catch glimpses of them all around it through the trees and over the tops of the hedges that separated the lawns. You couldn’t command a full view of any of them, and they couldn’t command a full view of the house, either.

It had a back porch and a front one, and it had rambler roses trained around the porch posts both in front and in back.

It was midafternoon and Mrs. Janet Miller was sitting in her chair on the back porch. That was because the back of the house faced west and got the afternoon sun. Mornings she sat on the front porch, afternoons on the back. Life had long ago been reduced to its barest essentials for her. The feel of the warm sun on her, the sight of the blue sky over her, the sound of Vern Miller’s voice in her ears—those were the only things it held any more, those were the only things left to her. She didn’t ask for more, so long as those weren’t taken from her as everything else had been.

She sat there uncomplaining, content, almost—yes, almost happy, in her rubber-tired wheelchair, a blanket tucked snugly about her feet and lap. She could feel the sun

on her, she could see the sky out through the porch posts, and as for the sound of his voice, that would come a little later—it was too early for that yet. She had that much more to look forward to, at least.

She was sixty, with a pink-cheeked, unlined face, snow-white hair, trustful pottery-blue eyes. She was completely, hopelessly paralyzed from head to foot, had been for the past ten years.

It seemed long ago, another lifetime ago now, that she had last walked on floors, moved up and down stairs, raised her hands to her hair to brush it, to her face to wash it, to her mouth to feed it, or expressed the thoughts that were still as clear, as undimmed as ever in her mind, by the sound of words issuing from her mouth. All that was gone now, gone and unlamented. She had trained herself, forced herself, steeled herself, not to lament it.

No one would ever know what it had cost her to accomplish that much, no one would ever know the private purgatory she had been through, the Via Dolorosa she had traversed. But she had emerged now, she had won her battle. She held tight to what remained to her. No monster-god ever worshipped by the most benighted savages could be cruel enough to take that pitiful remainder from her. The sun, the sky, Vern’s voice, remained. She had achieved resignation, acceptance, content. So she sat there motionless in the slanting sun, behind the twining rambler-rose tendrils. Something human, something living, that wanted its happiness too.

The doorbell rang around on the other side of the house, and the footsteps of Vera, Vern’s wife, started from the floor above to answer it. But quickly, with a rush, as though she had been waiting for this summons, as though she had seen

who it was from one of the upper windows. It must be company then, and not just a tradesman or peddler.

Janet Miller could hear the front door open, then quickly close again, from where she sat. But no gush of feminine salutations followed. Instead a man's voice said, cautiously muted, but not too muted to carry to the sharp ears whose sensitivity had increased rather than diminished since the loss of other faculties: "You alone?"

And Vera's voice answered: "Yes. Did anyone see you come in?"

That first, husky, guarded voice hadn't been *the* voice, hadn't been Vern's. It couldn't be this early—not for another hour or more yet. Who could it be then? A man—that meant it was a friend of Vern's, of course. She knew all his friends and tried to place this one, but couldn't. They never came at this hour. They were all busy downtown, as Vern was himself.

Well, she'd know in a minute. One thing about Vern's friends, the first thing they all did was come and say hello to her, ask her how she was, usually bring her something, some little trifle or dainty. Vera would bring him out with her to see her, or else wheel her in to where he was. She liked to meet company. That wasn't one of the three essentials; that was a little pampering she allowed herself.

But instead of coming through the hall that bisected the house, out to where she was, they turned off into the living-room, and she heard the door close after them, and from then on there wasn't another sound.

She couldn't understand that. Vera had never closed the door like that when they had company before. It must have been just absentmindedness on her part. She'd done it without thinking. Or else maybe it was some little surprise they were preparing, for herself or for Vern, and they wanted to make sure of keeping it a secret. But Vern's birthday was long past, and her own didn't come until February—

She waited patiently but the door stayed closed. It seemed she wasn't to meet this caller, or be wheeled in to him. She sighed a little, disappointedly.

Then suddenly, without warning, they came through into the back of the house, the kitchen. It had a window looking out on the back porch, just a little to one side of where she was seated. She could even see into a very narrow strip of the room by looking out of the far corners of her eyes. She could move her eyes, of course.

Vera came in there first, the caller after her. She seemed to set something down on the kitchen table, then she started to undo it with a great crackling and rattling of paper. Some sort of parcel, evidently. So they were busied about a surprise, a gift, after all.

She heard Vera say, "Where'd you ever get this idea from?" with a sort of admiring, complimentary ring to her voice.

The man answered: "Reading in the papers about how they were passing them out over in London and Paris, when they were scared war was going to break out. Someone I know was over there at the time and brought some of them back with him. I got hold of these from him."

"D'yuh think it'll work?" she asked.

He said: "Well, it's the best idea of the lot we've had so far, isn't it?"

"That doesn't say much for some of the others," Vera answered.

The crackle of unwrapping paper had continued uninterruptedly until now. It stopped at last.

There was a moment's silence, then she said: "Aren't they funny-looking things?"

The man said: "They'll do the trick, though. Never mind how they look."

The paper crackled one last time, then Vera said: "What'd you bring two for?"

"One for the old lady," he answered.

Janet Miller experienced a pleasant little glow of anticipation. They had something for her, they were going to give her something, some little present or memento.

"What for?" she heard Vera say impatiently. "Why not both of them at once?"

"Use your head," the man growled. "That's the one thing we want to avoid. She's our immunity; don't you get it? Sort of like an alibi. As long as nothing happens to her, it's good for an accident. But if they both go then it looks too much like we wanted the decks cleared. Don't let's load the dice against ourselves. One out of three people in a house, we can get away with. But two out of three, and it'll begin to smell fishy. Don't forget you're in the same room with him. She's up at the other end of the hall. How's it going to look if he goes and you, right next to him, don't? And then she goes too, all the way out in another room, with a couple of closed doors in between?"

"All right," Vera conceded grudgingly. "But if you had to push her around all day and wait on her like I do—"

The sunlight falling on Janet Miller seemed to have changed. It was cold, baleful now. She could hear her heart beating, pounding against her ribs, and her breath was coming fast, through fear-distended nostrils.

The man went on: "You better let me show you how to put it on right while I'm here, so you'll know how it goes when the time comes."

Vera started to say something, but her voice was blurred out as though she had stuck her head into a bag.

Suddenly she came too close to the window, moved inadvertently within that narrow segment of the room that the far corners of Janet Miller's eyes could encompass. Her whole head had vanished. If the paralytic had been capable of sound, she would have screamed. Vera had what looked

like a horse's feed bag up over her entire face. A nozzle protruded from this and went down somewhere out of sight. Two round gogglelike disks for eyes.

A gas mask!

She shifted further back into the room, out of sight again. Her voice sounded clearly once more. She must have taken it off. "Whew! Stuffy. Are you sure it'll work? I'm not in this to take any chances myself, you know."

"They're made to stand much worse stuff than you're going to get tonight."

"Where'll I keep them? I don't want him to find them before I'm ready for them. I'm afraid if I take them up to the room with me he'll—"

Janet Miller heard the clang of the oven door being opened, pushed closed again. "Here's a place he'll never look into in a million years. Supper's all cooked. I can just warm it on top of the stove. He never bothers with the kitchen much. I'll come down and get them the last thing, after he's asleep. Take the paper out with you."

More crackle of paper, this time being smoothed and folded small, to fit into someone's pocket.

The man's voice said: "That's that. Now have you got everything straight? Put the spare on the old lady. Don't cross me up on that. We're just laying ourselves wide open if you let her go with him. Don't put your own on ahead of time—he's liable to wake up and see you wearing it. Hold out as long as you can before you get into it; it won't hurt you to get a little of the stuff in you. Remember you've got an inhalator squad to buck afterwards.

"Get rid of all the papers and rags stuffed under the windows before they get here. And when you phone the alarm, don't speak over the phone. Your voice is liable to sound too strong. Just knock the receiver off and leave it

that way; that'll bring 'em. It'll take a little longer, but what've you got to lose? You're in a fade-out on the floor near the door, just couldn't make it. But the most important thing of all is the masks. If they're found around here afterwards, we're cooked. Take hers and yours off before they get here, when you're sure he's finished, and lock 'em both in the rumble seat of the car, out in the garage. You won't be using it after he's gone. You don't even know how to drive. In a day or two you phone the Ajax Garage—that's my place—to come and get it, take it off your hands, sell it for you. I'll take them out at my end, return them as soon as I can. No one'll ever know the difference."

"How long'll I give him? I've heard of them pulling people through after working over 'em an hour, sometimes more. We want to make sure that don't happen."

"Just see that he soaks up enough, and you can bet all the oxygen in the world won't pull him through. Watch his face. When that gets good and blue, all mottled, you got nothing more to worry about. You better lie low for about a month afterwards. Give them a chance to settle up the estate and all that. I'll give you a ring in—say thirty days from tonight. Are you sure everything's shaped up right?"

"Yeah. He's insured up to his ears. All his stock's been bought in my name. The business has been doing pretty good, and there are no other relatives to horn in. We'll be set for life, Jimmy darling. That's why I held out against doing it any other way but this. There wouldn't've been any sense to it."

"Where's the old lady?" he asked unexpectedly.

"On the back porch where she always is."

"Hey, she can hear us, can't she? Let's get out of here!"

She laughed callously. "Suppose she does? What can she do? Who can she tell? She can't talk, she can't write, she can't even make signs."

They didn't even bother looking out at her to see whether she was dozing or awake.

“All right,” was the last thing he said. “Don’t get frightened now. Just keep your head about you, and everything’ll pan out. See you in a month.” They exchanged a kiss. A blood-red kiss of death.

Then they went out of the kitchen, back into the living-room. They opened the side door of that, came out into the hall. The front door opened and closed again and Janet Miller was left alone in the house—with her knowledge and the potential murderess of her son.

Vernon Miller was a genial, easy-going, goodhearted, unsuspicious sort of man, the kind that so often draws a woman like Vera to be his life partner. He was no easy mark, no sap. He was wary enough in business, in the outside world of men and affairs could even be implacable, hard-boiled, if the occasion warranted. The trouble was, he let his defenses down in the wrong place—laid himself wide open in the home.

Janet Miller heard his key in the door. He said “Hello, there!” to the house in general. Vera came down the stairs, and Janet Miller heard them exchange a kiss. A Judas kiss.

Then he came on out to the back porch, to see her, and the third component of her trinity, the sound of his voice, was vouchsafed her.

“Did you enjoy the sun?”

Her eyes.

“Want me to take you in now?”

Her terrible eyes.

“Look what I brought you.”

Her eyes, her terrible imploring eyes.

“Did you miss me? Glad I’m back? Is that why you’re looking at me like that?” He squatted down to the level of the chair, cupped his hand to his knees. “What’re you trying to tell me, darling?”

Her eyes, her haunted eyes.

“Shall I try for you? Blink them once for no, twice for yes.” This was an old established code between them, their only link. “Are you hungry?” No. “Are you chilly?” No. “Are you—”

Vera called out from the kitchen, interrupted them as if guessing what Janet was trying to do: “Don’t stay out there all night, Vern. I’m all ready for you.”

Her eyes, her despairing eyes.

He straightened up, shifted around behind the chair, out of her sight, and rolled her into the living-room ahead of him. Left her there for a minute while he went upstairs.

Even her only weapon, the use of her eyes, was blunted, for they almost always followed him around a room, in and out of doors, even on other nights when they had no terrible message to deliver, so how could he be expected to tell the difference tonight?

Vera finished setting the table. “All right, Vern,” she called up.

He came down again, hands freshly washed, guided her chair into the dining room, pushed it close up beside Vera at the table, sat down opposite them. Vera was the one who always fed her.

He opened his napkin, looked down, began to spoon soup.

Vera broke the brief preliminary silence. “She won’t open her mouth.”

She was trying to force a spoonful through Janet Miller’s clenched teeth. Janet Miller had retained just enough muscular control of her jaws still to be able to close or slightly relax her mouth, sufficiently to take food. It was tightly shut now.

He looked over at her and she blinked at him. Singly, three times. No, no, no.

“Don’t you feel well? Don’t you want any?”

“She’s just being stubborn,” Vera said. “She was perfectly all right all day.”

Yes, I was, thought Janet Miller harrowingly, until you let death into my son's house.

She kept trying to force the spoon through. Janet Miller resisted it. It tilted and the soup splashed off. "Now look at that!" she exclaimed short-temperedly.

"Do you want me to feed you?" he asked.

She couldn't signal those three double blinks fast enough. Yes, yes, yes.

He got up and moved the wheelchair around beside his own.

Vera began to apply herself to her own meal with a muttered: "You can have the job; see if I care."

So far so good. She was over beside him now, in closer contact. So near and yet so far. Her pitiful, desperate plan was first to rivet his attention to the fact that something was wrong, something was troubling her, and hold it there. That was the easiest part of it. Once that was accomplished, she must find some way of centering his interest on that oven wherein the two gas masks lay concealed. Get him to go to it, open it himself if possible. Failing that, get him to force Vera to go to it, open it.

In such event Vera would undoubtedly attempt to smuggle them out of their hiding place, find another for them without letting him see her do it. But they were large, bulky, not easily concealed. The chances of his discovering them would be that much greater. Even if he did discover them, that by no means guaranteed that he would understand their implication, realize they meant his own intended death. Vera would probably find some explanation to fob off on him. But she might lose her nerve, it might result in a postponement if nothing else. Lacking speech with which to warn him, that was the most Janet Miller could hope for.

So she took the long, devious, roundabout path that was the only one open to her, to try to focus his attention on the gas oven—by refusing to touch, one by one, all the dishes that had been prepared on the open burners on top of the stove.

"She's not touching a thing," he said finally. He put his hand solicitously to her forehead, to feel if she had a temperature. It was moist with anguish.

"Don't humor her so much," Vera snapped. "There's nothing the matter with this food."

"What is it, dear, aren't you hungry?" She'd been waiting for that! She gave him the yes-signal an infinite number of times.

"She is hungry!" he said in surprise.

"Then why doesn't she eat what's put before her?" Vera said furiously.

"Maybe she wants something special."

Step two! Oh, if it only kept up like this. If she was only given the chance to save him . . .

"I like that," sniffed Vera disdainfully. She was still not on guard against her. As soon as that happened, Janet Miller knew, it would double her difficulties.

He leaned toward her tenderly. "Do you want something special, dear? Something that's not on the table?"

Yes, yes, yes, yes, came her agonized messages.

"See, I knew it!" he said triumphantly.

"Well, she's not going to get it," Vera snapped.

He gave her a rebuking look. All he said, mildly but firmly, was: "Yes, she is." But his meaning was plain—"would you deprive anyone so unfortunate of a little thing like that, if you knew it would make her a little happier?"

Vera saw she'd gone too far. She tried to cover up her blunder. "How you going to tell what it is, anyway?" she asked sulkily.

"I'll make it my business to," he said, a little coldly.

Janet Miller’s thoughts were racing ahead. Many things could be prepared in that oven, but most of them, roasts, pies, and so forth were out of the question, needed long cooking ahead. It must be something that could only be made in there, and yet would not take any time. It held a wire rack in it, a grill. That was it! Bacon. That could be made almost instantly, and there was always some in the house.

He was patiently running through a list of delicacies, trying to arrive at the right one by a process of elimination. “Do you want croquettes?” No. “Succotash?” No—

“Meantime your own meal is getting cold,” Vera observed sarcastically. Her nerves were a little on edge, with what she knew lay ahead. She was not ordinarily so heartless about Janet, to give her her due. Or rather she was, but took good pains to keep it concealed from him. His mother could have told him a different story of what went on in the daytime, when he wasn’t home.

He began to run out of food names; his suggestions came slower, were about ready to falter to a stop. Fear stabbed at her. She widened her eyes at him imploringly to go on.

Vera came to her aid without meaning to. “It’s no use, Vern,” she said disgustedly. “Are you going to keep this up all night?”

Her latent opposition only served to solidify his determination, spurred him on to further attempts. “I’m not going to let her go away from this table hungry!” he said stubbornly, and started in again, this time with breakfast dishes, for he had run out of supper ones. “Cereal?” No. “Ham and eggs?” No. Oh, how close he was getting. “Bacon?”

Yes, yes, yes, went her eyes. Her heart sang a paean of gratitude.

He smacked his palm down on the table in vindication.

“I knew I’d get it finally.”

Her eyes left him, shifted appraisingly over to Vera. All the color had drained from her face; it was white as the tablecloth before her. The two women, the mother and the wife, the would-be savior and the would-be killer, exchanged a long measured look. “So you heard us!” was in Vera’s look. “So you know.” And then with cruel, easily read derision, “Well, try to tell him. Try to save him.”

He said plaintively: “You heard what she wants, Vera. What’re you sitting there for? Go out and broil her a few strips.”

Vera’s face was that of a trapped thing. She swallowed, though she hadn’t been chewing just then. “I should say not. I got one meal ready. I’m not going to get up in the middle of it and start another! It’ll get the stove all greasy and—and—”

He threw his napkin down. “I’ll do it myself then. That’s one of the few things I do know how to cook—bacon.” But before he could move she had shot up from her chair, streaked over toward the doorless opening that led to the kitchen, as though something were burning in there.

“Can’t you take a joke?” she said thickly. “What kind of a wife d’you take me for? I wouldn’t let you, after you’ve been working hard all day. Won’t take a minute . . .”

He was so defenseless, so unguarded—because he thought he’d left all antagonists outside the front door. He fell for it, grinned amiably after her.

Oh, if he’d only keep looking, only keep watching her from where he was! He could see the oven door from where he was sitting. He could see what she’d have to take out of it in another minute, right from in here. But there was no suspicion in his heart, no thought of treachery. He turned back toward Janet again, smiled into her face reassuringly, patted one of her nerveless hands.

For once her eyes had no time for him. They kept staring past him into the lighted kitchen. If only he’d turn and follow their direction with his own!

She saw Vera glance craftily out at them first, measuring her chances of remaining undetected in what she was about to do. Then she crouched down, let out the oven flap. Then she looked again, to make sure the position of his head hadn't shifted in the meantime. Then she crushed the two bulky olive-drab masks to her, turned furtively away with them so that her back was to the dining room, sidled across the room that way, sidewise, and thrust them up into a seldom-used cupboard where preserves were kept.

So it hadn't been just an evil dream. There was murder in the house with them. Janet Miller's eyes hadn't been idle while the brief transfer was occurring. They had shifted frantically from Vera to him, from him to Vera, trying to draw his own after them, to look in there.

She failed. He misunderstood, thought she was simply impatient for the bacon. "You'll have it in a minute now," he soothed, but he kept on eating his own meal without looking into the kitchen.

Vera came in with it finally, and the smile she gave Janet Miller was not a sweet, solicitous one as he thought, it was a she-devil's smile of mockery and refined cruelty. She knew Janet had seen what she'd done in there just now, and she was taunting her with her inability to communicate it to him.

"Here we are," she purred. "Nice and crispy, done to a turn!"

"Thanks, Vera." The doomed man smiled up at her gratefully.

The meal finished, he retired to the living-room to read his paper, wheeled her with him. Vera, with a grim, gloating look at her, went back into the kitchen to wash the dishes.

Janet Miller's eyes were on his face the whole time they sat in there alone, but he wouldn't look up at her; he remained

buried in the market reports and football results. Oh, to have a voice—even the hoarsest whispered croak—what an opportunity, the two of them in there alone like that! But then if she'd had one, the opportunity wouldn't have been given to her. She probably wouldn't have been allowed to overhear in the first place.

Even so, Vera was taking no chances on any circuitous system of communication by trial and error, such as he had used at the table to find out what she wanted. Twice she came as far as the living-room door, stood there and looked in at them for a moment, dishcloth in her hand, on some excuse or other.

His doomed head remained lowered to his paper, oblivious of the frenzied eyes that bored into him, beat at him like electric pulses to claim his attention.

Vera directed an evil smile at the helpless woman at his side, returned whence she had come, well content.

Time was so precious, and it was going so fast. Once Vera came in here with them finally, she'd never leave them again for the rest of the evening.

He felt her imploring eyes on him once, reached out and absently stroked her veined hand without looking up, but that was the closest she got to piercing his unawareness. A football score, a bond quotation, a comic strip, these things were dooming him to death.

Vera came in to them at last, helped herself to a cigarette from his coat pocket, turned on the radio. He looked up at her, said: "Oh, by the way, did you phone the gas company to send a man around to look at that hot-water heater in the bathroom? I'd like to take a bath tonight."

A knife of dread went through Janet Miller's heart. So that was how it was going to be done! That defective water heater in the upstairs bathroom. She closed her eyes in consternation, opened them again. She hadn't known until now what to expect—only that it would be gas in some form or other.

Vera snapped her fingers in pretended dismay. “I meant to, and it slipped my mind completely!” she said contritely.

It hadn’t. Janet Miller knew. She’d purposely refrained from reporting it. That was part of their plan, to make it look more natural afterwards. An unavoidable accident.

“We’ve used it this long, once more can’t hurt,” she said reassuringly.

“I know, but it’s dangerous the way that thing leaks when you turn it on. We’re all liable to be overcome one of these nights. If a man wants anything done around here he’s got to attend to it himself,” he grumbled.

“I’ll notify them the first thing in the morning,” she promised submissively.

But there wouldn’t be any morning for him.

A moment later she artfully took his mind off the subject by calling his attention to something on the radio. “Did you hear that just then? That was a good one! Don’t let’s miss this—I think those two are awfully funny.”

A joke on the radio. What could be more harmless than that? Yet it was helping to kill a man.

A station announcement came through—“Ten p.m., Eastern Standard Time—”

“Things are picking up. If they keep on like this, I think we’ll be able to take that cruise next summer.”

No you won’t, Janet Miller screamed at him in terrible silence; you’re going to be killed tonight! Oh, why can’t I make you hear me?

The station announcement came through again. It seemed to her like only a minute since they’d heard the last one. “Ten thirty p.m., Eastern Standard Time—”

He yawned comfortably. “Before you know it the holidays’ll be here. What do you want for Christmas?”

“Anything you want to give me,” she simpered demurely.

He turned and looked at Janet, then scrutinized her more closely. “What’s the matter, dear? Why, there are beads of

sweat on your forehead." He came over, took his handkerchief and gently touched them off one by one.

But Vera quickly jumped into the breach. She was on her guard now. Janet had her to combat as well as her own incapacity. The odds were insuperable. "The room is too close, that's all it is. I feel it myself . . ." Vera pretended to mop her own brow.

He reached down and touched Janet's hands.

"But her hands are so cold! That can't be it—"

"Oh, well—" Vera dropped her eyes tactfully. "Her circulation, you know," she murmured under her breath, as if trying not to hurt the paralytic's feelings.

He nodded, satisfied.

Janet's eyes clung to him desperately. Hear me! Why can't you hear me! Why can't you understand what I'm trying so hard to tell you!

He got up, stretched. "I think I'll go up and light that thing, get ready for my bath and go to bed. I had a tough day."

"I think we may as well all go up," Vera said accommodatingly. "There's nothing but swing on all the stations from now on and it gets monotonous." The dial-light snapped out. On such a casual, everyday, domestic note began the preparations for murder.

He picked Janet carefully up in his arms and started for the stairs with her. Her chair was always left downstairs. It was too bulky to be taken up at nights.

She thought distractedly, while the uncarpeted oak steps ticked off beneath him one by one, "Who'll carry me down in the morning? Oh, my son, my son, where will you be then?"

On the stairs their two faces were closer together than at other times. Her frozen lips strained toward him, striving to

implant a kiss. He said jocularly: “What are you breathing so hard for? I’m doing all the work.”

He carried her into her own room, set her down on the bed, promised, “I’ll be in to say good night to you in a minute,” and went out to start heating the water for his bath.

It was Vera who always prepared her for bed.

She never needed to be completely undressed, for she no longer wore street clothing, only a warm woolen robe and felt slippers. It was simply a matter of taking these off and arranging the bed coverings about her.

Vera came in and attended to the task as inscrutably, as matter-of-factly, as though there were no knowledge shared between them of what was to happen tonight. This woman bending over her was worse than a murderess. She was a monster, not human at all. Janet’s eyes were beseeching her, trying to say to her: “Don’t do this; don’t take him from me.” It was useless; it was like appealing to granite. There were two impulses there too strong to be deflected, overcome—passion for another man, and greed. Pity didn’t have a chance.

He was in the bathroom now. There was the soft thud of ignited gas. He called in, just as Vera finished arranging Janet in bed: “Hey, Vera! Do you think it’s all right to light this thing? There must be a whale of a leak in it. The flame is more white than blue, with the air in it!” There was a faint but distinct hum coming from the hot-water heater. That, however, was not a sign of its being defective, but a normal accompaniment to its being used.

“Of course it’s all right,” Vera called back unhesitatingly. “Don’t be such a sissy! You’d better not put off taking that bath tonight. You’re always too rushed in the morning, and then raise hob with me!”

A thread of acrid warning drifted into Janet’s bedroom, dissolved unnoticeably after a single stab at her nostrils. Vera had gone into their bedroom to begin undressing

herself. He came in to Janet, in bathrobe and slippers, and he looked so young, so vigorous—to die this soon! He said: “I’ll say good night to you now, hon. You must be tired and want to go to sleep.”

Then as he bent toward her to kiss her forehead, he saw something, stopped short. He changed his mind, sat down on the edge of the bed instead, kept looking at her steadily. “Vera,” he called over his shoulder, “come in here a minute.”

She came, the murderess, in pink satin and foamy lace, like an angel of destruction, stroking her loosened hair with a silver-backed brush.

“What is it now?” She said it a little jumpily.

“Something’s troubling her, Vera. We’ve got to find out what it is. Look, there are tears in her eyes. Look, see that big one, rolling down her cheek?”

Vera’s face was a little tense with fear. She forced it into an expression of sympathetic concern, but she had an explanation ready to throw at him, to forestall further inquiry. “Well after all, Vern,” she said in an undertone, close to his ear, as though not wanting Janet to overhear her, “it’s only natural she should feel that way every once in a while. She has every reason to. Don’t forget, we’ve gotten used to—what happened to her, but it must come back to her every so often.” She gave his shoulder a soothing little pat. “That’s all it is,” she whispered.

He was partly convinced, but not entirely. “But she doesn’t take it so hard other nights. Why should she tonight? Ever since I came home tonight she’s been watching me so. I’ve had the strangest feeling at times that she’s trying to tell me something . . .”

There was no mistaking the pallor on Vera’s face now, but it could so easily have been ascribed to concern about the invalid’s welfare, to a wifely sharing of her husband’s anxiety.

“I think I’ll sit with her awhile,” he said.

Yes, stay in here with me, pleaded the woman on the bed, stay in here, stay awake, and nothing can happen to you.

Vera put her arms considerately about his shoulders, gently raised him to his feet. “No, you go in and take your bath. The water must be hot now. I’ll sit with her. She’ll be all right in the morning, you’ll see.”

But he won’t, my son won’t.

Vera threw her a grimace meant to express kindly understanding, as he turned and padded out of the room. “She’s just a little downhearted, that’s all.”

She moved over to the window, stood looking out with her back to the room. She couldn’t bear to face those accusing eyes on the bed. There was a muffled sound of splashing coming through the bathroom door, and then after a while he came out.

“Sure you turned that thing off now?” Vera called in to him warningly. A warning not meant to save, and that couldn’t save.

“Yeah,” he said through the folds of a towel, “but you can notice the gas odor distinctly. We’ve got to get that thing fixed the first thing tomorrow. I’m not going to shut myself up in there with it any more. How’s Mom?”

“Shh! I’ve got her to sleep already. No, don’t go in, you’ll only wake her.” She reached up, treacherously snapped the light out.

No! Let me say good-bye to him at least! If I can’t save him, at least let me see him once more before you—

The door ebbed silently, remorselessly closed, cutting her off. Help! Help! ran the demented whirlpool of her thoughts.

There was the murmured sound of their two voices coming thinly through the partition wall for a while. Then a window sash going up. Then the muted snap of the light switch on their side. It seemed she could hear everything through the paper-thin wall. Not even that was to be spared

her. Sweat poured down her face, though a cool fresh night wind was blowing in through her own open window.

Silence. Silence that crouched waiting, like an animal ready to pounce. Silence, that pounded, throbbed like a drum. Silence that went on and on, and almost gave birth to hope, it was so protracted.

Then a very slight sound from in there, barely distinguishable at all—the slither of a window sash coming down to the bottom, sealing the room up.

Her own door opened softly, and a ghostly white-gowned form slithered silently past along the wall, lowered the window in here, stuffed rags around its frame. She must have had the water heater turned on for quite some time already—without being lit this time, of course. The sharp, pungent, acrid odor of illuminating gas drifted in after her, thickened momentarily. She slipped out again, on her errand of death.

One of the lower steps of the staircase, far below, creaked slightly at her passage. Even the slight grinding of the oven door, as it came open, reached Janet Miller's straining ears in the stillness. She must have put them back in there again, while she was washing the dishes.

The odor thickened. Janet Miller began to hear a humming in her ears, at first far away, then drawing nearer, nearer, like a train rushing onward through a long echoing tunnel. He coughed, moaned a little in his sleep, on the other side of the wall. Sleep that was turning into death. He must be getting the effects worse in there. He was nearer the bath, nearer the source of annihilation.

The form glided into Janet's room again. It looked faintly bluish now, not white any more, from the gas refraction. Janet Miller wanted to be sick at her stomach. There was a roaring in her ears. A train was rushing through her skull,

in one side out the other now—and the room was lurching around her.

She was pulled up from the pillow she rested on, a voice seemed to say from miles away, “I guess you’ve had enough to fool them,” and something came down over her head. Suddenly she could breathe pure sweet air again. The roaring held steady for a while, then began receding, as if the train were going in reverse now. It died away at last. The blue dimness went out too.

My son! My son!

Through two round goggles she saw the light of dawn come filtering strangely into the room about her. A wavering figure appeared before them presently, one arm out to support herself against the wall as she advanced. Vera, wavering not because Janet Miller’s vision was defective any longer, but because the quantity of gas accumulated in the airtight rooms was beginning to affect her, even in the short time since she’d taken off her own mask. She held a wet handkerchief pressed to her mouth in its place, and was evidently striving to hold her breath.

She had sense enough to go over to the window first, remove the rags, open it a little from the bottom before she came back to the bed, reared Janet up to a sitting position and fumblingly pulled the mask off her.

The humming started up again in Janet’s ears, the train was coming back toward her.

Vera was gagging into the handkerchief. “Hold your breath all you can, until I get back here,” she sobbed. “I’m telling you this for your own sake.” She trailed the mask after her by its nozzle, went tottering in a zigzag course out of the room.

Janet Miller could hear her floundering, rather than walking, down the stairs. A door far at the back of the house opened, stayed that way.

The humming kept on increasing for a little while, but then drifts of uncontaminated air from the open window

began knifing their way in, neutralized it. Gas must still be pouring out of the heater in the bath down the hall, however.

Hold your breath as much as you can, she had said just now. That was to live, though. He's gone, Janet Miller thought. He must be by now, or she wouldn't have come in here to take the mask off me. Maybe I can go with him, that's the best thing for me to do now. She began to take great deep breaths, greedily draw in all the poisoned air she could, hold it in her lungs. Like going under it purposely, in a dentist chair, when they gave you a breath count.

The humming advanced on her again, became a deep-throated roar. The room became a dark-blue pinwheel, spinning madly, rapidly darkening around its edges as it spun.

"We'll fool them, Vern, we'll go together," she thought hazily. The darkness had reached the center of the pinwheel now; only a pinpoint of blue remained at its exact core. Glass tinkled somewhere far off, but that had nothing to do with her.

The pinpoint of blue went out and there was nothing.

She was very thirsty and she kept drinking air. Such delicious air. It poured down her and she couldn't get enough of it. She couldn't see anything. She was inside a big tent, something like that anyway, but she could hear a murmur of voices. Then there was a blinding flash of light and the delicious flow of air stopped for a minute. Then the kindly darkness returned, the flow of air resumed.

"She's coming up. She'll be all right."

"Wonderful, isn't it? You'd think just a whiff of it, anyone in her condition—"

The flash of light repeated itself. Then again, and again, faster and faster all the time, like a flickering movie film, and suddenly it stayed on permanently, there was no more darkness, and her eyes were open.

She was violently sick and, although she thought that was a bad thing, the faces all around her looked on encouragingly and nodded, as though it were a very good thing.

“She’s O.K. now. Nothing more to worry about.”

“How’re the other two?” someone called inside to another room.

“The wife’s O.K.,” the voice of somebody unseen answered. “The husband’s gone.”

They picked her up—she must have been on a stretcher—and started to carry her out. Just before they left the room with her, a desolate screaming started up somewhere within the house. “No, no, don’t stop! Bring him back! You must! Oh, why couldn’t it have been me instead? Why did it have to be him?”

They carried Janet Miller out and put her into the back of an automobile, and she didn’t hear any more of the screaming.

A pallid, mournful figure came into the room with the nurse. It was hard to recognize Vera in the widow’s weeds. This was two days later.

“You’re going home now, dear,” the nurse told Janet Miller cheerfully. “Here’s your daughter-in-law come to take you back with her.”

Janet Miller blinked her eyes. No, no, no. It was no use. They didn’t know the old code she and Vern had had.

“Can you manage it?” the nurse asked Vera.

“I have a friend waiting downstairs with a car. If you’ll just have somebody wheel the chair down for me, we can

take her right in it with us."

She was taken down in an elevator, still blinking futilely, rolled out to the hospital driveway by the orderly, and a man got out of a sedan waiting there. So now she saw her son's other murderer for the first time.

He was taller than Vern had been and better-looking, much better-looking, but his face was weaker, didn't have as much character in it—the kind that the Veras of this world go to hell for.

He and the orderly lifted her out of the chair and got her onto the front seat of the car. Then the chair was fastened to the outside, in back. It was too bulky to go inside the car.

Vera got in next to her—she was between the two of them now—and they drove away from the hospital. She hadn't been kept there all this time because of the gas, of course, but simply so she could be cared for properly during the first, acute stages of Vera's "grief."

"That cost plenty!" Vera said explosively as the hospital receded behind them.

"It looked good though, didn't it?" he argued. "Anyway, what the hell. We've got plenty of it now, haven't we?"

"All right, but why waste it on her? What're we going to do, have her hanging around our necks like a millstone from now on?"

The shoulders of both of them were pressed against hers, one on each side, yet they spoke back and forth as though she were five miles away, without pity for her helplessness.

"She's our immunity. How many times do I have to tell you that? So long as she stays with us, under the same roof, looked after by us, there won't be a whisper raised. We gotta have her around—for a while anyway."

Vera flipped back her widow's veil, put a cigarette in her mouth. "I'll have time for just one before we get up to our own neighborhood. Gee, I'll be glad when this sob-act is over!"

She threw the cigarette out of the car, lowered the veil again, as they turned down the street that led to the house that had belonged to Janet Miller's son. A residue of smoke came through the mesh of the veil, made her look like the monster she was.

Vera went in first, head bowed in case the neighbors were looking. He carried Janet in his arms, came back for the chair and took that in afterwards.

"Now come on, clear out," Vera said to him as soon as Janet had been installed in it. "You can't begin to hang around here yet; they may be watching."

"Let me get a pick-up, at least," he growled aggrievedly. "What's the idea of the bum's rush?" He downed two fingers of Vern's brandy with a single streamlined motion, from decanter to tumbler to mouth.

"I thought you were the one wanted to be careful. We gotta take it easy."

She came back into the room again after she'd sped him on his way, slung off her widow's hat and veil. She found Janet's eyes fastened on her remorselessly, like two bright stones.

She helped herself to a drink like he had, a little jerkily, not quite so streamlined. "Now I'm going to tell you one thing," she flared out at her unexpectedly. "If you want to stay out of trouble, keep those eyes of yours off me. Quit staring at me all the time! I know what you're thinking. You may as well forget it; it won't do you any good!"

His visits increased in number and lengthened in duration each time until, about three weeks after they'd brought her back from the hospital, they were married. They didn't announce it, of course, but Janet Miller heard them talking about it when they came home one day, and he didn't leave the house again from then on. He just moved in with them,

so she knew what it meant. She found out what his name was then, too, for the first time. Haggard, Jimmy Haggard. Murderer of Vernon Miller.

The community at large would probably think it was one of those “whirlwind” courtships. Young widow alone in world turns to only person who has shown her sympathy in her distress—very natural. Its haste might shock them, but then after all, another three or four weeks would elapse before it could be definitely confirmed, and by then it would seem that much less abrupt.

Janet Miller lived in a state of suspended animation for a while, a trancelike condition between being dead and alive. She undoubtedly drew breath and imbibed nourishment, so technically she was alive, but little more than that could be said for her. Not only the voice was gone now, but the other two primaries had gone with it—the sun and the blue sky. None of the three would ever return again. And so she would surely have died within a month or two at the most, for sheer lack of will to live, when slowly but surely a spark ignited, a new vital force began to glow sullenly, taking the place of the three that had vanished. Revenge.

From a spark it became a flame, from a flame an all-consuming conflagration. She was more alive now than she had ever been since her disabling catastrophe had overtaken her. Fiercely it burned, by day, by night. It needed no replenishment, no renewal. Time meant nothing to it. Hours meant nothing, days meant nothing, years meant nothing. She would wait. She would live to be a hundred, if need be, but she would wreak her retribution on this pair before she went. Surely, inescapably. Someday, somehow.

They played into her hands. They found her a burden, a nuisance. They began to bicker and quarrel about her. Neither one wanted to be annoyed moving her chair or feeding her. He had more humanity than the woman. No,

that was not it either—not real humanity, consideration. It was just that he was less reckless than Vera, more craven.

“But we can’t just let her starve, and she can’t feed herself! She’ll die on our hands for lack of attention, and then they’re liable to find out we neglected her, and one thing’ll lead to another, and first thing you know they’ll reopen the other thing, start putting two and two together, asking questions.”

“Well then, hire somebody to look after her. I’m not staying home all the time to spoon mush into her mouth, tuck her into bed! Get a companion for her. We’ve got dough enough for that now. Or else get rid of her altogether, farm her out to some nursing home.”

“No, not yet. We gotta keep her with us a few months, at least, until we’ve cooled off,” he insisted. “And yet I don’t like the idea of letting a stranger in here with us. It’s kind of risky. Especially somebody from the neighborhood that used to know Miller. We’ve got to be careful. One of us is liable to shoot our mouths off when we’ve got a lot of booze in us.”

While he was trying to make up his mind whether or not to take a chance, advertise or go to an agency, the matter was decided for him by one of those fortuitous coincidences that sometimes happen. A well-spoken young fellow, apparently down on his luck, was passing by one morning, and seeing Haggard on the front porch, approached timorously and asked if there was any work he could do, such as mowing the lawn or washing the windows. He explained that he was hitchhiking his way across country, and had just reached town half an hour before. As a matter of fact, he was packing a small bundle with him, apparently the sum total of his worldly goods.

Haggard looked him over speculatively. Then he glanced at the old lady. That seemed to give him an idea. “Come in a minute,” he said.

Janet Miller could hear him talking to him in the living-room. Then he called Vera down and consulted with her. She seemed to approve—probably only too glad to have someone take the old lady off their hands.

She brought him outside with her right after that, minus his bundle now.

“Here she is,” she said curtly. “Now you understand what’s required, don’t you? We’ll be out a good deal. You’ve got to spoon-feed her, and don’t take any nonsense from her. She’s got a cute little habit of going on hunger strikes. Pinch her nose until she has to open her mouth for air, if you have any trouble with her. You sleep out, but get here about nine so you can take her down on the porch. You don’t need to worry about dressing her, just wrap her in a blanket if I’m not up. Take her back to her room at night, after she’s been fed. That’s about all there is to it. I want someone in the house with her while we’re out, just to see that nothing happens.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said submissively.

“All right—what’s your name again?”

“Casement.”

“All right, Casement. Mr. Haggard’s already told you what you’re to get. That about covers everything. You can consider yourself hired. Bring out a chair for yourself, if you want one.”

He sat down to one side of the rubber-tired wheelchair, where he could watch her, hands on knees, legs apart.

They looked at each other, the old woman and the young man.

He smiled a little at her, tentatively. She could read sympathy behind it. She sensed, somehow, that this was his first case of the kind, that he’d never come into contact with anything like this before.

After about half an hour he got up, said, “I think I’ll get a glass of water. You want one too?” as though she could have answered. Then remembering that she couldn’t, he stood

there at a loss, looking at her. He was very inexperienced at a job like this; that could be seen with half an eye. He mumbled, half to himself, “How’m I going to tell when you . . .” Then rubbed his neck baffledly.

He turned and went inside anyway. He came out again in a minute, bringing one for her. He carried it over to her and stood with it, looking down at her uncertainly. She blinked her eyes twice to show him she was thirsty. To show him—if possible—a little more than that. He held it to her lips and slowly let its contents trickle into her mouth until it was empty.

“Want any more?” he asked.

She blinked once this time.

He put the glass down on the floor and stood looking at her, thoughtfully stroking his chin. “Sometimes you blink twice in a hurry, sometimes you just blink once. What is that for, yes and no? Well now, let’s find out just to make sure.” He picked up a newspaper, found the word “yes” in it, held his finger under it and showed it to her. She blinked twice. Then he found a “no,” showed that to her. She blinked once.

“Well, now we’re that much ahead, aren’t we?” he said cheerfully.

Her eyes seemed to be smiling—they were very expressive eyes. The code—she had her old code with Vern back again, as easy as that! He was a very smart young man.

The afternoon waned. He pushed her chair in to the supper table, sat and spooned her food to her mouth for her, a little awkwardly at first, but he soon got the hang of it, learned he must not load the spoon too much, as her jaws could only open to a limited extent.

Vera gave him a look. “You seem to have better luck with her than we did ourselves. She’ll swallow for you, at least.”

“Sure,” he said comfortably without taking his eyes from what he was doing, “Mrs. Miller and I are going to be great friends.”

Janet Miller couldn’t account for it, but he had spoken the truth. She could feel a sense of confidence, almost of alliance with him, without knowing why.

He carried her up to her room later and she didn’t see him any more that night. But she lay there in the dark, content. The flame burned high, unquenchable. Perhaps . . .

In the morning he came up to get her, carried her downstairs, gave her orange juice to drink, and sat with her on the front porch. For a while he just sat, basking as she was. Then presently he turned his head and glanced behind him at the front windows of the house, as if to ascertain whether anyone was in those rooms or not. But the way he did it was so casual she didn’t read any meaning into it. Perhaps he was just thinking to himself that the Haggards were late risers.

He said in a rather low voice, almost an undertone: “Do you like Mr. Haggard?”

Her eyes snapped just once, like a blue electric spark.

He waited awhile, then he said: “Do you like Mrs. Haggard?”

The negative blink this time was almost ferocious.

“I wonder why,” he said slowly, but it didn’t sound like a question.

That sense of alliance, of confederacy, came over her again, stronger than ever. Her eyes were fastened on him hopefully.

“It’s too bad we can’t talk,” he sighed and relapsed into silence.

Vera came downstairs, and then presently Haggard followed her. They began to bicker and their voices were clearly audible out on the porch.

“I gave you fifty only last night!” she snarled. “Go easy, will you?”

“What’re you trying to do, keep me on an allowance?”

“Whose money is it, anyway?”

“If it wasn’t for me, you—”

There was a warning *“Sh!”* followed by, “Don’t forget the old lady ain’t by herself out there no more.”

The sudden restraint spoke more eloquently than any reckless revelation could have. Janet Miller’s eyes were on Casement’s face. He gave not the slightest sign of having heard anything that surprised him.

Haggard went out to get the car, brought it around to the front door. Vera came out, threw Casement a careless “You know what to do,” and got in. They drove off.

Almost before they were out of sight down the long tree-lined street, he’d got up and gone inside. Not hurriedly or furtively, simply as though he had something to do that couldn’t be postponed any longer.

He stayed in there a long time. She could hear him first in one room, then in another. He seemed to go through the entire house upstairs and down while he was about it. She could hear a drawer slide open from time to time, or a desk-flap being let down. If it hadn’t been for that peculiar, inexplicable confidence with which he seemed to inspire her, she might have thought him a burglar who had taken the job just for an opportunity to ransack the house in its owners’ absence. Somehow the idea never occurred to her.

He came back outside again finally, after almost an hour, shaking his head slightly to himself. He sat down beside her, reached into his inside pocket, took out a little oblong book—a pocket dictionary.

“You and I have got to find some way of getting beyond yes and no,” he murmured. “I’d like to talk to you. That’s why I wangled this job.”

He glanced out between the porch posts, across the front lawn, up and down the sunny street. There was no one in sight. He took something from his vest pocket. Janet Miller thought it was a watch for a minute, until she saw that it was shield-shaped, not round. It had the State seal engraved on it. He let her see it, then put it away again. “I’m a detective,” he said. “I came up here and examined the premises immediately after it happened, just in the line of duty. Mrs. Haggard, as I at first reconstructed it, was awakened by the gas, managed to stagger down to the floor below, break the glass pane in the front door, then get over to the phone to try and call for help. She only had strength left to take the receiver off, then fell down with it and was found there on the floor by the telephone, overcome.

“However, I happened to question the switchboard operator who had sent in the alarm, and she insisted it was the other way around. She distinctly heard the crash of glass, over the open wire, *after* the receiver was already off. That made it a little hard to understand. That was a plate-glass inset in that door, not just thin window glass. She had to swing a heavy andiron at it to shatter it. Now if a person is not even strong enough to whisper ‘Help’ over the phone, how in the world is she able to crash out a solid square of plate glass?

“Furthermore, once she was at the door why did she turn around and go all the way back to the phone, which was already disconnected, and fall down there? There is a considerable length of hall between the two. It wasn’t at the door she was found, you understand, it was at the *phone*.

“As peculiar as that struck me, I think I would have let it go by, but I visited the hospital while she was there being treated and asked to see her things. The light satin bedroom slippers she’d had on were discolored around the edges from dew, and I found traces of moist earth and a blade of grass adhering to their soles. She’d been *outside the house* before she was overcome, then went in again,

closed the door after her, and smashed the glass panel in it from the inside.

"Then on top of all that, the usual neighborhood gossip has begun to drift in to us, about how soon afterwards she and Haggard were married. Even an anonymous letter or two. I tell you all this because, although this is going to be one of the toughest things I've ever come up against, I think you may be able to help me before we're through."

She could hardly breathe. The flame leaped heavenward and she blinked her eyes—twice—as rapidly as she could.

"Then there is something you can tell me about it? Good. Well, the main thing I want to know is: did he lose his life accidentally or not?"

No!

He gave her a long look. But she could see there was really no surprise in it, only confirmation. He thumbed the pocket dictionary, put his thumbnail below a word, held it up to her.

"Murder," it read.

Yes.

"By his wife?" His mouth was tightening up a little.

She stopped and thought a minute. If she once set him off on a false scent, or on an only partially correct scent, which was just as bad, there might be no possible way for her to correct him later.

She blinked once. Then immediately afterwards she blinked twice.

"Yes and no?" he said. "What do you mean by . . .?" Then he got it! He was turning out to be a smart young man, this ally of hers, this Casement. "His wife and somebody else?"

Yes.

"Haggard and your son's wife then, of course."

Yes.

“But—” he said uncertainly. “She was overcome herself.”

No.

“She wasn’t overcome?”

No.

“But I’ve seen the report of the ambulance doctor who treated her. I’ve spoken to him. She was taken to the hospital.”

They wasted the rest of the morning over that. She wasn’t particularly interested in convincing him that Vera’s gas poisoning had been feigned—as a matter of fact, it had only been partially so—but she was vitally interested in keeping him from going past that point, in order to try to bring the gas masks into it. Once he did, she might never again be able to make him understand what method had been used.

They went at it again in the afternoon, on the back porch. “There’s something there that seems to be holding us up. How is it you’re so sure she wasn’t overcome? You were overcome yourself—Sorry, I forgot, I can only ask you questions that shape to a yes or no answer.”

He was plainly stumped for a while. Took out some papers from his pocket, reports or jotted notes of some kind, and pored over them for a few minutes.

“He and she were occupying that same room, up there, that the Haggards are using now. You insist she wasn’t overcome by the gas. Oh, I see what you mean—she saved herself by doing what I suspected from the looks of those bedroom slippers, stayed outside while the gas was escaping, came back inside again after it had killed your son, avoiding most of its effects in that way. Is that right?”

No.

“She didn’t save herself in that way?”

No.

“Did she stay in another room upstairs, with the windows open?”

No.

He was plainly confounded. “She didn’t stay in the same room with him, the back bedroom, the whole time the gas was escaping?”

Yes.

He riffled his hair distractedly. She focused her eyes downward on the pocket dictionary he still held in his hand, glared at it as though it were her worst enemy.

Finally he translated the look. “Something in there. Yes, but what word in it?” he asked helplessly.

Why didn’t he open it? If he didn’t hurry up and open it, he’d lose the thread of the conversation that had immediately preceded her inspiration. She didn’t even know whether the word was in there. If it was, she was counting on alphabetical progression . . .

“Well, we’ll get it if it takes all week. She stayed right in the bedroom with him while he was asphyxiated. She wasn’t harmed, you insist, and there’s some word in here you want. Something about bedrooms?”

No.

“Something about windows?”

No.

“Something about the gas itself?”

Yes! He almost tore the little book in half to get to the G’s.

“Gas. We’ll take it from there on, all right?”

Instead of blinking, for once, she shut her eyes.

She was saying a prayer.

He started to run his finger down the page, querying her as he went. “Gaseous?” No. “Gastric?” No. “Gastronomy?” No. Suddenly he stopped. He’d seen it himself, automatically; she could tell by the flash of enlightenment that lit up his face.

“Gas mask! Why didn’t I think of that myself! It’s been as obvious as the nose on my face the whole time!”

Tears of happiness twinkled in her eyes.

“So she saved herself by using a gas mask.”

Yes, she told him.

“Did she put one on you, too?”

Yes.

“Very smart angle, there. It would have been too obvious if they’d let you go with him. Who’d she get them from, Haggard?”

Yes, she told him.

“Was he here that night, while it was taking place?”

No.

“Too smart, eh? Well, he’s an accessory just the same.” He hitched his chair a little closer to her. “Now, you want to see these people punished, of course, Mrs. Miller. He was your son.”

How needless was the yes she gave him. The flame of vengeance was a towering pillar of fire now.

“You know they killed your son, and now I know it too. But I’ve got to have stronger evidence than that. And what other evidence is there but those two gas masks? Everything depends on whether I can recover them or not. You had one on, and she removed it before outsiders arrived, obviously. You must have been conscious at least for a short while after she removed it. Did you see what she did with them?”

Yes.

Technically, she hadn’t, of course. But the answer was yes just the same, because she had heard beforehand what they intended doing with them.

“Swell,” he breathed fervently, balling a fist. “I suppose we’ll have a hard time getting it, but we’ll keep at it until we do. Am I tiring you?” he broke off to ask solicitously. “We’ve got plenty of time, you know. I don’t want to hurt you by all this excitement in one day.”

Tiring her! The flame of vengeance burned so high, so white, so tireless within her that she could have gone on for

hours. No, she signaled.

"All right. About what was done with them afterwards. Let's try a few short cuts. She hid them someplace in the house?"

No.

"I didn't think she would. It would've been too chancy. She hid them someplace outside the house?"

Yes.

"Do you know where?"

Yes.

"But how could you? Excuse me. Let's see. Under one of the porches?"

No.

"The garage?"

She refused to answer yes or no, afraid once more of sending him off on a wrong trail and being unable to correct it later. He might leave her and go out there and start tearing the garage apart.

"Not the garage then?"

She still refused to answer.

"The garage no answer, and not the garage, no answer either." He got it. Thank heaven for creating smart young men. "The car?"

Yes.

"The one they've got now?"

No.

"They've bought that since. That's down here in my notes. A former car then. Did you hear them discussing it afterwards? Is that how you know?"

No.

"You weren't in a position to see it being done at the time, and you didn't hear them talking it over afterwards. You must have heard them discussing it beforehand then."

Yes.

His face lit up. "That explains the whole thing. How it is you're so hep to what went on. That's swell. Did they know

you overheard them?”

She couldn’t afford to tell him the truth on that one. It might weaken his credulity. But she was convinced they hadn’t deviated in the slightest from the plan she had heard them shape in the kitchen that afternoon, anyhow. No, was her response.

“She doesn’t drive.” He’d learned that already, probably by watching them come and go. “He came and took the car away for her, then, with the masks still in it? That it?”

She didn’t answer.

“I see. He sent someone else up to get it, probably without taking him into their confidence. Therefore the masks must have been concealed in it, and he got them out at the other end without being observed.”

Yes.

“He owned a garage and repairshop, didn’t he, before his marriage?” He didn’t ask her that; just looked it up in his notes. “Yes, here it is. Ajax Garage and Service Station, Clifford Avenue. I’m going down there and look around thoroughly. There’s not much chance that those two masks haven’t been destroyed by now. But there is a chance, and a good one, that they were imperfectly destroyed. If I can just turn up sufficient remnants identifiable as having belonged to one or more gas masks, scraps of metal even, that’ll do the trick. You’ve told me all you can, Mrs. Miller, reconstructed the whole thing for me. The rest depends entirely on whether or not I can recover those two masks, intact or in fragments.” He put the jotted notes, and the pocket dictionary that had served them so well, back into his coat. “We may get the two of them yet, Mrs. Miller,” he promised softly, as he stood up.

The flame of vengeance roared rejoicingly in her own ears. Her eyes were on him meltingly. He seemed to understand what they were trying to say. But then who could have failed to understand, they were so eloquent?

“Don’t thank me,” he murmured deprecatingly. “It’s just part of my job.”

Two days went by. He was there to look after her as usual, so he must have been pursuing his investigations at night, after leaving the house, she figured. More than once, when he appeared in the mornings, he looked particularly tired, dozed there on the porch beside her, while her eyes fondly gave his sleeping face their blessing.

There is no hurry, take your time, my right arm, my sword of retribution, she encouraged him silently.

He didn’t tell her what success he was having, although the Haggards were out as much as ever and there was plenty of opportunity. It was hard to read his face, to tell whether he was being successful or not. Her eyes clung to him imploringly now, as much as they had ever clung to Vern Miller.

“You want to know, don’t you?” he said at last. “You’re eating your heart out waiting to find out, and it’d be cruel to keep you guessing any longer. Well—I haven’t had any luck so far. Their car’s still there in the garage, held for sale. I practically pulled it apart and put it together again, posing as a prospective buyer. Not while he was around, of course. They’re not in it any more. What’s more to the point, no one around the garage, no one of the employees, saw him take them out to dispose of them, or saw them at all. I’ve questioned them all; I haven’t any doubts left on that score. I’ve searched the garage from top to bottom, sifted ashes, refuse, debris, in every vacant lot for blocks around. I’ve examined the premises where Haggard lived before he moved in here. Not a sign of anything.”

He was walking restlessly back and forth between the veranda posts while he spoke.

“Damn the luck anyway!” he spat out. “Those things are bulky. They can’t just be made to vanish into thin air. Even if he used corrosive acid, nothing could disappear that thoroughly. He didn’t take them out over deep water, send them down to the bottom, because I’ve checked back on his movements thoroughly. He hasn’t been on any ferries or boats, or near any docks or bridges. Where did they come from, where did they go?”

He stopped short, looked at her. “That’s it!” he exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of that before? If I can’t find out where they went to, maybe I can find out where they came from. I may have better luck if I go at it the other way around. You don’t just pick up things like that at the five-and-ten. Did you hear him say where he got them from, when you heard them planning the thing?”

Yes, she answered eagerly.

“Did he buy them?”

No.

“Was he given them?”

No.

“Did he steal them?”

Yes.

“From a factory where they’re made?”

No.

“From an Army post?”

No.

He scratched his head. “Where else could he get hold of things like that? From some friend, somebody he knew?”

Yes.

“That doesn’t help much. Who is he? Where’d he get them from?”

She stared intently at the morning sun, blinked twice, then her eyes sought his. Then she did it again. Then a third time.

“I don’t get you. The sun? He got them from the sun?”

This time she looked slightly lower than the sun, midway between it and the horizon. “The East?” he caught on.

Yes.

“But we’re in the East already. Oh—Europe?”

Yes.

“Wait a minute, I know what you mean now. He swiped them from someone who brought them back from there.”

Yes.

“That does it!” he cried elatedly. “Now I know how I’ll find out who he is! Through the Customs office. He had to declare those things, especially if he brought in several with him at once. They’ll be down on his Customs declaration. Now I see too why I haven’t been able to find any traces of them in ash heaps or refuse dumps. He must be holding them intact somewhere, waiting his chance to return them if he hasn’t already. He’ll try to get them back unnoticed to where he got them from. That would be the smartest thing he could do. At last I think we’ve got a lead, Mrs. Miller—if only it isn’t too late!”

The telephone rang out shrilly in the almost total darkness of the room. Casement pushed back his cuff, glanced at the radium dial of his wrist watch. A quarter to twelve. He didn’t move, just let it go ahead ringing until it had stopped again of its own accord. He had an idea who it was—trying to find out for sure if there was anyone in this particular house or not. He guessed that if he answered it he wouldn’t hear anything—just a click at the other end, and his scheme would have been a failure.

“Not taking any chances, is he?” he grunted to himself. “Even though by now he must have gotten that post card in Hamilton’s handwriting I had routed through Boston.”

He was longing for a smoke, but he knew better than to indulge in one. The slightest little thing, such as a lighted

cigarette glimpsed through the dark windows of this supposedly untenanted house could ruin the whole carefully prepared setup. He'd worked too hard and patiently to have that happen now.

He looked at his watch again presently. A quarter after now; half an hour had gone by.

"Due any minute now," he murmured.

Within the next thirty seconds the soft purr of a car running in low sounded from outside. It slowed a little as it came opposite the house, but neither veered in nor stopped. Instead, it went on past toward the next corner, like a ghost under the pale streetlights. He smiled grimly as he recognized it. It would go around the block, reconnoitering, then come by a second time and stop. Its occupant was taking every possible precaution but the right one—staying away from here altogether.

The showdown was at hand. Casement finally left the big wing chair he'd sat in ever since dusk, felt for the gun on his hip and moved noiselessly out into the hall. He went back behind the stairs, where there was a door leading into a small storeroom built into the staircase structure itself.

He disappeared in there just as the whirr of wheels approached outside once more, from the same direction as before. This time they stopped. There was a brief wait, then the muffled sound of a car door clicking open. Then a furtive footfall from the porch. A key turned in the lock.

Casement nodded to himself at the sound. "Swiped Hamilton's key, evidently. Took a wax impression for a duplicate, and then got it back to him somehow. That's how he got them out of here in the first place."

The door opened and a little gray light from the street filtered into the inky front hall. Through a hairline door-crack at the back of the stairs Casement could make out a looming silhouette standing there, listening. It was empty-handed, but that was all right. He was just taking every precaution.

The silhouette widened the door-opening. Then it bent down, scanning the three-days' accumulation of dummy mail Casement had carefully planted just inside the door, under Hamilton's letter slot. There was also a quart bottle of milk that he'd bought at a dairy standing outside. The inked-in figure straightened, turned around, and descended from the porch again, leaving the door open the way it was. Casement wasn't worried, didn't stir.

There was another wait. Again the porch creaked. The silhouette was back again, this time with a square object like a small-sized suitcase in one hand. The door closed after it and everything became dark again.

Cautious footfalls came along the carpeted hall toward the staircase. They didn't go up it but came on toward the back. He was feeling his way, smart enough not to put on the lights or even use a pocket torch or match in the supposedly untenanted house.

The storeroom door under the stairs that Casement had gone through opened softly. Still nothing happened. There was the sound of something being set down on the floor. Then of two small suitcase latches clicking open one after the other. Then a great rattling of paper being undone, followed by something scratchy being lifted out of the paper.

There were hooks along the wall in there, with various seldom-used things hanging from them. Golf bags, cased tennis rackets—and gas masks that Hamilton had brought back from Europe as souvenirs.

An arm groped upward along the wall, feeling for a vacant hook. Casement had left two conveniently unburdened for just this situation.

The other found it, by sense of touch alone. The arm dipped down again toward the floor, came up with

something in it that rustled—and then suddenly there was a sharp metallic click in the stillness of the enclosed little space.

There was a gasp of abysmal terror, something dropped with a thud to the floor, and a light bulb went on overhead, lit up the place wanly.

Haggard and Casement were standing there face to face, across an upended trunk belonging to the house's owner. Haggard was on the outside of it, the detective on the inside, but they were already linked inextricably across the top of it by a manacle whose steel jaws must have been waiting there in the dark the whole time for Haggard to reach toward that empty hook, like bait in a trap.

An olive-drab gas mask lay at Haggard's feet. A second one still nestled in the small suitcase by the storeroom door, waiting to be transferred.

"Pretty," was all Casement said. "It's taken a long time and a lot of work, but it was worth it!" He glanced down at the torn half of a cardboard tag still attached to the handle of the suitcase. "So that's where you had them hidden all the time I was looking for them. Checked in a parcel room somewhere under a phony name, waiting for Hamilton to be away and the coast clear so you could smuggle them back in again unseen. Not a bad idea—if it had only worked."

The sky was blue, the sun was bright, and Janet Miller sat there in her chair on the front porch. She looked at the man and the woman standing before her, each handcuffed to a detective, and the flame within her blazed heavenward, triumphant.

"Take a look at this woman, whose son you murdered," Casement said grimly. "Face those eyes if you can—and deny it."

They couldn’t. Haggard’s head fell before her gaze. Vera averted hers. They shifted weight uncomfortably.

“You’ll see her again. She’ll be the principal witness against you—along with Hamilton and his two gas masks. Take them away, boys.” He turned her chair around so she could watch them go.

“I guess you wonder how I knew just which night he’d show up there at Hamilton’s house,” he said to her. “I made sure it’d be last night. I went to Hamilton, told him the whole story, and he agreed to help me. He went to Boston, mailed Haggard a postcard from there day before yesterday. He said he was staying until today. That made last night the only night Haggard would supposedly have had a chance to get those masks back in the house undetected. I faked some mail and filled the letter box with it, and stood a bottle of milk at the door. He fell for it.”

An important-looking white-haired man came out of the house, went over to Casement, put his hand on his shoulder. “Great work,” he said. “You sure sewed that one up—and singlehanded at that!”

Casement motioned toward Janet Miller. “I was just an auxiliary. Here’s where the thanks and the credit go.”

“Who’ll look after her until the trial comes up?” the captain asked.

“Why, I guess there’s room enough over in our house,” Casement said.

The sky was blue, the sun was warm, and her eyes shone softly as they rested on him. She had three things to live for again.

COLLARED

I knew something was up, because he came in nervous instead of just plain lit. He'd had his usual liquid transfusion, but his cooling system must have jammed; it wasn't taking.

He didn't bother looking at me. Me—last year's moll, left-over around the place. I was just a part of the furniture. That was his mistake. Chairs don't stand around waiting to get even on you.

The first six months or so I'd tried to run out on him, but I always got brought back feet first, and I usually had to have a new porcelain cap put on a tooth or two right afterwards. Since then things had changed. Now he was sick of me, but he couldn't get rid of me for love nor money. I was staying until I could get something on him.

He started dialing a number the minute he came in the door, before he even took his hat off. When he wanted a number that fast and that early—five in the morning—it couldn't be anyone's but his mouth's. So that meant he was in a jam.

I couldn't read the slots as he spun them, because he was out in the hall and I was inside at the mirror fiddling with my nails, but I could tell by the length of time the dial took slipping back each time about which ones they were. The first three were short turns—the exchange and its subdivision. The next two were long hauls—the end slot. His mouth's private number began with two zeros; that was it

all right. Then he changed his mind, hung up instead of going ahead. So that meant he wasn't sure whether he was in a jam or not; he'd just done something that worried him and was afraid he might be.

He came in instead, stiff-armed me by the shoulder, twisted me around his way so I nearly broke in two, and blew a lot of expensive Cutty Sark in my face for an atomizer. "Listen, Last Year," he said. "I been here with you from about three on, get that? I been here with you from the time I left the club."

"You been here from three on," I repeated. I had more porcelain caps than I could carry now. He was bending over me and I couldn't help seeing his collar.

"She's got the damnedest aim," I remarked. "Why don't you hold still when you're leaving her, so you get it on the kisser and not the Cluett Peabody?"

He yanked the collar off so hard and fast his whole tie stayed on around his neck. He looked at it kind of scared, and blew out a little breath, as though he were relieved I'd spotted it for him in time. He went into the bathroom. I heard a match scratch and I saw flame reflected against the tiles. I got a whiff of scorched linen, and then a lot of water ran down. He'd burned it.

That gave me a hint about what the jam was. He'd done something to her, whoever she was. Because he certainly hadn't got rid of it on my account. He'd brought those same lipstick trademarks back with him before, and it hadn't bothered him whether I saw them or not. They wouldn't come out in the wash, I'd found that out; it was waterproof rouge and they just went a little lighter.

And if it bothered him, that meant he hadn't meant to do it, whatever *it* was. Because what was a little kill to him? If he'd cut notches in a stick he'd have had a buzz-saw by now. But he always had it done by remote control, and this was one time he'd been very much all there, judging by his

collar; that made a difference. That alone was positive proof to me that it was unintentional.

The way I figured it, one of two things had happened. Either he'd found out something, lost his head for a minute, and couldn't control his trigger-finger in time, and now he regretted it; or it had been altogether an accident. Maybe she was one of those dumb twists that just had to fool with his gun to kill time between huddles, and had playfully pulled the trigger.

Either way it looked like my long-delayed payoff was coming up. So I just sat where I was and rubbed cold cream into my map as an excuse for staying up, to get all the dope I could. He came out again, collar gone now, and massaged the back of his neck. That meant he was trying to figure out whether to let the jam ride and take a chance on getting away with it, or do something to straighten it out.

He took off his coat and vest, and took a .32 out of one of the pockets. He took a sniff at the bore, and then tapped it against the palm of his hand a couple of times, worried. That wasn't his gun; he would have used a caliber like that to pick his teeth with.

Finally he went out to the phone again, and dialed a different number, without any zeros. "Louie," he said in a low voice. "I want you to come over here and do something for me."

Louie made it fast. But that's all he was geared for anyway, just one of his stooges. He brought him into the room with him. I was working on my neck now.

Louie said, "H'lo, Mae," just to stay in good with Buck, not knowing for sure if I'd been scratched yet.

"Never mind her," Buck said, letting him know I had. He gave me a traffic signal toward the bathroom with his thumb. "G'wan, get inside there and swaller some iodine or something until I tell you to come out again. And keep that door closed."

I missed some of it that way, but not for lack of pushing my ear hard enough against the door seam. His voice rose irritably every once in a while, which was a habit of his whenever he was talking to his stooges, and that helped some.

"Naw, no one heard it and no one saw it, or I woulda gotten Mendes on the wire right off," was the first thing I got, after a minute or two of static. Mendes was his mouthpiece.

More poor reception, and then: "Why didn't I leave it there? Suppose it *was* hers! Don't you think they're gonna know someone was up there, you dumb lug? Her wrist was weaker than I thought it would be; I pushed it all the way back over her shoulder, and it hit something, turned aside, and the bullet went into her from the back!"

More interference, and then: "I wouldn't wanna pass it off like that even if I could. I didn't want to lose the kid, even after what I found out. I was just gonna slap her around a few times. I got somebody lined up for it. No one takes anything away from me without paying for it!"

A name was coming up. I shifted down to the keyhole, where the reception was better.

"The boy friend's name is Frank Rogers; I got that much out of her before it happened. He came on here to take her back to her home town, when they'd heard she was getting in wrong. He's at the Hallerton House, one of these men's hotels. You know how to work it. Put a little vaseline on the gun, but see that you've got on gloves yourself. You be looking it over just as he comes along—in the hall outside his room, for instance. You drop the gun and it lands on one of your pet corns. You grab your foot with both hands and hop around, so you've got an excuse for not picking it up yourself. He'll bend down and hand it back to you without thinking twice—any guy would. Then just keep it well wrapped up after that, so it don't catch cold."

Some low-pitched beefing I couldn't catch came in from Louie at this point. Then Buck overrode him: "What you worrying about? You don't have to go in there with her, you yellow belly. The body's safe until ten; the woman that does her cleaning don't come around before then. Just see that you leave the gun around inside the building some place where the cops can't miss it, like he threw it away on the lam. Now get over there fast. He'll be getting up early; he was figuring on taking her back with him on the early-morning bus. The six o'clock one. So hurry."

I heard the outside door slam, I counted ten, and then I drifted out. "We're kind of low on iodine in there," I said meekly. "Should I have used a razor?"

He fired his shoe at me. It missed my head but busted the mirror. "Have a little bad luck on me," he wished fervently.

There were still enough pieces left in the mirror's frame to do piecework by, so I sat down at it again, for a stall to stay awake longer than him. He put on a pair of pajamas with zebra stripes. The last thing he said was, "You may as well quit that; it's not gonna get you anything—even in the dark." His yap dropped open and he started to breathe heavy.

I took another halfturn on the cold cream, to make sure he was asleep. I kept thinking, "I gotta find out who she is. Was, I mean. This is what I been waiting for for six months. This is my chance to fix him good, and if I pass it up it'll never come again, he's too cagy. I've got the fall guy's name. Frank Rogers. But I gotta find out hers, and especially where she's lying dead right now." Then a short cut occurred to me. "What the hell, this Rogers can tell me who and where she is."

I had to work fast, but I had to work carefully too. One wrong move and I knew what my finish would be. And it wouldn't be just another busted tooth this time either. He or some one of his gang would kill me. That was why there was no question of just anonymously ratting on Buck to the

cops. I had to stay out of it altogether. They had to trace it back to him themselves. I had to find some way of making sure they did—and leave me in the clear, on the sidelines, when they did. Even with him in the death house, my life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel if there was a leak afterwards.

I wouldn't call it a frame. There was once a guy named Gordon, may his good soul rest in peace. Never mind that now.

I didn't have much time. Those stooges of Buck's moved fast when they were on his shift. That Louie must be practically at Rogers' hotel by now. Here goes, I thought, and I tiptoed out to the phone, keeping my face turned his way so I could do a quick right-about-face if his eyes opened.

The dial made an awful clack. I tried to bury it against my chest, but it wouldn't go around then. Finally I muffled it all I could by keeping my finger in the slot on the return trip each time, but I expected to feel a slug in the back of my neck any minute.

"Get me Mr. Frank Rogers and get him fast," I said to the hotel clerk under my breath. They got him fast but not fast enough to suit me. He sounded sleepy too, must have just got up. Which was another bad break; it would have been bad enough talking to someone wide-awake.

I began: "I haven't time to repeat what I'm going to say a second time, so don't ask me to, get it the first. I've got a message for you from your girl friend."

"Alma?" he said, surprised.

That was only one-third of what I needed. "To make sure I've got the right party, kick back with her full name and address. There may be another Frank Rogers in the same building."

He fell for it. "Alma Kitteredge, 832 East Seventy-second. What's the message?"

“Just put on your pants and pull out of town fast. She’s not coming with you, you’ll find out why when you get back home. Buy a two-cent paper and shut up about this call.”

I was going to warn him not to touch anything, not to pick up any guns for any strangers, but before I had time I had to hang up. Buck had just changed sides in the hay. “What are you doing out there?” he growled.

“Just bringing in the morning paper, dee-yur.”

It hadn’t come yet, but he was asleep again by then anyway.

I made a quick round-trip to the closet, grabbed up whatever was handiest, and got dressed out there in the foyer on the installment plan, stopping between each layer to see if I was still in the clear. I put on my checker-board swagger-coat. Black and white plaid; you could see it a mile away even with low visibility, but it had been on the end hanger. I wasn’t heading for an Easter parade, anyway.

The last thing I took was a clean collar of his, rolled it up small, and put it in my handbag. Then I edged over and fished his key holder out of his vest-pocket. He had an awful lot of them, but only three Yales. I stepped outside and found out which was the one to our place, and that left only two. One probably to his office at the gambling club, and the other one to her place. I detached both of them and took them with me.

I eased the door closed after me, and then I hot-footed it down to the street, scared up a cab, and gave Alma’s address. I hadn’t been out this early in the morning since I was a good girl in love with an honest guy.

I had the driver let me off on the corner instead of right outside the door. It wasn’t such a hot place. None of the trimmings. No doorman, nothing. I could tell Buck hadn’t picked it for her. Still, he already had the key. She’d been afraid to refuse it to him, I guess. Just like I’d been before Gordon had his “accident.”

The door key opened the street door too. The mail slot said 3-A. I walked up a couple of flights of stairs and found the door, a little to the left. I didn't knock. I knew there was no one in there to hear me any more. The key I'd taken from Buck worked the door without any trouble, and I closed it quietly after me with a back-hand motion. The lights had been left on.

She had it nice inside. But she was spoiling the looks of it, even though she was a pretty little thing, lying slopped all over the floor like that.

I looked down at her. "Cheer up, kid," I said softly. "He'll get it hung on him, don't worry."

I went in to her dressing table, rummaged, and got out her lipstick. It was waterproof rouge. I took it back to where she was, bent down by her, lifted her head, and reddened up her mouth plenty. When I'd put it on so thick that it was practically caked on her, I picked up her hand and closed her fingers tight around the lipstick holder.

"Just so the dicks'll know what you were trying to tell them," I murmured to her. "If they don't think it funny that a girl dying from a slug takes time out to rouge her lips, they oughta be out shoving street cleaners' tea wagons around. Now spread yourself on this." I unrolled his clean collar, held it out straight by both ends, and pressed it hard against her smeared mouth. The print came out perfect, a complete cupid's bow.

"They'll check the rouge, they'll check the shape of your mouth. Oh, they'll know," I promised her softly. I rolled the collar up carefully again, put a little tissue paper around it so it wouldn't blur, put it back in my handbag.

"Now just so they'll know what to look for it on . . ." I said. I went over to the table and picked up a big glossy magazine lying there. I thumbed through the ads until I came to a full-page men's collar ad, with a handsome he-model illustrating it. "Here you go," I said. I held that against her mouth, so that the print came out on the collar

in the photograph just about where it had on Buck's. Then I dropped the mag on the floor near her, open at that particular page.

"Now if the cops are any good at all, that oughta bring them around where I live sooner or later—without me having to be filled full of buckshot for it either." I looked back at her from the door, saluted her sadly. "Take it easy, Toots. And the next time you live, marry your Frank Rogers fast and don't fool around with dynamite."

I had my hand on the door knob ready to leave when I heard someone outside in the hall. A sort of tiptoey tread, the kind you notice all the quicker just because it's trying not to be heard. I knew it was Louie, with his little gun all neatly fingerprinted now by Rogers. Louie must have come up through the basement, because I had Buck's key. I got good and scared. I didn't stop to think what a wonderful break I'd just had; if I'd left a minute sooner I'd have run into him head-on on the stairs. Or if he'd shown up a minute later. I was all right where I was. He was too yellow to come in here, and he didn't have the key anyway.

The sound of his tiptoeing went down the hall to the back. There was a muffled clunk from a tin bucket, then his steps came back again, passed the door where I was holding my breath, and faded out down the stairs.

I gave him all the time he needed to get out of the building. Then I let myself out, closed her door, and went up there to the end of the hall. There was a fire-ax clamped to the wall, and there was a red fire-bucket on the floor under it. The gun was lying at the bottom of it.

I'd seen Buck clean his often enough. He always used a piece of chamois or kidskin. Of course this was different; this was to get prints off, but I figured the same thing would work. I took one of my own gloves, from my handbag, to it. That, and my breath, and—what a lady spits with. I worked until there couldn't have been anything left on it. Then I laid it down again inside the pail.

I took a couple of swabs at the outside door knob too, just for luck, before I left. Not that I was particularly worried about myself, but just not to cloud the issue. The whole job must have taken about five, six minutes. Then I went downstairs and out of the building, and stood there for a half-minute outside the street door—like a fool, but the way anyone's apt to do. Sort of taking a deep breath after finishing something. It was still early but it was good and light by now.

You know how you can feel it when anyone's looking at you hard, even from a distance? Something pulled my head around in the opposite direction, and there was a figure in a light gray suit down at the next corner, on the other side of the street, sizing me up for all he was worth. It was Louie, same suit he'd just had on up at our place; he'd just come out of a cigar store that he'd gone into either to buy smokes or to report his success back to Buck over the wire.

My first thought was, "Take it easy. He can't tell who you are from that far off." Then I looked down at myself and I saw those checker-board black and white squares all over me. "Oh, Lord!" I gasped, and I stepped down from the doorway fast and went up the other way.

The steady way he'd been staring told me he already had a hunch it was me. And I knew what the next step would be. He'd phone back to Buck fast to see if I was there or not.

I jumped into the first cab I saw and I almost shook the driver by the shoulders to get some speed out of him. "Fast!" I kept whimpering. "Fast! I've got to beat a phone call."

"I don't see how it can be done," he said.

I didn't either, but it had to be. If Louie had only wasted time tailing me around to where I'd hopped the cab . . . If he'd only run out of nickels . . .

But if he'd already phoned Buck the first time and woken him up, then what was the use of all this? I was already finished. I threw something at the driver, I think it was a fin

for a six-bit ride, and I never got up to a third floor so fast before or after.

It was ringing away, I could hear it right through the door while I was trying to get it open. And of course I would drop, the key on the floor in my hurry and have to dredge for it. I don't know how I did it but finally I was in and had the damned thing at my mouth and ear, just as Buck came up for air in the other room and growled, "Are you gonna get a move on and shut that damn thing up or d'ya want a ride on the end of my foot?"

It was Louie, all right. "Who's that—*Mae?*" he said. He acted surprised I was there. So was I.

"Sure, who else?" I couldn't say much, I was too winded.

"I got three wrong numbers in a row, can y'imagine?" I thanked God and the Telephone Company. "I coulda sworn I seen you down on Seventy-second Street just now."

"Whaddya think I do, walk in my sleep?"

"Well, this dame beat it away fast."

"She probably got a look at your face. Listen, get through, will you? You just busted a dream Charles Boyer was in with me."

"Just tell Buck: Okay." He hung up. I got undressed right where I was standing, on the zipper plan; just dropped everything off together and stepped out of them. But he was asleep again, he didn't ask who it was.

I got her door key and the other one back into his pocket. I hung that blasted checker-board coat as far back inside the closet as it would go, and made a mental note to sell it to the first old-clothes man that came around. The collar with her death kiss on it I rolled up at the bottom of the laundry bag.

The rest was up to the dicks.

They didn’t show up for three days. Three days that were like three years. It was in the papers the first day, just a little squib. Not a word about the lipstick in her hand or the smear on the magazine. That gave me a bad jolt. Had they muffed it? There was always the possibility that Louie had gone back inside, after he’d thought he’d seen me leave there that day, and rearranged my carefully planted setup. But if he had, I’d have been dead two days already.

What looked good about it was that, although the papers spoke of their sending upstate to have a Frank Rogers held and questioned, there was no follow-up. It stopped at that. The next editions didn’t say a word about his being brought back under arrest. His alibi must have held up.

It should have, it was the straight goods.

The bureau drawer gave a crash at this point that was enough to split it in two, so I quickly dropped the paper. This was Thursday night, the second night after, around eight, Buck’s usual time for getting caked up to go down to the club. He was standing there across the room in suspenders, holster, and stiff shirt, but with a bare neck. “Well?” he growled. “What do I use for a collar? They’ve run out on me.”

My heart started hitting it up. “Ur-um-uff,” I said.

A shoe horn went past my left ear and a lit cigar butt sailed by my right. He didn’t wait to see if he’d hit me or not; he headed straight over for that laundry bag behind the bath door. “Now I’ll hafta use the same one twice!”

I managed to stay on my feet, but I was dying all over by inches as I saw his arm go down into it, scuffing things out. “Wait,” I moaned. “Getcha nice fresh one at the haberdasher downstairs. Won’t take a minute, they’re still open.” I got the door open.

It worked. He quit burrowing, with his fingertips just an inch away from it by that time. “Well, get some life into your bustle, I gotta get down there.”

It was right in our same building, but you had to go out the street door and around to get into it. I was too frightened even to remember his size. I bought one of every half-size they carried, from fourteen up to seventeen, to make sure of hitting the right one, and charged them. It was only when I ducked back into the house door again and saw people stopping dead and staring, that I realized I had on bell-bottomed pajamas and a brassier. It was better than a shroud, at that.

He let me off easy, just pushed me back over the arm of a chair. It stayed up, so I did too. He hadn't fished up what lay curled at the bottom of the laundry bag and that was all that mattered.

That was Thursday:

Friday lasted 96 hours, but it finally ended. I kept worrying Rogers had spilled it that an anonymous woman had tipped him to get out of town. If that leaked, and it got back to Buck!

Friday night I got a sudden phone call from Buck, from the club, at two in the morning. He never did that any more; he would have been only too glad if I'd tried to cheat on him those days, so he could've tied the can to me.

I knew what it was, before he even said anything. They were on the trail at last. They must have just been over there to talk to him, for the first time. He was phoning to warn me ahead.

"Anyone been around?" he asked mysteriously.

"No."

"In case anyone does, remember what I told you Tuesday night?"

"That was the night you came home early from the club, at three."

I didn't get any thanks for it. "Now listen, Last Year, if anything gets gummed, if there's any slip-up, I'm going to know just who's to blame for it. You better wish you'd never been born."

He was right; I was probably his only alibi, from the moment he had left the club that night. That may sound as if it was bad for him, but I was the one it was bad for. He could always get out of it in the end, he'd got out of worse ones, and in this case there was the printed gun (so he thought!) and no witnesses. But if there was the least hitch, if he was questioned once too often or half an hour too long, he'd know the answer. That was curtains for me; there was no one else I could pass the buck to.

He'd hardly rung off than there was a knock on the door. I knew who it was. I knew I was going to have to handle the interview just as though Buck was present, or listening in the next room. That didn't have me stopped. If they had any brains at all, maybe they could get it from what I didn't say, instead of what I did.

But when I'd opened the door, it was only one guy. "Headquarters," he said, and he tipped his hat and showed his badge. Only strangers tipped their hats to me any more, not the guys I associated with. "Are you Buck Colby's wife?"

"Common law." Buck didn't even refer to me as that.

"Come in and talk to you?"

"Why, sure," I said hospitably. "Help yourself."

He looked around him casually.

Suddenly he'd said, "About what time does Colby get back here at nights as a rule?" It was out and waiting to be answered before I'd even heard it coming. I was supposed to think he wanted to see Buck right now and wondered how long he'd have to wait for him.

"Never much before three. He's kept busy at the cl—"

He cut it short with his hand. "How about after?"

"Seldom after, either."

"Take Tuesday, for instance." They were coming faster now.

"Tuesday was one of his early nights. He was here at three to the dot."

"References?"

“You picked an easy one for me to remember.” I thumbed the busted mirror. “I was still sitting up there when he came in. If it had been any later than three I would have been in bed. And as a matter of fact, I remember asking him, ‘What brings you home so early?’ He said the take had been rather thin.”

“Where does that mirror come in it?”

“He was taking off his shoe, and he pulled too hard, and it flew out of his hand and landed over here.” I coughed deprecatingly.

He’d shut up all of a sudden. He kept looking at me as if he found me kind of interesting, all at once. The next time he spoke, it wasn’t a police question any more, it was more personal. “Been—married to him long?”

I slid my mouth around toward my left ear. “I’ve been with Mr. Colby two years now.” It sounded strangely sweet, coming out of such a bittershaped thing.

He was getting more and more interested in me personally, seemed to forget all about what had brought him up here. Seemed to. “Worked in one of his clubs, I guess, in the beginning?”

“No. Mr. Colby *did* urge me to when he first met me. But I was intending getting married at the time, so I didn’t feel free to accept. However, the party I—uh, had figured on marrying had an accident, and that left me much freer to accept, so I did.”

He looked at me. “Had an accident,” he said without any question mark.

“Yes. A rather large beer truck ran wild down a hill near where I was living and crushed him against a cement wall as he was on his way up to see me. I suppose even the first time would have killed him, but every time the frightened driver tried to reverse and extricate his vehicle, it would only back up a little and then go smashing in again. It happened three or four times. Like a sort of battering ram.

“The funny part of it was he never fell down. He stayed sort of stuck to the wall—partly. And partly to the fender and radiator. He even got all over the engine too, I understand. They had to whitewash the wall and scour the sidewalk with creosote. “The driver felt very bad about it.

It preyed on his mind, until a few months later he took his own life by tying his hands to his feet and jumping into the river. I don’t believe anyone remembered who he was by that time any more. I happened to, of course, but that was all. No one was to blame, you understand. How could they be?”

I chewed the lining of my check and made my eyes hard as marbles. *”No one was to blame.”*

He just looked at me. After a while he said quietly, “Thought a lot of him, didn’t you?”

I let my eyes drift. “There was never any very great—feeling between us, compared to what there is between Mr. Colby and myself now.” I took my lower jaw and shifted it tenderly back and forth, as if to see whether it had been fractured or not lately.

He shook his head half pityingly and looked down at the floor. Finally he said, as if winding up the interview: “Then he was here from three o’clock on, Tuesday night?”

“From three on. *I stake my life on that!”*

He shuttered his eyes at me understanding, as if to say, “I guess you do.” He got up. “I’m going to ask you to let me take a look in your laundry bag before I go.”

I shifted my eyes over to the bath door, then back to him again. “That’s a very strange request,” I said primly. “I can’t imagine what possible—” He went over to it while I was still talking, stuck his arm down into it, and pulled the bottom up through the top without anything falling out. “Empty,” he said.

“I take it out on Mondays as a rule, but this week, for *some* reason—” I looked at him hard—“I put it off until just yesterday. Just yesterday Mr. Colby noticed it was rather

full, and reminded me I hadn't taken it out." I rubbed my shoulder as though it still ached. "I can't imagine what made me so absent-minded. If he hadn't called my attention to it, it would have been still here." Our eyes met.

He'd sat down again. I said, in my best tea-table manner, "Will you excuse me while I get a cigarette?" He held out a leather case from his pocket. I ignored it. He raised the lid of a box standing there right beside me, full. I didn't seem to see him do it. I got my handbag and brought it back and dug out a crumpled pack. A little vivid green tab of paper came up with it "accidentally" and slipped to the floor. It had two ink-brush ideographs on it, and a couple of words of English—the laundry's name and location.

He picked it up for me, looked at it, and handed it back. I put it back in my bag and put my bag back where I'd got it. The cigarette wouldn't draw, was split from being battered around so much; it didn't matter, I seemed to have got over wanting a smoke any more by that time.

He hitched his chair closer, dropped his voice until you could hardly hear it. Nine parts lip motion to one part of vocal sound. "Temple's my name.

Why don't you come down and see me, if you're leery about talking up here? We'll give you protection."

I clasped my hands in hasty, agonized entreaty, separated them again. "I beg your pardon?" I said in a clear, ringing voice. "Did you say something just then?"

"Take a walk, buddy!" Buck was standing there in the open doorway, Louie looking over his shoulder. I put on a great big relieved expression, like I was sure glad they'd finally shown up. Buck came on in, with his lower jaw leading the way by two inches.

"Now listen, you questioned me at my club oilier tonight, and I took it good-natured. I soitainly never expected to find you here half an hour later. How long does this keep up?"

"What does he want, hon?" I said with wide-eyed innocence. I could have saved myself the trouble, he didn't

even give me a tumble.

“Now if ya think ya got anything on me, out with it, and I’ll go anywheres you say and face it! If ya haven’t, there’s the way out and don’t lemme see ya around here again.” This Temple dick took it meeker than I thought he would. He got up and went toward the door. He went slow, but he went.

“Nothing to get sore about,” he drawled mildly. “I’m just doing my job. No one said anything about having anything on you.”

“You bet no one did!” Buck blared, and slammed the door on him.

None of us said anything for a few minutes. Then Louie looked out to make sure he’d gone, and Buck opened up.

“Y’did better than I expected, at that,” he said to me. “It’s a good thing for you y’did.” He tapped his side meaningfully. “I heard the whole thing from outside the door. We been out there for the past ten minutes. There’s only one thing I don’t like about it. What did he want with that laundry bag?” He poured himself a shot, wiped the dew away on his sleeve. “I don’t get it. I burned—” He didn’t finish it. “How did he know? How did he get onto that?”

He came over at me and his finger shot out like a knife. “Hey, you!” I nearly died in the split-second before he came out with the rest of it. “Did you take any collars over with the rest of that stuff yesterday?”

“I don’t think there were any,” I mumbled vaguely.

“Yes or no?”

My next answer came from the other side of the room, where he’d kited me. “No,” I groaned through a constellation of stars. “They were frayed so I—”

“Just the same you get over there the minute that place opens up in the morning and get that stuff back here, hear me? If they want it, then I want it twice as bad.”

“Sure, Buck,” I said, wiping the blood off my lip. “I’ll bring it back.”

“Why you so worried about collars?” Louie asked him, puzzled.

Buck explained in an undertone, “She’s been kissing me on the neck and I been finding lip-rouge on ’em when I got home. That’s the only thing I can figure he’s looking for. I burned one but there may be others.”

“Yeah, but how would they know?” said Louie with unanswerable logic. “You brought the marks back with you, they didn’t stay down there with *her*.”

His face had a look like something was within an inch of clicking behind it, and I knew what that something was: A loud checked coat leaving a dead girl’s doorway only a few minutes after he had the other day. If it’s possible to shrink inside your own skin and take up lots less room than before, I shrank. That fool Temple, I thought, he may have killed me by making that pass at the laundry bag.

But before the chain of thought Louie was working on could click, Buck saved me by cutting across it and distracting his attention. “There’s something ain’t working right. I don’t know why they haven’t jumped you-know-who by now. They went up and questioned him all right, but I notice there ain’t been a word printed about their bringing him back with them. He musta sprung an alibi that held up. Put your ear down to the ground and find out what’s up, for me, Louie. You got ways. If it don’t move, looks like we’ll have to put a flea in their ear about—” He pressed his fingertips down hard on the table to show him what he meant.

He was standing over me shaking me at seven-thirty the next morning.

And when Buck shook you, you shook. “G’wan, get over there like I told you and get that wash back. I don’t care if it

ain’t ironed or ain’t even washed yet, don’t come back here without it!”

The owner’s name was Lee. It was just about a block away, down in a basement. They were up already, three of the little fellows, ironing away a mile a minute; they must have lived in the back of the place. I tottered down from the street level, put the bright green wash ticket down on the counter.

I thought he looked at me kind of funny. He got it down from the shelf, done up flat in brown paper. “Two dolla’ fi’ cents,” he said. He kept looking at me funny even after I paid him. The other two had quit pounding their flat-irons, were acting funny too. Not looking at me, but sort of waiting for something to happen. I had an idea they were dying to tell me something, but didn’t have the nerve.

I started to pick up the flat package to walk out with it, and it wouldn’t move, stayed on the counter. A hand was holding it down. The string popped, the brown paper rattled open. I didn’t bother turning my head. Like the three monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. I kept watching the sidewalk level outside the shop, murmuring “Thank God!” over and over.

Behind me, a voice said quietly, “Tie the lady’s bundle up again, John.”

I breathed, “Don’t take too long, will you?” I didn’t mean it for the laundryman, I hoped he knew that.

Temple knew everything. “Want to stay out?” he said softly. “I’ll cover you.”

“You’ll cover me with a rubber bib at the morgue. Sure I want to stay out—out of it.”

“I’ve got a look-out posted.”

“Can he beat a slug’s time into my girlish waist?” I wanted to know.

“If you need help before the lab checks this collar, lower one of the window shades.”

“That’d be about right. Lower one of the window shades, like when there’s been a death in the house.” Somebody wedged the retied bundle under my arm, the laundryman I guess, and I walked on out and up the steps. Ostrich-like, I hadn’t seen Temple from first to last. I could be beaten to death, but I couldn’t truthfully say I’d seen him.

It gave me a funny feeling when I got back outside our place again. There should have been a sign over the door, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.”

That had been my last chance to lam, when I was sent out for that laundry. But I knew enough not to. It would have been a dead give-away, and meant certain death. When they want to get you, not all the protection of all the dicks in town is any good to you. The only way for me to play it was this: They mustn’t find out anything that would make them want to get me. So in I went.

He was pacing up and down the room a mile a minute. He turned on me and grabbed the package and slapped me back away from it. “What took you so long?” he griped.

“I hadda wait for them to show up and lemme in.”

He busted it wide open, rummaged through it, scattering it all over the place. Not a collar turned up. “Whew!” he said, and slid his finger across his forehead and flicked it off in the air. Then he thought it over. “But just the same he was after *something* in here. Let’s see if it coulda been anything else.”

He turned the wrapping paper over and before my glazing eyes yanked a bright green price list out from under it. You get one back with every package, a check list of what they’re charging you for. I’d seen too many of them before, I knew just what was going to be on it: i collar—5c. With no collar present to match it. We’d both overlooked that, me and that voice back at the laundry.

“Eight shirts,” he mumbled, “all here. Six shorts.”

I could feel my cheeks puffing in and out like bellows. I reached down and hung onto the nearest piece of furniture,

to brace myself for it when it came. He'd hit it in about a second more.

The phone rang. He dropped the laundry bill and went out to get it. I kind of swayed where I was. I couldn't move fast, my knees were all watery. But luckily the party seemed to have a lot to say, held him out there long enough for me to pull myself together.

I got over to where his coat was hanging, across the back of a chair, and unclasped a pencil with a rubber on it. Then I staggered to where the laundry slip was, and rubbed out the pencilled "1" in front of the printed word collars and the pencilled "5ff" after it. Then I floundered into a chair, and finally got my stomach down where it belonged again.

He came in and finished up what he'd been doing. The list was badly wrinkled and that had covered the erasure. "Everything accounted for," he said. "He overcharged me five cents, but the hell with that." He wasn't a tightwad. Just a killer. "Whatever that dirty name was after, he didn't get."

He hauled a cowhide valise out into the middle of the room. He thumbed it, and then me. "Start packing," he said. "We're getting out of here. I don't like the way that dope sounded just now."

So that had been Louie who'd called just now. Well, I didn't like it either, any more than he did, but not for the same reasons. The lab would never kick back with its report on that collar in time to keep them from hauling me off out of reach with them. Temple would never be able to get to me once they took me out of here with them. And it was no good trying to stall either.

"Come on, yuh paralyzed?" he said, and gave me a shove. "Get a move on."

Damn it, if I'd only emptied the closet first, while we were still alone in the place, and the bureau drawers later! But he kept cracking the whip over my head and I didn't have time to think straight. I emptied out the drawers first, and before I'd got around to the clothes closet, Louie was

already in the place. Even then, I was so busy listening to the two of them while I hauled things back and forth that I forgot for a minute what was in that closet. Didn't realize what I was going to be in for, in just one more round trip.

"What'd you mean just now, it's gone sour?" Buck was demanding.

"The gun turned up clean."

Pokh!

"Don't sock me!" Louie shrilled. "I done my part! Rogers wrapped his mitts around it right under my own eyes! Picked it up and handed it back to me. Somebody musta tampered with it after I planted it."

I unslung a half-dozen dresses from the rack, and suddenly black and white checks were glaring malevolently at me from the depths of the closet! A chair creaked, and Louie had slumped down in one right on a line with the closet door, rubbing the side of his face where Buck had caught him. I knew I'd never be able to get it out of there without him seeing it, not even if I tried to cover it over with the dresses. It was such a big bulky thing.

"It's got to stay in there where it is," I heaved terrifiedly to myself. "That's my only chance."

I sidled out with the dresses, and gave the closet door a little nudge behind me with the point of my elbow, to close it more than it was so he couldn't see in. I didn't bend over the bags, I toppled over them from fright and weakness when I got to them.

I should have got away with it, the way they were barking at each other.

"You blundering fool! No wonder they never brought Rogers back! Mendes'll have to go to bat for me now!"

"*She* ratted on you herself!" Louie protested. For a minute I thought he meant me and a drop of twenty degrees ran down my spine. "I heard she left some kind of a high-sign, but I couldn't find out what it was; they're keeping it to themselves. They found her with something in

her hand. They put the kibosh on it, wouldn't let the papers tell it. One story I heard was they're out after some guy that poses for ads in magazines, but I think it's just a bum steer they threw out on purpose. Anyway, one thing's sure, she didn't die right away like you thought."

"She was dead when I left her!" Buck growled ferociously. "I oughta know, I tried hard enough to bring her back! Somebody's framed me! C'mon, let's get out of here fast. Hurry up, you, y'got everything?"

Louie's face was working like he was trying to connect something up. "Y'know, I forgot to tell you," he started to say, "Tuesday morning early, when you sent me over there —"

"Come on, I've got everything!" I interrupted frantically. "What're we waiting for?" I picked up both valises, heavy as they were, just to break Louie's chain of thought.

"Make sure you don't leave nothing behind," Buck said. He widened the closet door to take a last look in. His voice sounded hollow, coming from inside it. "Hey, you dope, what's the matter with this coat?"

Clump went the two valises to the floor. I just stood there between them. Dead already, for all practical purposes, just waiting to fall down. I didn't even turn to look, just waited for it to come.

Buck came out holding it up by one hand, and the room was suddenly full of loud checks. Louie gave a jolt out of his chair, like a tack had run up through it.

"That's the coat!" he yelled. "I'd know it anywhere! That's the coat I seen come out of the Kitteredge babe's house five minutes after I left there Tuesday morning! So you wanna know who ratted on you! So you wanna know who! Ask *her* what she was doing down there. Ask *her* how the gun turned up clean. Ask *her* how the stiff come to give a high-sign when you left her dead."

"Did I answer at this end when you called up right afterwards—did I or didn't I? Tell him that!" I yelled.

“Sure—so out of breath you couldn’t hardly talk at all,” Louie said.

“Don’t let him put a knife in me, Buck. What’s he trying to tell you?”

But I could tell by Buck’s eyes I’d lost the bout already. They would have cut window glass, they were so hard.

“He wouldn’t make up a thing like that,” he said. “Know why? He hasn’t got imagination enough. And there’s not another coat like yours in town; they told you that fifty times over when you bought it.”

Buck unbuttoned his topcoat, spaded his hand under his jacket, heaved once, brought out his gun, leveled it, squinted at my stomach. Gee, it was awful watching him do it, he seemed to do it so slow. He crooked his left index finger at me, kept wiggling it back and forth, and *smiling.* You had to sec that smile to know how awful a smile can be.

“C’m over here and get it,” he said. “You’re not worth moving a step out of the way for. Come on, this way. The nearer you are, the less you feel it. This is where you came in, baby.” I picked up one foot and put it down on the outside of the valise and stayed that way, straddling it. I noticed a funny thing; I wasn’t so scared any more. I wasn’t as scared as I had been just before they’d found the coat. I kept thinking, “It won’t take long, I won’t feel it. I’ll be with Gordon now, anyway.”

“Not here,” Louie said nervously. “What’d we go to all that trouble about the first one for if you’re only gonna pull a kill, big as life, where they can’t miss it?”

It was hard for Buck to put on his brakes, his blood was so hot for a kill. But Louie was talking sense, and he knew it. He put his gun away slow, even slower than he’d brought it out.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, you’re right. And she’s not worth taking a rap for. We’ll go up to the place in the sticks. I’ll get in touch with my mouth as soon as we get up there. He can

handle the Kitteredge thing easy; he's handled worse ones than that for me.

"Let's see, now; she'll start with us, but she won't get up there with us though. You and me, Louie, will have to hike it the last lap of the way in. We're going to have an accident with the car before we get there. You know that hairpin turn, where the road twists around that bluff high over the river? It always makes me nervous every time I pass that stretch of road, especially the way you drive, kind of close to the edge."

He gave another of those smiles of his, and Louie grinned back at him in answer. "That ain't far from the place," he said. "I don't mind hoofing it from there in." He thumped himself over the belt buckle. "Matter of *fact,* I don't get enough exercise."

"I like accidents," Buck said. He kept on smiling. "You take the bags, Louie, I'll take the body."

He linked his arm through mine, like a guy often walks with a woman. Only the hand on the end of it stayed in his coat pocket, and the coat pocket stuck into my side, hard and heavy.

"Now if you're in a hurry," he said, "if you want it fast, right away instead of later, just sing out between here and the car. It don't make any difference to me if you take the ride with us dead or alive. You're just short-changing yourself out of about forty minutes of life, that's all."

The shade, I kept thinking, the window shade. My signal to Temple. It was as out of reach as if it had been on the window of a house across the street. "If I've got to go, I've got to go," I said dreamily. "But won't you let me take just one last look at the town from the window? You see, I won't be seeing it again. You can keep the gun at my back; you can make sure I don't try nothing."

"Aw, let her take one last look," Louie said. "It'll hurt that much more, don't you get it? Here, I'll hold her hands

behind her back, so she can't signal with them in any way, and you keep the gun on her."

They shoved me up in front of the window, keeping back out of sight behind the curtains. "Okay, Mae, say good-by," Buck laughed.

The cord was hanging in a loop in front of me but Louie had both my wrists in a vise behind me. I had a lot of clothes to wear. I could have had on almost anything that day—anything that wouldn't have done any good. But he'd hustled me out so fast to get that laundry I hadn't had time to doll up. I'd shoved into a skirt and a blouse. A blouse with a couple of big flat buttons on each side of it.

I don't know how I did it. I bet I couldn't do it over again now if I tried. The cord was hanging in a loop that rested against my chest. "Gee, it's pretty," I said, and turned a little to look up one way. "It's tough to leave it," I said, and turned again to look down the other way. I couldn't get a full loop into it, but I got it snagged around the button, which was the size of a silver dollar. He did the rest.

"C'mon, that's enough," Buck said, and he jerked me back and started to swing me around on my way to the door. The button took the cord with it and pulled it tight over my shoulder. *Whirr!* and the shade came all the way down to the bottom, so fast and hard it tore partly off the roller, creased, and wouldn't go up again.

It looked so much like an accident they didn't even tumble. He just gave me a clip on the head, and freed the cord by wrenching the button off. Then we went on out of the place and down to the street, him and me first and Louie behind us with the two bags.

If I had expected the shade stunt to get me anything, I was out of luck. The street was dead, there wasn't a soul in sight up or down the whole length of it. Buck's car was standing a few yards down from the door, where there were a couple of big fat leafy trees. He had a habit of parking it

under them, to keep the sun from heating up the inside of it too much.

We went down to it and he shoved me into the back seat, climbed in next to me and pinned me into the comer with his shoulder. Louie dumped the bags in the trunk, got in and took the wheel. “So he had a look-out posted, did he?” I thought bitterly. “Where—over in the next county?”

We started off with kind of a thud, that didn’t come from the engine. “What was that?” asked Buck.

Louie looked out and behind us. “One of the branches of that tree musta grazed the roof. I see it kind of wobbling up and down.”

We rounded the corner and started out for the express highway that later on turned into the upstate road we wanted. Buck had his gun on me the whole time, through the pocket, of course.

I just sat there in the corner resignedly. It was too late for anyone to horn in now. Temple’s look-out had muffed it. Must have gone off to phone in the alarm just as we came out of the building.

There was more life on the avenue we were on now than on the street we lived on. Louie said suddenly, “Everybody walking along the sidewalk turns and rubbernecks after us. What’s she doing?”

“Nothing,” Buck told him. “I got her covered. You’re just jittery, that’s all.” Then he glanced back through the rear insert. “Yeah, their heads are all turned staring after us!”

His face worked savagely and he brought the gun out into the open, then reburied it in my side without any pocket over it. “I don’t know what ya been doin’, but you’re through doin’ it now! Step it up,” he told Louie, “and let your exhaust out, I’m going to give it to her right here in the car, ahead of the accident.

She’ll never come up from the river bottom again anyway, so it don’t make no difference if she’s got a slug in her.”

He crowded me back into the corner of the seat, sort of leaned over me, to muffle it between our two bodies. My eyes got big, but I didn't let out a sound.

Over his shoulder I saw something that I knew I couldn't be seeing. A pair of legs swung down off the car roof, then a man's waist and shoulders and face came down after them, and he was hanging to the roof with both arms. He hung there like that for a minute, jockeying to find the running-board with his feet. Then he let go, went down almost out of sight, came up again, hanging onto the door handle with one hand, drawing a gun with the other.

Buck had his back turned to that side, didn't see him in time. But the man had darkened the inside of the car a little by being there like that, and Buck pulled his gun out of my side and started turning. He never had time to fire.

The guy fired once, straight into his face, and then Louie swerved, and the car threw the guy who'd shot off the running-board and he lay there behind us in the street.

Buck's head fell back into my lap, and it never moved again, just got a little blood on me. I saw Louie reaching with one hand, so I freed the gun that was still in Buck's hand, pointed it at the back of his neck, and said:

"Pull over!"

The jolting of the car to a stop threw Buck's dead head off my lap to the floor where it belonged.

I was holding Louie there like that, hands up in the clear off the wheel, when Temple's look-out came limping after us. He was pretty badly banged up by his fall but not out of commission. He took over.

"They ought to be here any minute," he said. "I tipped off Temple as soon as I caught the shade signal, but I figured he wouldn't make it in time. That tree was a natural, for stowing myself away on the roof."

Temple and the rest caught up with us five or ten minutes later, in a screaming police car. On the way back in it with

him, safely out of earshot of the handcuffed Louie, I said: “Well, what luck did you have with that collar?”

“The lab just sent in its report before I came away. It checks all right. It’s just as well we got him this way, though, because we couldn’t have used it anyway. Frank Rogers’ testimony on the way he was tricked into handling that gun can take care of Louie as an accessory, and we’ll sweat the rest of it out of Louie himself, so you can still stay out of it like you wanted to all along.” He chuckled. “Pretty neat, the way you worked it. Our fellows have waded through more dirty wash since Tuesday morning . . .

“But wait a minute,” I said, puzzled. “How’d you know I was the one worked it? How’d you know that the collar was planted?”

He winked at me good-naturedly. “You held it to her mouth upside down. The cleft of the upper lip was at the bottom.” He chuckled. “What was he supposed to be doing while she was kissing him—standing on his head?”

YOU'LL NEVER SEE ME AGAIN

It was the biscuits started it. How he wished, afterward, that she'd never made those biscuits! But she made them, and she was proud of them. Her first try. Typical bride-and-groom stuff. The gag everyone's heard for years, so old it has whiskers down to here. So old it isn't funny any more. No, it isn't funny; listen while it's told.

He wasn't in the mood for playing house. He'd been working hard all day over his drafting-board. Even if they'd been good he probably would have grunted, "Not bad," and let it go at that. But they weren't good; they were atrocious. They were as hard as gravel; they tasted like lye. She'd put in too much of something and left out too much of something else, and life was too short to fool around with them.

"Well, I don't hear you saying anything about them," she pouted.

All he said was: "Take my advice, Smiles, and get 'em at the corner bakery after this."

"That isn't very appreciative," she said. "If you think it was much fun bending over that hot oven—"

"If you think it's much fun eating them—I've got a blueprint to do tomorrow; I can't take punishment like this!"

One word led to another. By the time the meal was over, her fluffy golden head was down inside her folded arms on the table and she was making broken-hearted little noises.

Crying is an irritant to a tired man. He kept saying things he didn't want to. "I could have had a meal in any restaurant without this. I'm tired. I came home to get a little rest, not the death scene from *Camille* across the table from me."

She raised her head at that. She meant business now. "If I'm annoying you, that's easily taken care of! You want it quiet; we'll see that you *get* it quiet. No trouble at all about that."

She stormed into the bedroom and he could hear drawers slamming in and out. So she was going to walk out on him, was she? For a minute he was going to jump up and go in there after her and put his arms around her and say: "I'm sorry, Smiles; I didn't mean what I said." And that probably would have ended the incident then and there.

But he checked himself. He remembered a well-meaning piece of advice a bachelor friend of his had given him before his marriage. And bachelors always seem to know so much about marriage rules! "If she should ever threaten to walk out on you, and they all do at one time or another," this sage had counseled him, "there's only one way for you to handle that. Act as though you don't care; let her go. She'll come back fast enough, don't worry. Otherwise, if you beg her not to, she'll have the upper hand over you from then on."

He scratched himself behind one ear. "I wonder if he was right?" he muttered. "Well, the only way to find out is to try it."

So he left the table, went into the living-room, snapped on a reading-lamp, sprawled back in a chair, and opened his evening paper, perfectly unconcerned to all appearances. The only way you could tell he wasn't, was by the little glances he kept stealing over the top of the paper every once in a while to see if she was really going to carry out her threat.

She acted as if she were. She may have been waiting for him to come running in there after her and beg for forgiveness, and when he didn't, forced herself to go through with it. Stubborn pride on both their parts. And they were both so young, and this was so new to them. Six weeks the day after tomorrow.

She came bustling in, set down a little black valise in the middle of the room, and put on her gloves. Still waiting for him to make the first overtures for reconciliation. But he kept making the breach worse every time he opened his mouth, all because of what some fool had told him. "Sure you've got everything?" he said quietly.

She was so pretty even when she was angry. "I'm glad you're showing your true colors; I'd rather find out now than later."

Someone should have pushed their two heads together, probably. But there wasn't anyone around but just the two of them. "You're making a mountain out of a molehill. Well, pick a nice comfortable hotel while you're at it."

"I don't have to go to a hotel. I'm not a waif. I've got a perfectly good mother who'll receive me with open arms."

"Quite a trip in the middle of the night, isn't it?" And to make matters worse, he opened his wallet as if to give her the money for her fare.

That put the finishing touch to her exasperation. "I'll get up there without any help from you, Mr. Ed Bliss! And I don't want any of the things you ever gave me, either! Take your old silver-fox piece!" *Fluff*. "And take your old diamond ring!" *Plink*. "And take your old pin money!" *Scuff-scuff-slap*. "And you can take back that insurance policy you took out on me, too! Simon Legree! Ivan the Terrible!"

He turned the paper back to where the boxscores were. He only hoped that bachelor was right. "See you day after tomorrow, or whenever you get tired playing hide-and-seek," he said calmly.

“You’ll never see me again as long as you live!” It rang in his ears for days afterwards.

She picked up the valise, the front door went *boom!* and he was single again.

The thing to do now was to pretend he didn’t care, and then she’d never try anything like this again. Otherwise, his life would be made miserable. Every time they had the least little argument, she’d threaten to go back to her mother.

That first night he did all the things he’d always wanted to do, but they didn’t stack up to so much after all. Took off his socks and walked around in his bare feet, let the ashes lie wherever they happened to drop off, drank six bottles of cold beer through their mouths and let them lie all over the room, and went to bed without bothering to shave.

He woke up about four in the morning, and it felt strange knowing she wasn’t in the house with him, and he hoped she was all right wherever she was, and he finally forced himself to go back to sleep again. In the morning there wasn’t anyone to wake him up. Her not being around didn’t seem so strange then simply because he didn’t have time to notice; he was exactly an hour and twenty-two minutes late for work.

But when he came back that night, it did seem strange, not finding anyone there waiting for him, the house dark and empty, and beer bottles rolling all around the living-room floor. Last night’s meal, their last one together, was still strewn around on the table after twenty-four hours. He poked his finger at one of the biscuits, thought remorsefully, “I should have kept quiet. I could have pretended they were good, even if they weren’t.” But it was too late now; the damage had been done.

He had to eat out at a counter by himself, and it was very depressing. He picked up the phone twice that evening, at

10:30 and again at 11:22, on the point of phoning up to her mother's place and making up with her, or at least finding out how she was. But each time he sort of slapped his own hand, metaphorically speaking, in rebuke and hung up without putting the call through. "I'll hold out until tomorrow," he said to himself. "If I give in now, I'm at her mercy."

The second night was rocky. The bed was no good; they needed to be made up about once every twenty-four hours, he now found out for the first time. A cop poked him in the shoulder with his club at about three in the morning and growled, "What's your trouble, bud?"

"Nothing that's got anything to do with what's in your rule book," Bliss growled back at him. He picked himself up from the curb and went back inside his house again.

He would have phoned her as soon as he woke up in the morning, but he was late again—only twelve minutes behind, this time, though—and he couldn't do it from the office without his fellow draftsmen getting wise she had left him.

He finally did it when he came back that evening, the second time, after eating. This was exactly 8:17 p.m. Thursday, two nights after she'd gone.

He said, "I want to talk to Mrs. Belle Alden, in Denby, this state. I don't know her number. Find it for me and give it to me." He'd never met Smiles' mother, incidentally.

While he was waiting for the operator to ring back, he was still figuring how to get out of it; find out how she was without seeming to capitulate. Young pride! *Maybe I can talk the mother into not letting on I called to ask about her, so she won't know I'm weakening. Let it seem like she's the first one to thaw out.*

The phone rang and he picked it up fast, pride or no pride.

"Here's your party."

A woman's voice got on, and he said, "Hello, is this Mrs. Alden?"

The voice said it was.

"This is Ed, Smiles' husband."

"Oh, how is she?" she said animatedly.

He sat down at the phone. It took him a minute to get his breath back again. "Isn't she there?" he said finally.

The voice was surprised. "Here? No. Isn't she *there*?"

For a minute his stomach had felt all hollow. Now he was all right again. He was beginning to get it. Or thought he was. He winked at himself, with the wall in front of him for a reflector. So the mother was going to bat for her. They'd cooked up this little fib between them, to punish him. They were going to throw a little fright into him. He'd thought he was teaching her a lesson, and now she was going to turn the tables on him and teach him one. He was supposed to go rushing up there tearing at his hair and foaming at the mouth. "Where's Smiles? She's gone! I can't find her!" Then she'd step out from behind the door, crack her whip over his head, and threaten: "Are you going to behave? Are you ever going to do that again?" And from then on, she'd lead him around with a ring in his nose.

"You can't fool me, Mrs. Alden," he said self-assuredly. "I know she's there. I know she told you to say that."

Her voice wasn't panicky; it was still calm and self-possessed, but there was no mistaking the earnest ring to it. Either she was an awfully good actress, or this wasn't any act. "Now listen, Ed. You ought to know I wouldn't joke about a thing like that. As a matter of fact, I wrote her a long letter only yesterday afternoon. It ought to be in your mailbox by now. If she's not there with you, I'd make it my business to find out where she is, if I were you. And I wouldn't put it off, either!"

He still kept wondering: "Is she ribbing me or isn't she?" He drawled undecidedly, "Well, it's damned peculiar."

“I certainly agree with you,” she said briskly. He just chewed the inner tube of his cheek.

“Well, will you let me know as soon as you find out where she is?” she concluded. “I don’t want to worry, and naturally I won’t be able to help doing so until I hear that she’s all right.”

He hung up, and first he was surer than ever that it wasn’t true she wasn’t there. For one thing, the mother hadn’t seemed worried enough to make it convincing. He thought, “I’ll be damned if I call back again, so you and she can have the laugh on me. She’s up there with you right now.”

But then he went outside and opened the mailbox, and there was a letter for Smiles with her mother’s name on the envelope, and postmarked 6:30 the evening before.

He opened it and read it through. It was bona fide, all right; leisurely, chatty, nothing fake about it. One of those letters that are written over a period of days, a little at a time. There was no mistaking it; up to the time it had been mailed, she hadn’t seen her daughter for months. And Smiles had left him the night before; if she’d gone up there at all, she would have been there long before then.

He didn’t feel so chipper any more, after that. She wouldn’t have stayed away this long if she’d been here in town, where she could walk or take a cab back to the house. There was nothing to be that sore about. And she’d intended going up there. The reason he felt sure of that was this: With her, it wasn’t a light decision, lightly taken and lightly discarded. She hadn’t been living home with her mother when he married her. She’d been on her own down here for several years before then. They corresponded regularly, they were on good terms, but the mother’s remarriage had made a difference. In other words, it wasn’t a case of flying straight back to the nest the first time she’d lost a few feathers. It was not only a fairly lengthy trip up there, but they had not seen each other for several years.

So if she'd said she was going up there, it was no fleeting impulse, but a rational, clear-cut decision, and she was the kind of girl who would carry it out once she had arrived at it.

He put his hat on, straightened his tie, left the house, and went downtown. There was only one way she could get anywhere near Denby, and that was by bus. It wasn't serviced by train.

Of the two main bus systems, one ran an express line that didn't stop anywhere near there; you had to go all the way to the Canadian border and then double back nearly half of the way by local, to get within hailing distance. The smaller line ran several a day, in each direction, up through there to the nearest large city beyond; they stopped there by request. It was obvious which of the two systems she'd taken.

That should have simplified matters greatly for him; he found out it didn't. He went down to the terminal and approached the ticket-seller.

"Were you on duty here Tuesday night?"

"Yeah, from six on. That's my shift every night."

"I'm trying to locate someone. Look. I know you're selling tickets all night long, but maybe you can remember her." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "She's young, only twenty, with blond hair. So pretty you'd look at her twice, if you ever saw her the first time; I know you would. Her eyes are sort of crinkly and smiling. Even when her mouth isn't smiling, her eyes are. She—she bought a ticket to Denby."

The man turned around and took a pack of tickets out of a pigeonhole and blew a layer of dust off them. "I haven't sold a ticket to Denby in over a month." They had a rubber band around them. All but the top one. That blew off with his breath.

That seemed to do something to his powers of memory. He ducked down out of sight, came up with it from the floor. “Wait a minute,” he said, prodding his thumbnail between two of his teeth. “I don’t remember anything much about any eyes or smile, but there was a young woman came up and priced the fare to Denby. I guess it was night before last, at that. Seeing this one ticket pulled loose out of the batch reminded me of it. I told her how much it was, and I snagged out a ticket—this loose one here. But then she couldn’t make it; I dunno, she didn’t have enough money on her or something. She looked at her wrist watch, and asked me how late the pawnshops stay open. I told her they were all closed by then. Then she shoveled all the money she could round up across the counter at me and asked me how far that would take her. So I counted and told her, and she told me to give her a ticket to that far.”

Bliss was hanging onto his words, hands gripping the counter until his knuckles showed white. “Yes, but where to?”

The ticket-seller’s eyelids drooped deprecatingly. “That’s the trouble,” he said, easing the back of his collar. “I can’t remember that part of it. I can’t even remember how much the amount came to, now, any more. If I could, I could get the destination by elimination.”

“If I only knew how much she had in her handbag when she left the house,” Bliss thought desolately, “we could work it out together, him and me.” He prodded: “Three dollars? Four? Five?”

The ticket vendor shook his head baffledly. “No use, it won’t come back. I’m juggling so many figures all night long, every night in the week—”

Bliss slumped lower before the sill. “But don’t you keep a record of what places you sell tickets to?”

“No, just the total take for the night, without breaking it down.”

He was as bad off as before. “Then you can’t tell me for sure whether she did get on the bus that night or not?”

Meanwhile an impatient line had formed behind Bliss, and the ticket-seller was getting fidgety.

“No. The driver might remember her. Look at it this way: she only stood in front of me for a minute or two at the most. If she got on the bus at all, she sat in back of him for anywhere from an hour to four hours. Remember, I’m not even guaranteeing that the party I just told you about is the same one you mean. It’s just a vague incident to me.”

“Would the same one that made Tuesday night’s run be back by now?”

“Sure, he’s going out tonight again.” The ticket man looked at a chart. “Go over there and ask for No. 27. Next!”

No. 27 put down his coffee mug, swiveled around on the counter stool, and looked at his questioner.

“Yare, I made Tuesday night’s upstate run.”

“Did you take a pretty blond girl, dressed in a gray jacket and skirt, as far as Denby?”

No. 27 stopped looking at him. His face stayed on in the same direction, but he was looking at other things. “Nawr, I didn’t.”

“Well, was she on the bus at all?”

No. 27’s eyes remained at a tangent from the man he was answering. “Nawr, she wasn’t.”

“What’re you acting so evasive about? I can tell you’re hiding something, just by looking at you.”

“I said, ‘Nawr, I didn’t.’ ”

“Listen. I’m her husband. I’ve got to know. Here, take this, only tell me, will you? I’ve got to know. It’s an awful feeling!”

The driver took a hitch in his belt. “I get good wages. A ten-dollar bill wouldn’t make me say I sawr someone when I didn’t. No, nor a twenty, nor a century either. That’s an old one. It would only make me lose my rating with the company.” He swung around on his stool, took up his coffee

mug again. “I only sawr the road,” he said truculently. “I ain’t supposed to see who’s riding in back of me.”

“But you can’t help seeing who gets off each time you stop.”

This time No. 27 wouldn’t answer at all. The interview was over, as far as he was concerned. He flung down a nickel, defiantly jerked down the visor of his cap, and swaggered off.

Bliss slouched forlornly out of the terminal, worse off than before. The issue was all blurred now. The ticket-seller vaguely thought some girl or other had haphazardly bought a ticket for as much money as she had on her person that night, but without guaranteeing that she fitted his description of Smiles at all. The driver, on the other hand, definitely denied anyone like her had ridden with him, as far as Denby or anywhere else. What was he to think? Had she left, or hadn’t she left?

Whether she had or not, it was obvious that she had never arrived. He had the testimony of her own mother, and that letter from her from upstate, to vouch for that. And who was better to be believed than her own mother?

Had she stayed here in the city then? But she hadn’t done that, either. He knew Smiles so well. Even if she had gone to the length of staying overnight at a hotel that first night, Tuesday, she would have been back home with him by Wednesday morning at the very latest. Her peevishness would have evaporated long before then. Another thing, she wouldn’t have had enough money to stay for any longer than just one night at even a moderately priced hotel. She’d flung down the greater part of her household expense money on the floor that night before walking out.

“All I can do,” he thought apprehensively, “is make a round of the hotels and find out if anyone like her was at any of them Tuesday night, even if she’s not there now.”

He didn’t check every last hotel in town, but he checked all the ones she would have gone to, if she’d gone to one at

all. She wouldn’t have been sappy enough to go to some rundown lodging-house near the freight yards or longshoremen’s hostelry down by the piers. That narrowed the field somewhat.

He checked on her triply: by name first, on the hotel registers for Tuesday night; then by her description, given to the desk clerks; and lastly by any and all entries in the registers, no matter what name was given. He knew her handwriting, even if she’d registered under an assumed name.

He drew a complete blank. No one who looked like her had come to any of the hotels—Tuesday night, or at any time since. No one giving her name. No one giving another name, who wrote like her. What was left? Where else could she have gone? Friends? She didn’t have any. Not close ones, not friends she knew well enough to walk in on unannounced and stay overnight with.

Where was she? She wasn’t in the city. She wasn’t in the country, up at Denby. She seemed to have vanished completely from the face of the earth.

It was past two in the morning by the time he’d finished checking the hotels. It was too late to get a bus any more that night, or he would have gone up to Denby then and there himself. He turned up his coat collar against the night mist and started disconsolately homeward. On the way he tried to buck himself up by saying: “Nothing’s happened to her. She’s just hiding out somewhere, trying to throw a scare into me. She’ll show up, she’s bound to.” It wouldn’t work, much. It was two whole days and three nights now. Marriage is learning to know another person, learning to know by heart what he or she’d do in such-and-such a situation. They’d only been married six weeks, but, after all,

they'd been going together nearly a year before that; he knew her pretty well by now.

She wasn't vindictive. She didn't nurse grievances, even imaginary ones. There were only two possible things she would have done. She would have either gotten on that bus red-hot, been cooled off long before she got off it again, but stayed up there a couple of days as long as she was once there. Or if she hadn't taken the bus, she would have been back by twelve at the latest right that same night, with an injured air and a remark like: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself letting your wife walk the streets like a vagrant!" or something to that effect. She hadn't, so she must have gone up there. Then he thought of the letter from her mother, and he felt good and scared.

The phone was ringing when he got back. He could hear it even before he got the front door open. He nearly broke the door down in his hurry to get at it. For a minute he thought—

But it was only Mrs. Alden. She said, "I've been trying to get you ever since ten o'clock. I didn't hear from you, and I've been getting more and more worried." His heart went down under his shoelaces. "Did you locate her? Is it all right?"

"I can't find her," he said, so low he had to say it over again so she could catch it.

She'd been talking fast until now. Now she didn't say anything at all for a couple of minutes; there was just an empty hum on the wire. Something came between them. They'd never seen each other face to face, but he could sense a change in her voice, a different sound to it the next time he heard it. It was as though she were drawing away from him. Not moving from where she stood, of course, but rather withdrawing her confidence. The beginnings of suspicion were lurking in it somewhere or other.

"Don't you think it's high time you got in touch with the police?" he heard her say. And then, so low that he could

hardly get it: “If you don’t, I will.” *Click,* and she was gone.

He didn’t take it the way he, perhaps, should have.

As he hung up, he thought, “Yes, she’s right, I’ll have to. Nothing else left to be done now. It’s two full days now; no use kidding myself any more.”

He put on his hat and coat again, left the house once more. It was about three in the morning by this time. He hated to go to them. It seemed like writing *finis* to it. It seemed to make it so final, tragic, in a way. As though, once he notified them, all hope of her returning to him unharmed, of her own accord, was over. As though it stopped being just a little private, domestic matter any more and became a police matter, out of his own hands. Ridiculous, he knew, but that was the way he felt about it. But it had to be done. Just sitting worrying about her wasn’t going to bring her back.

He went in between two green door lamps and spoke to a desk sergeant. “I want to report my wife missing.” They sent a man out, a detective, to talk to him. Then he had to go down to the city morgue, to see if she was among the unidentified dead there, and that was the worst experience he’d had yet. It wasn’t the sight of the still faces one by one; it was the dread, each time, that the next one would be hers. Half under his breath, each time he shook his head and looked at someone who had once been loved, he added, “No, thank God.” She wasn’t there.

Although he hadn’t found her, all he could give when he left the place of the dead was a sigh of unutterable relief. She wasn’t among the found dead; that was all this respite marked. But he knew, although he tried to shut the grisly thought out, that there are many dead who are not found. Sometimes not right away, sometimes never.

They took him around to the hospitals then, to certain wards, and though this wasn’t quite so bad as the other place, it wasn’t much better either. He looked for her among amnesia victims, would-be suicides who had not yet

recovered consciousness, persons with all the skin burned off their faces, mercifully swathed in gauze bandaging and tea leaves. They even made him look in the alcoholic wards, though he protested strenuously that she wouldn't be there, and in the psychopathic wards.

The sigh of relief he gave when this tour was over was only less heartfelt than after leaving the morgue. She wasn't dead. She wasn't maimed or injured or out of her mind in any way. And still she wasn't to be found.

Then they turned it over to Missing Persons, had her description broadcast, and told him there wasn't anything he could do for the present but go home.

He didn't even try to sleep when he got back the second time. Just sat there waiting—for the call that didn't come and that he somehow knew wouldn't come, not if he waited for a week or a month.

It was starting to get light by that time. The third day since she'd been swallowed up bodily was dawning. She wasn't in the city, alive or dead, he was convinced. Why sit there waiting for them to locate her when he was sure she wasn't here? He'd done all he could at this end. He hadn't done anything yet at the other end. The thing was too serious now; it wasn't enough just to take the word of a *voice* over a telephone wire that she wasn't up there. Not even if the voice was that of her own mother, who was to be trusted if anyone was, who thought as much of her as he did. He decided he'd go up there himself. Anything was better than just sitting here waiting helplessly.

He couldn't take the early-morning bus, the way he wanted to. Those building plans he was finishing up had to be turned in today; there was an important contractor waiting for them. He stood there poring over the blueprints, more dead than alive between worry and lack of sleep, and when they were finally finished, turned in, and O.K.'d, he went straight from the office to the terminal and took the bus that should get in there about dark.

Denby wasn’t even an incorporated village, he found when the bus finally got there, an hour late. It was just a place where a turnpike crossed another road, with houses spaced at lengthy intervals along the four arms of the intersection. Some of them a quarter of a mile apart, few of them in full view of one another due to intervening trees, bends in the roads, rises and dips of the ground. A filling-station was the nearest thing to the crossroads, in one direction. Up in the other was a store, with living-quarters over it. It was the most dispersed community he had ever seen.

He chose the store at random, stopped in there, and asked, “Which way to the Alden house?”

The storekeeper seemed to be one of those people who wear glasses for the express purpose of staring over instead of through them. Or maybe they’d slipped down on the bridge of his nose. “Take that other fork, to your right,” he instructed. “Just keep going till you think there ain’t going to be no more houses, and you’re sure I steered you wrong. Keep on going anyway. When you least expect it, one last house’ll show up, round the turn. That’s them. Can’t miss it. You’ll know it by the low brick barrier wall runs along in front of it. He put that up lately, just to keep in practice, I reckon.”

Bliss wondered what he meant by that, if anything, but didn’t bother asking. The storekeeper was evidently one of these loquacious souls who would have rambled on forever given the slightest encouragement, and Bliss was tired and anxious to reach his destination. He thanked him and left.

The walk out was no picayune city block or two; it was a good stiff hike. The road stretched before him like a white tape under the velvety night sky, dark-blue rather than black, and stars twinkled down through the openings between the roadside-tree branches. He could hear countryside night noises around him, crickets or something, and once a dog barked way off in the distance—it sounded

like miles away. It was lonely, but not particularly frightening. Nature rarely is; it is man that is menacing.

Just the same, if she had come up here—and of course she hadn't—it wouldn't have been particularly prudent for a young girl alone like her to walk this distance at that hour of the night. She probably would have phoned out to them to come in and meet her at the crossroads, from either the store or that filling-station. And yet if both had been closed up by then—her bus wouldn't have passed through here until one or two in the morning—she would have had to walk it alone. But she hadn't come up so why conjure up additional dangers?

Thinking which, he came around the slow turn in the road and a low, elbow-height boundary wall sprang up beside him and ran down the road past a pleasant, white-painted two-story house, with dark gables, presumably green. They seemed to keep it in good condition. As for the wall itself, he got what the storekeeper's remark had intended to convey when he saw it. It looked very much as though Alden had put it up simply to kill time, give himself something to do, add a fancy touch to his property. For it seemed to serve no useful purpose. It was not nearly high enough to shut off the view, so it had not been built for privacy. It only ran along the front of the parcel, did not extend around the sides or to the back, so it was not even effective as a barrier against poultry or cattle, or useful as a boundary mark. It seemed to be purely decorative. As such, it was a neat, workmanlike job; you could tell Alden had been a mason before his marriage. It was brick, smoothly, painstakingly plastered over.

There was no gate in it, just a gap, with an ornamental willow wicket arched high over it. He turned in through there. They were up yet, though perhaps already on the point of retiring. One of the upper-floor windows held a light, but with a blind discreetly drawn down over it.

He rang the bell, then stepped back from the door and looked up, expecting to be interrogated first from the window, particularly at this hour. Nothing of the kind happened; they evidently possessed the trustfulness that goes with a clear conscious. He could hear steps start down the inside stairs. A woman's steps, at that, and a voice that carried out to where he was with surprising clarity said, "Must be somebody lost their way, I guess."

A hospitable little lantern up over the door went on from the inside, and a moment later he was looking at a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman with soft gray eyes. Her face was long and thin, but without the hatchet-sharp features that are so often an accompaniment of that contour of face. Her hair was a graying blond, but soft and wavy, not scraggly. Knowing who she was, he almost thought he could detect a little bit of Smiles in her face: the shape of the brows and the curve of the mouth, but that might have been just autosuggestion.

"Hm-m-m?" she said serenely.

"I'm Ed, Mrs. Alden."

She blinked twice, as though she didn't get it for a minute. Or maybe wasn't expecting it.

"Smiles' husband," he said, a trifle irritatedly. You're supposed to know your own in-laws. It wasn't their fault, of course, that they didn't. It wasn't his, either. He and Smiles had been meaning to come up here on a visit as soon as they could, but they'd been so busy getting their own home together, and six weeks is such a short time. Her mother had been getting over a prolonged illness at the time of their wedding, hadn't been strong enough for the trip down and back.

Both her hands came out toward his now, after that momentary blankness. "Oh, come in, Ed," she said heartily. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, but I *wish* it had been under other circumstances." She glanced past his

shoulder. “She’s not with you, I see. No word yet, Ed?” she went on worriedly.

He looked down and shook his head glumly.

She held her hand to her mouth in involuntary dismay, then quickly recovered her self-control, as though not wishing to add to his distress. “Don’t know what to think,” she murmured half audibly. “It’s not like her to do a thing like that. Have you been to the police yet, Ed?”

“I reported it to them before daylight this morning. Had to go around to the different hospitals and places.” He blew out his breath at the recollection. “*Huff,* it was ghastly.”

“Don’t let’s give up yet, Ed. You know the old saying, ‘No news is good news.’ ” Then: “Don’t let me keep you standing out here. Joe’s upstairs; I’ll call him down.”

As he followed her inside, his whole first impression of Smiles’ mother was that she was as nice, wholesome, and inartificial a woman as you could find anywhere. And first impressions are always half the battle.

She led him along a neat, hardwood-floored hall, varnished to the brightness of a mirror. An equally spotless white staircase rose at the back of it to the floor above.

“Let me take your hat,” she said thoughtfully, and hung it on a peg. “You look peaked, Ed; I can tell you’re taking it hard. That trip up is strenuous, too. It’s awful; you know you read about things like this in the papers nearly every day, but it’s only when it hits home you realize—”

Talking disconnectedly like that, she had reached the entrance to the living-room. She thrust her hand around to the inside of the door frame and snapped on the lights. He was standing directly in the center of the opening as she did so. There was something a little unexpected about the way they went on, but he couldn’t figure what it was; it must have been just a subconscious impression on his part. Maybe they were a little brighter than he’d expected, and after coming in out of the dark—The room looked as though it had been painted fairly recently, and he supposed that

was what it was: the walls and woodwork gave it back with unexpected dazzle. It was too small a detail even to waste time on. Or is any detail ever too small?

She had left him for a moment to go as far as the foot of the stairs. “Joe, Smiles’ husband is here,” he heard her call.

A deep rumbling voice answered, “She with him?”

She tactfully didn’t answer that, no doubt to spare Bliss’s feelings; she seemed to be such a considerate woman. “Come down, dear,” was all she said.

He was a thick, heavy-set man, with a bull neck and a little circular fringe of russet-blond hair around his head, the crown of it bald. He was going to be the blunt, aggressive type, Bliss could see. With eyes too small to match it. Eyes that said, “Try and get past us.”

“So you’re Bliss.” He reached out and shook hands with him. It was a hard shake, but not particularly friendly. His hands were calloused to the lumpiness of alligator hide. “Well, you’re taking it pretty calmly, it seems to me.”

Bliss looked at him. “How do you figure that?”

“Joe!” the mother had remonstrated, but so low neither of them paid any attention.

“Coming up here like this. Don’t you think it’s your business to stick close down there, where you could do some good?”

Mrs. Alden laid a comforting hand on Bliss’s arm. “Don’t, Joe. You can tell how the boy feels by looking at him. I’m Smiles’ mother and I know how it is; if she said she was coming up here, why, naturally—”

“I know you’re Teresa’s mother,” he said emphatically, as if to shut her up.

A moment of awkward silence hung suspended in the air above their three heads. Bliss had a funny “lost” feeling for a minute, as though something had eluded him just then, something had been a little askew. It was like when there’s a word you are trying desperately to remember; it’s on the

tip of your tongue, but you can’t bring it out. It was such a small thing, though—

“I’ll get you something to eat, Ed,” she said, and as she turned to go out of the room, Bliss couldn’t help overhearing her say to her husband in a stage whisper: “Talk to him. Find out what really happened.”

Alden had about as much finesse as a trained elephant doing the gavotte among ninepins. He cleared his throat judicially. “D’ja do something you shouldn’t? That how it come about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Wull, *we* have no way of knowing what kind of a disposition you’ve got. Have you got a pretty bad temper, are you a little too quick with the flat of your hand?”

Bliss looked at him incredulously. Then he got it. “That’s hardly a charge I expected to have to defend myself on. But if it’s required of me—I happen to worship the ground my wife walks on. I’d sooner have my right arm wither away than—”

“No offense,” said Alden lamely. “It’s been known to happen before, that’s all.”

“Not in my house,” Bliss said, and gave him a steely look.

Smiles’ mother came in again at this point, with something on a tray. Bliss didn’t even bother looking up to see what it was. He waved it aside, sat there with his arms dangling out over his knees, his head bent way over, looking straight down through them.

The room was a vague irritant. He kept getting it all the time, at least every time he raised his head and looked around, but he couldn’t figure what was doing it. There was only one thing he was sure of: it wasn’t the people in it. So that left it up to the room. Smiles’ mother was the soothing, soft-moving type that it was pleasant to have around you. And even the husband, in spite of his brusqueness, was the stolid emotionless sort that didn’t get on your nerves.

What was it, then? Was the room furnished in bad taste? It wasn't; it was comfortable and homey-looking. And even if it hadn't been, that wouldn't have done it. He was no interior decorator, allergic to anything like that. Was it the glare from the recent paint job? No, not that, either; now that he looked, there wasn't any glare. It wasn't even glossy paint; it was the dull kind without highlights. That had just been an optical illusion when the lights first went on.

He shook his head a little to get rid of it, and thought, "What's annoying me in here?" And he couldn't tell.

He was holding a lighted cigarette between his dangling fingers, and the ash was slowly accumulating.

"Pass him an ash tray, Joe," she said in a watery voice. She was starting to cry, without any fuss, unnoticeably, but she still had time to think of their guest's comfort. Some women are like that.

He looked and a whole cylinder of ash had fallen to the rug. It looked like a good rug, too. "I'm sorry," he said, and rubbed it out with his shoe. Even the rug bothered him in some way.

Pattern too loud? No, it was quiet, dark-colored, and in good taste. He couldn't find a thing the matter with it. But it kept troubling him just the same.

Something went *clang*. It wasn't in the same room with them; some other part of the house, faint and muffled, like a defective pipe joint settling or swelling.

She said, "Joe, when are you going to have the plumber in to fix that water pipe? It's sprung out of line again. You'll wait until we have a good-sized leak on our hands."

"Yeah, that's right," he said. It sounded more like an original discovery than a recollection of something overlooked. Bliss couldn't have told why, it just did. More of his occultism, he supposed.

"I'll have to get a fresh handkerchief," she said apologetically, got up and passed between them, the one

she had been using until now rolled into a tight little ball at her upper lip.

"Take it easy," Alden said consolingly.

His eyes went to Bliss, then back to her again, as if to say: "Do you see that she's crying, as well as I do?" So Bliss glanced at her profile as she went by, and she was. She ought to have been; she was the girl's mother.

When she came in again with the fresh handkerchief she'd gone to get, he got to his feet.

"This isn't bringing her back. I'd better get down to the city again. They might have word for me by now."

Alden said, "Can I talk to you alone a minute, Bliss, before you go?"

The three of them had moved out into the hall. Mrs. Alden went up the stairs slowly. The higher up she got the louder her sobs became. Finally, a long wail burst out, and the closing of a door cut it in half. A minute later bedsprings protested, as if someone had dropped on them full length.

"D'you hear that?" Alden said to him. Another of those never-ending nuances hit Bliss; he'd said it as if he were proud of it.

Bliss was standing in the doorway, looking back into the room. He felt as if he were glad to get out of it. And he still couldn't understand why, any more than any of the rest of it.

"What was it you wanted to say to me on the side?"

Blunt as ever, Alden asked, "Have you told us everything, or have you left out part of it? Just what went on between you and Teresa anyway?"

"One of those tiffs."

Alden's small eyes got even smaller; they almost creased out in his face. "It must have been *some* tiff, for her to walk out on you with her grip in her hand. She wasn't the kind—"

"How did you know she took her grip with her? I didn't tell you that."

“You didn’t have to. She was coming up here, wasn’t she? They always take their grips when they walk out on you.”

There wasn’t pause enough between their two sentences to stick a bent comma. One just seemed to flow out of the other, only with a change of speakers. Alden’s voice had gone up a little with the strain of the added pace he’d put into it, that was all. He’d spoken it a little faster than his usual cadence. Small things. Damn those small things to hell, torturing him like gnats, like gnats that you can’t put your finger on!

Right under Bliss’s eyes, a bead of sweat was forming between two of the reddish tufts of hair at the edge of Alden’s hairline. He could see it oozing out of the pore. What was that from? Just from discussing what time his bus would get him back to the city, as they were doing now? No, it must have been from saying that sentence too fast a while ago—the one about the grip. The effects were only coming out now.

“Well,” Bliss said, “I’d better get a move on, to catch the bus back.”

Her door, upstairs, had opened again. It might have been just coincidental, but it was timed almost as though she’d been listening.

“Joe,” she called down the stairwell. “Don’t let Ed start back down again right tonight. Two trips in one day is too much; he’ll be a wreck. Why not have him stay over with us tonight, and take the early morning one instead?”

Bliss was standing right down there next to him. She could have spoken to him directly just as easily. Why did she have to relay it through her husband?

“Yeah,” Alden said up to her, “that’s just what I was thinking myself.” But it was as though he’d said: “I get you.”

Bliss had a funny feeling they’d been saying something to one another right in front of his face without his knowing what it was.

“No,” he said dolefully, “I’m worried about her. The sooner I get down there and get to the bottom of it—”

He went on out the door, and Alden came after him.

“I’ll walk you down to the bus stop,” he offered.

“Not necessary,” Bliss told him curtly. After all, twice now this other man had tried to suggest he’d abused or maltreated his wife; he couldn’t help resenting it. “I can find my way back without any trouble. You’re probably tired and want to turn in.”

“Just as you say,” Alden acquiesced.

They didn’t shake hands at parting. Bliss couldn’t help noticing that the other man didn’t even reach out and offer to. For his part, that suited him just as well.

After he’d already taken a few steps down the road, Alden called out after him, “Let us know the minute you get good news; I don’t want my wife to worry any more than she has to. She’s taking it hard.”

Bliss noticed he didn’t include himself in that. He didn’t hold that against him, though; after all, there was no blood relationship there.

Alden turned as if to go back inside the house again, but when Bliss happened to glance back several minutes later, just before taking the turn in the road that cut the house off from sight, he could still detect a narrow up-and-down band of light escaping from the doorway, with a break in it at one point as though a protruding profile were obscuring it.

“Wants to make sure I’m really on my way to take that bus,” he said to himself knowingly. But suspicion is a two-edged sword that turns against the wielder as readily as the one it is wielded against. He only detected the edge that was turned toward him, and even that but vaguely.

He reached the crossroads and took up his position. He still had about five minutes to wait, but he’d hardly arrived when two yellow peas of light, swelling until they became great hazy balloons, came down the turnpike toward him. He thought it was the bus at first, ahead of its own

schedule, but it turned out to be a coupe with a Quebec license. It slowed long enough for the occupant to lean out and ask:

"Am I on the right road for the city?"

"Yeah, keep going straight, you can't miss," Bliss said dully. Then suddenly, on an impulse he was unable to account for afterward, he raised his voice and called out after him, "Hey! I don't suppose you'd care to give me a lift in with you?"

"Why not?" the Canuck said amiably, and slowed long enough for Bliss to catch up to him.

Bliss opened the door and sidled in. He still didn't know what had made him change his mind like this, unless perhaps it was the vague thought that he might make better time in with a private car like this than he would have with the bus.

The driver said something about being glad to have someone to talk to on the way down, and Bliss explained briefly that he'd been waiting for the bus, but beyond those few introductory remarks, they did not talk much. Bliss wanted to think. He wanted to analyze his impression of the visit he had just concluded.

It was pretty hopeless to do much involved thinking with a stranger at his elbow, liable to interrupt his train of thought every once in a while with some unimportant remark that had to be answered for courtesy's sake, so the most he could do was marshal his impressions, sort of document them for future reference when he was actually alone:

1. The lights seemed to go on in an unexpected way, when she first pressed the switch.

2. The room bothered him. It hadn't been the kind of room you feel at ease in. It hadn't been *restful*.

3. There had been some sort of faulty vocal coordination when she said, "I'm Smiles' mother," and he said, "I know

you’re Teresa’s mother.”

4. There had also been nuances in the following places: When Alden’s eyes sought his, as if to assure himself that he, Bliss, saw that she was crying almost unnoticeably there in the room with them. When she ran whimpering up the stairs and threw herself on the bed, and he said, “Hear that?” And lastly when she called down and addressed her overnight invitation to Alden, instead of Bliss himself, as though there were some intangible kernel in it to be extracted first before he passed on the dry husk of the words themselves to Bliss.

At this point, before he got any further, there was a thud, a long-drawn-out reptilian hiss, and a tire went out. They staggered to a stop at the side of the road.

“Looks like I’ve brought you tough luck,” Bliss remarked.

“No,” his host assured him, “that thing’s been on its ninth life for weeks; I’m only surprised it lasted this long. I had it patched before I left Three Rivers this morning, thought maybe I could make the city on it, but it looks like no soap. Well, I have a spare, and now I *am* glad I hitched you on; four hands are better than two.”

The stretch of roadway where it had happened was a particularly bad one, Bliss couldn’t help noticing as he slung off his coat and jumped down to lend a hand; it was crying for attention, needled with small jagged rock fragments, either improperly crushed in the first place or else loosened from their bed by some recent rain. He supposed it hadn’t been blocked off because there was no other branch road in the immediate vicinity that could take its place as a detour.

They’d hardly gotten the jack out when the bus overtook and passed them, wiping out his gain of time at a stroke. And then, a considerable time later, after they’d already finished the job and wiped their hands clean, some other anonymous car went steaming by, this time at a rate of speed that made the bus seem to have been standing still in

its tracks. The Canadian was the only one in sight by the stalled car as its comet-like headlights flicked by. Bliss happened to be farther in off the road just then. He turned his head and looked after it, however, at the tornado-like rush of air that followed in its wake, and got a glimpse of it just before it hurtled from sight.

"That fellow's *asking* for a flat," the Canadian said, "passing over a stretch of fill like this at such a clip."

"He didn't have a spare on him, either," Bliss commented.

"Looked like he was trying to beat that bus in." Just an idle phrase, for purposes of comparison. It took on new meaning later, though, when Bliss remembered it.

They climbed in and started off again. The rest of the ride passed uneventfully. Bliss spelled his companion at the wheel, the last hour in, and let him take a little doze. He'd been on the road steadily since early that morning, he'd told Bliss.

Bliss woke him up and gave the car back to him when they reached the city limits. The Canadian was heading for a certain hotel all the way downtown, so Bliss wouldn't let him deviate from his course to take him over to his place; he got out instead at the nearest parallel point to it they touched, thanked him, and started over on foot.

He had a good stiff walk ahead of him, but he didn't mind that—he'd been sitting cramped up for so long. He still wanted to think things over as badly as ever, too, and he'd found out by experience that solitary walking helped him to think better.

It didn't in this case, though. He was either too tired from the events of the past few days, or else the materials he had were too formless, indefinite, to get a good grip on. He kept asking himself, "What was wrong up there? Why am I dissatisfied?" And he couldn't answer for the life of him. "Was anything wrong," he was finally reduced to wondering, "or was it wholly imaginary on my part?" It was like a wrestling bout with shadows.

The night around him was dark-blue velvet, and as he drew near his own isolated semi-suburban neighborhood, the silence was at least equal to that up at Denby. There wasn't a soul stirring, not even a milkman. He trudged onward under a leafy tunnel of sidewalk trees that all but made him invisible.

Leaving the coupe where he had, and coming over in a straight line this way, brought him up to his house from behind, on the street in back of it instead of the one running directly before it, which was an approach he never took at other times, such as when coming home from downtown. Behind it there was nothing but vacant plots, so it was a shortcut to cross diagonally behind the house next door and go through from the back instead of going all the way around the corner on the outside. He did that now, without thinking of anything except to save a few extra steps.

As he came out from behind the house next door, treading soundless on the well-kept backyard grass, he saw a momentary flash through one of his own windows that could only have been a pocket torch. He stopped dead in his tracks. *Burglars* was the first thought that came to him.

He advanced a wary step or two. The flash came again, but from another window this time, nearer the front. They were evidently on their way out, using it only intermittently to help find their way. He'd be able to head them off at the front door, as they stole forth.

There was a partition hedge between the two houses, running from front to back. He scurried along that, on his neighbor's side of it, keeping head and shoulders down, until he was on a line with his own front door. He crouched there, peering through.

They had left a lookout standing just outside his door. He could see the motionless figure. And then, as his fingers were about to part the hedge, to aid him in crashing through, the still form shifted a little, and the uncertain light struck a glint from a little wedge on its chest. At the

same instant Bliss caught the outline of a visor above the profile. A cop!

One hand behind him, Bliss ebbed back again on his heels, thrown completely off balance by the unexpected revelation.

His own front door opened just then and two men came out, one behind the other. Without visors and without metallic gleams on their chests. But the cop turned and flipped up his nightstick toward them in semi-salute; so, whatever they were, they weren't burglars, although one was unmistakably carrying something out of the house with him.

They carefully closed the front door behind them, even tried it a second time to make sure it was securely fastened. A snatch of guarded conversation drifted toward him as they made their way down the short front walk to the sidewalk. The uniformed man took no part in it, only the two who had been inside.

"He's hot, all right," Bliss heard one say.

"Sure, he's hot, and he already knows it. You notice he wasn't on that bus when it got in. I'll beat it down and get the Teletype busy. You put a case on this place. Still, he might try to sneak back in again later."

Bliss had been crouched there on his heels. He went forward and down now on the flats of his hands, as stunned as though he'd gotten a rabbit punch at the back of the neck.

Motionless there, almost dazed, he kept shaking his head slightly, as though to clear it. They were after *him;* they thought he'd—Not only that, but they'd been tipped off what bus he was supposed to show up on. That could mean only one person, Joe Alden.

He wasn't surprised. He could even understand his doing a thing like that; it must seem suspicious to them up there the way she'd disappeared, and Bliss's own complete lack of any plausible explanation for it. He'd probably have felt the

same way about it himself, if he'd been in their place. But he did resent the sneaky way Alden had gone about it, waiting until he was gone and then denouncing him the minute his back was turned. Why hadn't he tried to have him held by the locals while he was right up there with them? He supposed, now, that was the esoteric meaning in her invitation to him to stay over; so Alden could go out and bring in the cops while he was asleep under their roof. It hadn't worked because he'd insisted on leaving.

Meanwhile, he continued watching these men before him who had now, through no fault of his own, become his deadly enemies. They separated. One of them, with the uniformed cop trailing along with him, started down the street away from the house. The other drifted diagonally across to the opposite side. The gloom of an overshadowing tree over there swallowed him, and he failed to show up again on the other side of it, where there was a little more light.

There was hardly any noise about the whole thing, hardly so much as a footfall. They were like shadows moving in a dream world. A car engine began droning stealthily, slurred away, from a short distance farther down the street, marking the point of departure of two out of the three. A drop of sweat, as cold as mercury, toiled sluggishly down the nape of Bliss's neck, blotted itself into his collar.

He stayed there where he was, on all fours behind the hedge, a few minutes longer. The only thing to do was go out and try to clear himself. The only thing not to do was turn around and slink off—though the way lay open behind him. But at the same time he had a chill premonition that it wasn't going to be so easy to clear himself; that once they got their hands on him—

"But I've got to," he kept telling himself over and over. "They've got to help me, not go after me. They can't say I—did anything like that to Smiles! Maybe I can hit one of them that's fair minded, will listen to me."

Meanwhile he had remained in the crouched position of a track runner waiting for the signal to start. He picked himself up slowly and straightened to his full height behind the hedge. That took courage, alone, without moving a step farther. “Well, here goes,” he muttered, tightened his belt, and stuck a cigarette in his mouth. It was a crawly sort of feeling. He knew, nine chances to one, his freedom of movement was over the minute he stepped out from behind this hedge and went over toward that inky tree shadow across the street that was just a little too lumpy in the middle. He didn’t give a rap about freedom of movement in itself, but his whole purpose, his one aim from now on, was to look for and find Smiles. He was afraid losing it would hamper him in that. She was his wife; he wanted to look for her himself. He didn’t want other guys to do it for him whether they were professionals or not.

He lighted the cigarette when halfway across the street, but the tree shadow didn’t move. The detective evidently didn’t know him by sight yet, was on the lookout for someone coming from the other direction on his way to the house.

Bliss stopped right in front of him and said, “Are you looking for me? I’m Ed Bliss and I live over there.”

The shadow up and down the tree trunk detached itself, became a man. “How’d you know anyone was looking for you?” It was a challenge, as though that were already an admission of guilt in itself.

Bliss said, “Come inside, will you? I want to talk to you.”

They crossed over once more. Bliss unlocked the door for him, with his own key this time, and put on the lights. They went into the living-room. It was already getting dusty from not being cleaned in several days.

He looked Bliss over good. Bliss looked him over just as good. He wanted a man in this, not a detective.

The detective spoke first, repeated what he’d asked him outside on the street. “How’d you know we’d be looking for

you when that bus got in?”

“I didn’t. I just happened to take a lift down instead.”

“What’s become of your wife, Bliss?”

“I don’t know.”

“We think you do.”

“I wish you were right. But not in the way you mean.”

“Never mind what you wish. You know another good word for that? Remorse.”

The blood in Bliss’s face thinned a little. “Before you put me in the soup, just let me talk here quietly with you a few minutes. That’s all I ask.”

“When she walked out of here Tuesday night, what was she wearing?”

Bliss hesitated a minute. Not because he didn’t know—he’d already described her outfit to them when he reported her missing—but because he could sense a deeper import lurking behind the question.

The detective took the hesitancy for an attempt at evasion, went on: “Now, every man knows his wife’s clothes by heart. You paid for every last one of them; you know just what she owned. Just tell me what she had on.”

There was danger in it somewhere. “She had on a gray suit—jacket and skirt, you know. Then a pink silk shirtwaist. She threw her fur piece back at me, so that’s about all she went out in. A hat, of course. One of those crazy hats.”

“Baggage?”

“A black valise with tan binding. Oh, about the size of a typewriter case.”

“Sure of that?”

“Sure of that.”

The detective gave a kind of soundless whistle through his teeth.

“Whe-ew!” he said, and he looked at Bliss almost as if he felt sorry for him. “You’ve sure made it tough for yourself this time! I didn’t have to ask you that, because we know just as well as you what she had on.”

“How?”

“Because we found every last one of those articles you just mentioned in the furnace downstairs in this very house, less than twenty minutes ago. My partner’s gone down to headquarters with them. And a guy don’t do that to his wife’s clothes unless he’s done something to his wife, too. What’ve you done with her, Bliss?”

The other man wasn’t even in the room with him any more, so far as Bliss was concerned. A curtain of foggy horror had dropped down all around him. “My God!” he whispered hoarsely. “Something’s happened to her, somebody’s done something to her!” And he jumped up and ran out of the room so unexpectedly, so swiftly, that if his purpose had been to escape, he almost could have eluded the other man. Instead, he made for the cellar door and ran down the basement steps. The detective had shot to his feet after him, was at his heels by the time he got down to the bottom. Bliss turned on the light and looked at the furnace grate, yawning emptily open—as though that could tell him anything more.

He turned despairingly to the detective. “Was there any blood on them?”

“Should there have been?”

“Don’t! Have a heart,” Bliss begged in a choked voice, and shaded his eyes. “Who put them in there? Why’d they bring them back here? How’d they get in while I was out?”

“Quit that,” the headquarters man said dryly. “Suppose we get started. Our guys’ll be looking all over for you, and it’ll save them a lot of trouble.”

Every few steps on the way back up those basement stairs, Bliss would stop, as though he’d run down and needed winding up again. The detective would prod him forward, not roughly, just as a sort of reminder to keep going.

“Why’d they put them *there*?” he asked. “Things that go in there are meant for fuel. That’s what you came back for,

to finish burning them, isn't it? Too late in the year to make a fire in the daytime without attracting attention."

"Listen. We were only married six weeks."

"What's that supposed to prove? Do you think there haven't been guys that got rid of their wives six *days* after they were married, or even six *hours*?"

"But those are fiends—monsters. *I* couldn't be one of them!"

And the pitiless answer was: "How do we know that? We can't tell, from the outside, what you're like on the inside. We're not X-ray machines."

They were up on the main floor again by now.

"Was she insured?" the detective questioned.

"Yes."

"You tell everything, don't you?"

"Because there's nothing to hide. I didn't just insure *her,* I insured us both. I took out twin policies, one on each of us. We were each other's beneficiaries. She wanted it that way."

"But you're here and she's not," the detective pointed out remorselessly.

They passed the dining-room entrance. Maybe it was the dishes still left on the table from that night that got to him. She came before him again, with her smiling crinkly eyes. He could see her carrying in a plate covered with a napkin. "Sit down there, mister, and don't look. I've got a surprise for you."

That finished him. That was a blow below the belt. He said, "You gotta let me alone a minute." And he slumped against the wall with his arm up over his face.

When he finally got over it, and it took some getting over, a sort of change had come over the detective. He said tonelessly, "Sit down a minute. Get your breath back and pull yourself together." He didn't sound like he meant that particularly, it was just an excuse.

He lighted a cigarette and then he threw the pack over at Bliss. Bliss let it slide off his thigh without bothering with it.

The detective said, “I’ve been a dick going on eight years now, and I never saw a guy who could fake a spell like you just had, and make it so convincing.” He paused, then went on: “The reason I’m saying this is, once you go in you stay in, after what we found here in the house tonight. And, then, you did come up to me outside of your own accord, but of course that could have been just self-preservation. So I’m listening, for just as long as it takes me to finish this cigarette. By the time I’m through, if you haven’t been able to tell me anything that changes the looks of things around, away we go.” And he took a puff and waited.

“There’s nothing I can tell you that I haven’t already told you. She walked out of here Tuesday night at supper time. Said she was going to her mother’s. She never got there. I haven’t seen her since. Now you fellows find the things I saw her leave in, stuffed into the furnace in the basement.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and kept it pinched.

The detective took another slow pull at his cigarette. “You’ve been around to the morgue and the hospitals. So she hadn’t had any accident. Her things are back here again. So it isn’t just a straight disappearance, or amnesia, or anything like that. That means that whatever was done to her or with her, was done against her will. Since we’ve eliminated accident, suicide, voluntary and involuntary disappearance, that spells murder.”

“Don’t!” Bliss said.

“It’s got to be done.” The detective took another puff. “Let’s get down to motive. Now, you already have one, and a damned fine one. You’ll have to dig up one on the part of somebody else that’ll be stronger than yours, if you expect to cancel it out.”

“Who could want to hurt her? She was so lovely, she was so beautiful—”

“Sometimes it’s dangerous for a girl to be too lovely, too beautiful. It drives a man out of his mind; the man that can’t have her. Were there any?”

“You’re talking about Smiles now,” Bliss growled dangerously, tightening his fist.

“I’m talking about a *case*. A case of suspected murder. And to us cases aren’t beautiful, aren’t ugly, they’re just punishable.” He puffed again. “Did she turn anyone down to marry you?”

Bliss shook his head. “She once told me I was the first fellow she ever went with.”

The detective took another puff at his cigarette. He looked at it, shifted his fingers back a little, then looked at Bliss. “I seldom smoke that far down,” he warned him. “I’m giving you a break. There’s one more drag left in it. Anyone else stand to gain anything, financially, by her death, outside of yourself?”

“No one I know of.”

The detective took the last puff, dropped the buff, ground it out. “Well, let’s go,” he said. He fumbled under his coat, took out a pair of handcuffs. “Incidentally, what was her real name? I have to know when I bring you in.”

“Teresa.”

“Smiles was just your pet name for her, eh?” The detective seemed to be just talking aimlessly, to try to take the sting out of the pinch, keep Bliss’s mind off the handcuffs.

“Yeah,” Bliss said, holding out his wrist without being told to. “I was the first one called her that. She never liked to be called Teresa. Her mother was the one always stuck to that.”

He jerked his wrist back in again.

“C’mon, don’t get hard to handle,” the detective growled, reaching out after it.

“Wait a minute,” Bliss said excitedly, and stuck his hand behind his back. “Some things have been bothering me. You

brought one of them back just then. I nearly had it. Let me look, before I lose it again. Let me look at that letter a minute that her mother sent her yesterday. It's here in my pocket."

He stripped it out of the envelope. *Smiles, dear,* it began.

He opened his mouth and looked at the other man. "That's funny. Her mother never called her anything but Teresa. I know I'm right about that. How could she? It was my nickname. And I'd never seen her until last night and—and Smiles hadn't been home since we were married."

The detective, meanwhile, kept trying to snag his other hand—he was holding the letter in his left—and bring it around in front of him.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Bliss pleaded. "I've got one of those things now. There was like a hitch in the flow of conversation, an air pocket. She said, 'I'm Smiles' mother,' and he said, 'You're *Teresa's* mother,' like he was reminding her what she always called Smiles. Why should he have to remind her of what she always called Smiles herself?"

"And that's supposed to clear you of suspicion, because her mother picks up your nickname for your wife, after she's been talking to you on the phone two or three days in a row? Anyone would be liable to do that. She did it to sort of accommodate you. Didn't you ever hear of people doing that before? That's how nicknames spread."

"But she caught it *ahead of time,* before she heard me call it to her. This letter heading shows that. She didn't know Smiles had disappeared yet, when she sent this letter. Therefore she hadn't spoken to me yet."

"Well, then, she got it from the husband, or from your wife's own letters home."

"But she never used it before; she disliked it until now. She wrote Smiles and told her openly it sounded too much like the nickname of a chorus girl. I can prove it to you. I can show you. Wait a minute, whatever your name is. Won't

you let me see if I can find some other letter from her, just to convince myself?”

My name is Stillman, and it’s too small a matter to make any difference one way or the other. Now, come on Bliss; I’ve tried to be fair with you until now—”

“Nothing is too small a matter to be important. You’re a detective; do I have to tell you that? It’s the little things in life that count, never the big ones. The little ones go to make up the big ones. Why should she suddenly call her by a nickname she never used before and disapproved of? Wait, let me show you. There must be one of her old letters upstairs yet, left around in one of the bureau drawers. Just let me go up and hunt for it. It’ll take just a minute.”

Stillman went up with him, but Bliss could tell he was slowly souring on him. He hadn’t changed over completely yet, but he was well under way. “I’ve taken all the stalling I’m going to from you,” he muttered tight-lipped. “If I’ve got to crack down on you to get you out of here with me, I’ll show you that I can do that, too.”

Bliss was pawing through his wife’s drawers meanwhile, head tensely lowered, knowing he had to beat his captor’s change of mood to the punch, that in another thirty seconds at the most the slow-to-anger detective was going to yank him flat on the floor by the slack of the collar and drag him bodily out of the room after him.

He found one at last, almost when he’d given up hope. The same medium-blue ink, the same note paper. They hadn’t corresponded with any great frequency, but they had corresponded regularly, about once every month or so.

“Here,” he said relievedly, “here, see?” And he spread it out flat on the dresser top. Then he spread the one from his pocket alongside it, to compare. “See? ‘Dearest Teresa.’ What did I tell—”

He never finished it. They both saw it at once. It would have been hard to miss, the way he’d put both missives

edge to edge. Bliss looked at the detective, then back at the dresser again.

Stillman was the first to put it into words. An expression of sudden concentration had come over his face. He elbowed Bliss a little aside, to get a better look. “See if you can dig up some more samples of her writing,” he said slowly. “I’m not an expert, but, unless I miss my guess, these two letters weren’t written by the same person.”

Bliss didn’t need to be told twice. He was frantically going through everything of Smiles’ he could lay his hands on, all her keepsakes, mementos, accumulated belongings, scattering them around. He stopped as suddenly as he’d begun, and Stillman saw him standing there staring fixedly at something in one of the trinket boxes he had been plumbing through.

“What’s the matter? Did you find some more?”

Bliss acted scared. His face was pale. “No, not writing,” he said in a bated voice. “Something even—Look.”

The detective’s chin thrust over his shoulder. “Who are they?”

“That’s evidently a snapshot of her and her mother, taken at a beach when she was a girl. I’ve never seen it before, but—”

“How do you know it’s her mother? It could be some other woman, a friend of the family’s.”

Bliss had turned it over right while he was speaking. On the back, in schoolgirlish handwriting, was the notation:

Mamma and I, at Sea Crest, 19—

Bliss reversed it again, right side forward.

“Well, what’re you acting so scared about?” Stillman demanded impatiently. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Because this woman on the snapshot isn’t the same woman I spoke to as her mother up at Denby tonight!”

“Now, wait a minute; hold your horses. You admit yourself you had never set eyes on her before until tonight; eight years is eight years. She’s in a bathing-suit in this snapshot. She may have dyed or bleached her hair since, or it may have turned gray on her.”

“That has nothing to do with it! I’m not looking at her hair or her clothes. The whole shape of her face is different. The bone structure is different. The features are different. This woman has a broad, round face. The one in Denby has a long, oval one. I tell you, it’s not the same woman at all!”

“Gimme that, and gimme those.” Stillman pocketed letters and snapshot. “Come on downstairs. I think I’ll smoke another cigarette.” His way of saying: “You’ve got yourself a reprieve.”

When they were below again, he sat down, with a misleading air of leisure. “Gimme your wife’s family background, as much of it as you can, as much of it as she told you.”

“Smiles was down here on her own when I met her. Her own father died when she was a kid, and left them comfortably well off, with their own house up in—”

“Denby?”

“No, it was some other place; I can’t think of it offhand. While she was still a youngster, her mother gave Smiles her whole time and attention. But when Smiles had finished her schooling, about two years ago, the mother was still an attractive woman, young for her years, lively, good-hearted. It was only natural that she should marry again. Smiles didn’t resent that; she’d expected her to. When the mother fell for this mason, Joe Alden, whom she first met when they were having some repairs made to the house, Smiles tried to like him. He’d been a good man in his line, too, but she couldn’t help noticing that after he married her mother, he stopped dead, never did a stroke of work from then on; pretending he couldn’t find any—when she knew for a fact that there was work to be had. That was the first thing she

didn’t like. Maybe he sensed she was onto him, but anyway they didn’t rub well together. For her mother’s sake, to avoid trouble, she decided to clear out, so her mother wouldn’t have to choose between them. She was so diplomatic about it, though, that her mother never guessed what the real reason was.

“She came on down here, and not long ago Alden and her mother sold their own house and moved to a new one in Denby. Smiles said she supposed he did it to get away from the gossipy neighbors as much as anything else; they were probably beginning to criticize him for not at least making a stab at getting a job after he was once married.”

“Did they come down when you married Smiles?”

“No. Smiles didn’t notify them ahead; just sent a wire of announcement the day we were married. Her mother had been in poor health, and she was afraid the trip down would be more than she could stand. Well, there’s the background.”

“Nothing much there to dig into, at first sight.”

“There never is, anywhere—at first sight,” Bliss let him know. “Listen, Stillman. I’m going back up there again. Whatever’s wrong is up at that end, not at this.”

“I was detailed here to bring you in for questioning, you know.” But he didn’t move.

“Suppose I hadn’t gone up to you outside in the street just now. Suppose I hadn’t shown up around here for, say, another eight or ten hours. Can’t you give me those extra hours? Come up there with me, never leave me out of your sight, put the bracelet on me, do anything you want, but at least let me go up there once more and confront those people. If you lock me up down at this end, then I’ve lost her sure as anything. I’ll never find out what became of her—and you won’t either. Something bothered me up there. A whole lot of things bothered me up there, but I’ve only cleared up one of them so far. Let me take a crack at the rest.

“You don’t want much,” Stillman said grudgingly. “D’ya know what can happen to me for stepping out of line like that? D’ya know I can be broken for anything like that?”

“You mean you’re ready to ignore the discrepancy in handwriting in those two letters, and my assurance that there’s someone up there that doesn’t match the woman on that snapshot?”

“No, naturally not; I’m going to let my lieutenant know about both those things.”

“And by that time it’ll be too late. It’s already three days since she’s been gone.”

“Tell you what,” Stillman said. “I’ll make a deal with you. We’ll start out for headquarters now, and on the way we’ll stop in at that bus terminal. If I can find any evidence, the slightest shred, that she started for Denby that night, I’ll go up there with you. If not, we go over to headquarters.”

All Bliss said was: “I know you’ll find out she did leave.”

Stillman took him without handcuffing him, merely remarking, “If you try anything, you’ll be the loser, not me.”

The ticket-seller again went as far as he had with Bliss the time before, but still couldn’t go any further than that. “Yeah, she bought a ticket for as far as the money she had on her would take her, but I can’t remember where it was to.”

“Which don’t prove she ever hit Denby,” Stillman grunted.

“Tackle the bus driver,” Bliss pleaded. “No. 27. I know he was holding out on me. I could tell by the way he acted. She rode with him, all right, but for some reason he was cagey about saying so.”

But they were out of luck. No. 27 was up at the other end, due to bring the cityward bus in the following afternoon.

Stillman was already trying to steer his charge out of the place and on his way over to headquarters, but Bliss wouldn’t give up. “There must be someone around here that saw her get on that night. One of the attendants, one of

the concessionaires that are around here every night. Maybe she checked her bag, maybe she drank a cup of coffee at the counter."

She hadn't checked her bag; the checkroom attendant couldn't remember anyone like her. She hadn't stopped at the lunch counter, either; neither could the counterman recall her. Nor the Negro that shined shoes. They even interrogated the matron of the restroom, when she happened to appear outside the door briefly. No, she hadn't noticed anyone like that, either.

"All right, come on," Stillman said, hooking his arm around Bliss's.

"One more spin. How about him, over there, behind the magazine stand?"

Stillman only gave in because it happened to be near the exit; they had to pass it on their way out.

And it broke! The fog lifted, if only momentarily, for the first time since the previous Tuesday night. "Sure I do," the vendor said readily. "How could I help remembering? She came up to me in such a funny way. She said, 'I have exactly one dime left, which I overlooked when I was buying my ticket because it slipped to the bottom of my handbag. Let me have a magazine.' Naturally, I asked her which one she wanted. 'I don't care,' she said, 'so long as it lasts until I get off the bus. I want to be sure my mind is taken up.' Well, I've been doing business here for years, and it's gotten so I can clock the various stops. I mean, if they're riding a long distance, I give them a good thick magazine; if they're riding a short distance, I give them a skinny one. I gave her one for a medium distance—Denby; that was where she told me she was going."

All Stillman said was: "Come on over to the window while I get our tickets."

Bliss didn't say "Thanks." He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. The grateful look he gave the detective spoke for itself.

“Two to Denby, round,” Stillman told the ticket-seller. It was too late for the morning bus; the next one left in the early afternoon.

As they turned from the window, Bliss wondered aloud:

“Still and all, why was that driver so reluctant to admit she rode on the bus with him that night? And the ticket man claims she didn’t buy a ticket to Denby, but to some point short of there.”

“It’s easy to see what it adds up to,” Stillman told him. “She had a ticket for only part of the distance. She coaxed the driver into letting her ride the rest of the way to Denby. Probably explained her plight to him, and he felt sorry for her. That explains his reluctance to let you think she was on the bus at all. He must have thought you were a company spotter and naturally what he did would be against the regulations.”

Tucking away the tickets in his inside coat pocket, the detective stood there a moment or two undecidedly. Then he said, “We may as well go back to your house. I might be able to turn up something else while we’re waiting, and you can catch a nap. And, too, I’m going to call in, see if I can still make this detour up there and back legitimate while I’m about it.”

When they got back to his house Bliss, exhausted, fell asleep in the bedroom. He remained oblivious to everything until the detective woke him up a half hour before bus time.

“Any luck?” Bliss asked him, shrugging into his coat.

“Nope, nothing more,” Stillman said. Then he announced, “I’ve given my word to my lieutenant I’ll show up at headquarters and have you with me, no later than nine tomorrow morning. He doesn’t know you’re with me right now; I let him think I got a tip where I could lay my hands on you. Leaving now, we will get up there around sunset, and we’ll have to take the night bus back. That gives us only a few hours up there to see if we can find any trace of her. Pretty tight squeeze, if you ask me.”

They boarded the bus together and sat down in one of the back seats. They didn't talk much during the long, monotonous ride up.

"Better take another snooze while you've got the chance," Stillman said.

Bliss thought he wouldn't be able to again, but, little by little, sheer physical exhaustion, combined with the lulling motion of the bus, overcame him and he dropped off.

It seemed like only five minutes later that Stillman shook him by the shoulder, rousing him. The sun was low in the west; he'd slept through nearly the entire trip. "Snap out of it, Bliss; we get off in another couple of minutes, right on time."

"I dreamed about her," Bliss said dully. "I dreamed she was in some kind of danger, needed me bad. She kept calling to me, 'Ed! Hurry up, Ed!' "

Stillman dropped his eyes. "I heard you say her name twice in your sleep: 'Smiles, Smiles,' " he remarked quietly. "Damned if you act like any guilty man I ever had in my custody before. Even in your sleep you sound like you were innocent."

"Denby!" the driver called out.

As the bus pulled away and left them behind at the crossroads, Stillman said, "Now that we're up here, let's have an understanding with each other. I don't want to haul you around on the end of a handcuff with me, but my job is at stake; I've got to be sure that you're still with me when I start back."

"Would my word of honor that I won't try to give you the slip while we're up here be worth anything to you?"

Stillman looked at him square in the eye. "Is it worth anything to *you*?"

"It's about all I've got. I know I've never broken it."

Stillman nodded slowly. "I think maybe it'll be worth taking a chance on. All right, let me have it."

They shook hands solemnly.

Dusk was rapidly falling by now; the sun was already gone from sight and its afterglow fading out.

"Come on, let's get out to their place," Bliss said impatiently.

"Let's do a little inquiring around first. Remember, we have no evidence so far that she actually got off the bus here at all, let alone reached their house. Just her buying that magazine and saying she was coming here is no proof in itself. Now, let's see, she gets off in the middle of the night at this sleeping hamlet. Would she know the way out to their house, or would she have to ask someone?"

"She'd have to ask. Remember, I told you they moved here *after* Smiles had already left home. This would have been her first trip up here."

"Well, that ought to cinch it for us, if she couldn't get out there without asking directions. Let's try our luck at that filling-station first; it would probably have been the only thing open any more at the hour she came."

The single attendant on duty came out, said, "Yes, gents?"

"Look," Stillman began. "The traffic to and from here isn't exactly heavy, so this shouldn't be too hard. Think back to Tuesday night, the last bus north. Did you see anyone get off it?"

"I don't have to see 'em get off; I got a sure-fire way of telling whether anyone gets off or not."

"What's that?"

"Anyone that does get off, at least anyone that's a stranger here, never fails to stop by me and ask their way. That's as far as the last bus is concerned. The store is closed before then. And no one asked their way of me Tuesday night, so I figure no strangers got off."

"This don't look so good," murmured Stillman in an aside to Bliss. Then he asked the attendant, "Did you hear it go by at all? You must have, it's so quiet here."

"Yeah, sure, I did. It was right on time, too."

“Then you could tell if it stopped to let anyone down or went straight through without stopping, couldn’t you?”

“Yeah, usually I can,” was the disappointing answer. “But just that night, at that particular time, I was doing some repair work on a guy’s car, trying to hammer out a bent fender for him, and my own noise drowned it out. As long as no one stopped by, though, I’m pretty sure it never stopped.”

“Damn it,” Stillman growled, as they turned away, “she couldn’t have been more unseen if she was a ghost!”

After they were out of earshot of the filling-station attendant, Bliss said, “If Alden, for instance, had known she was coming and waited to meet her at the bus, that would do away with her having to ask anyone for directions. She may have telephoned ahead, or sent a wire up.”

“If she didn’t even have enough money to buy a ticket all the way, she certainly wouldn’t have been able to make a toll call. Anyway, if we accept that theory, that means we’re implicating them directly in her disappearance, and we have no evidence so far to support that. Remember, she may have met with foul play right here in Denby, along the road to their house, without ever having reached it.”

It was fully dark by the time they rounded the bend in the road and came in sight of that last house of all, with the low brick wall in front of it. This time not a patch of light showed from any of the windows, upstairs or down, and yet it was earlier in the evening than when Bliss himself had arrived.

“Hello?” the detective said. “Looks like nobody’s home.”

They turned in under the willow arch, rang the bell, and waited. Stillman pummeled the door and they waited some more. This was just perfunctory, however; it had been obvious to the two of them from the moment they first looked at the place that no one was in.

“Well, come on. What’re we waiting for?” Bliss demanded. “I can get in one of the windows without any trouble.”

Stillman laid a restraining hand on his arm. “No, you don’t; that’s breaking and entering. And I’m out of jurisdiction up here to begin with. We’ll have to go back and dig up the local law; maybe I can talk him into putting the seal of official approval on it. Let’s see if we can tell anything from the outside, first. I may be able to shine my torch in through one of the windows.”

He clicked it on, made a white puddle against the front of the house, walked slowly in the wake of that as it moved along until it leaped in through one of the black window embrasures. They both edged up until their noses were nearly pressed flat against the glass, trying to peer through. It wouldn’t work. The blinds were not down, but the closely webbed net curtains that hung down inside of the panes effectively parried its rays. They coursed slowly along the side of the house, trying it at window after window, each time with the same results.

Stillman turned away finally, but left his torch on. He splashed it up and down the short length of private dirt lane that ran beside the house, from the corrugated tin shack at the back that served Alden as a garage to the public highway in front. He motioned Bliss back as the latter started to step out onto it. “Stay off here a minute. I want to see if I can find out something from these tire prints their car left. See ’em?”

It would have been hard not to. The road past the house was macadamized, but there was a border of soft, powdery dust along the side of it, as with most rural roads. “I want to see if I can make out which way they turned,” Stillman explained, strewing his beam of light along them and following offside. “If they went in to the city, to offer their cooperation to us down there, that would take them off to the right; no other way they could turn from here. If they turned to the left, up that way, it was definitely a lam, and it changes the looks of things all around.”

The beam of his light, coursing along the prints like quicksilver in a channel, started to curve around *toward the right* as it followed them up out of sight on the hard-surfaced road. There was his answer.

He turned aimlessly back along them, light still on. He stopped parallel to the corner of the house, strengthened the beam's focus by bringing the torch down closer to the ground. "Here's something else," Bliss heard him say. "Funny how you can notice every little thing in this fine floury dust. His front left tire had a patch on it, and a bad one, too. See it? You can tell just what they did. Alden evidently ran the car out of the shed alone, ahead of his wife. She got in here at the side of the house, to save time, instead of going out the front way; they were going down the road the other way, anyway. His wheel came to rest with the patch squarely under it. That's why it shows so plain in this one place. Then he took his brake off and the car coasted back a little with the tilt of the ground. When he came forward again, the position of his wheel diverged a little, missed erasing its own former imprint. Bet they have trouble with that before the night's over."

He spoke as though it were just a trivial detail. But is anything, Bliss was to ask himself later, a trivial detail?

"Come on," Stillman concluded, pocketing his light, "let's go get the law and see what it looks like on the inside."

The constable's name was Cochrane, and they finally located him at his own home. "Evening," Stillman introduced himself, "I'm Stillman of the city police. I was wondering if there's some way we could get a look inside that Alden house. Their—er—stepdaughter has disappeared down in the city; she was supposed to have started for here, and this is just a routine check. Nothing against them. They seem to be out, and we have to make the next bus back."

Cochrane plucked at his throat judiciously. “Well, now, I guess I can accommodate you, as long as it’s done in my presence. I’m the law around here, and if they’ve got nothing to hide, there’s no reason why they should object. I’ll drive ye back in my car. This feller here your subordinate, I s’pose?”

Stillman said, “Um,” noncommittally, favored Bliss with a nudge. The constable would have probably balked at letting a man already wanted by the police into these people’s house, they both knew, even if he was accompanied by a bona fide detective.

He stopped off at his office first to get a master key, came back with the remark: “This ought to do the trick.” They were back at the Alden place once more inside of ten minutes, all told, from the time they had first left it.

Cochrane favored them with a sly grimace as they got out and went up to the house. “I’m sort of glad you fellers asked me to do this, at that. Fact is, we’ve all been curious about them folks ourselves hereabouts for a long time past. Kind of unsociable; keep to themselves a lot. This is as good a time as any to see if they got any skeletons in the closet.”

Bliss shuddered involuntarily at the expression.

The constable’s master key opened the door without any great difficulty, and the three of them went in.

They looked in every room in the place from top to bottom, and in every closet of every room, and not one of the “skeletons” the constable had spoken of turned up, either allegorical or literal. There wasn’t anything out of the way, and nothing to show that anything had ever been out of the way, in this house.

In the basement, when they reached it, were a couple of sagging, half-empty bags of cement in one corner, and pinkish traces of brick dust and brick grit on the floor, but that was easily accounted for. “Left over from when he was putting up that wall along the roadside a while back, I guess,” murmured Cochrane.

They turned and went upstairs again. The only other discovery of any sort they made was not of a guilty nature, but simply an indication of how long ago the occupants had left. Stillman happened to knuckle a coffeepot standing on the kitchen range, and it was still faintly warm from the residue of liquid left in it.

"They must have only just left before we got here," he said to Bliss. "Missed them just by minutes."

"Funny; why did they wait until after dark to start on a long trip like that? Why didn't they leave sooner?"

"That don't convict them of anything, just the same," Stillman maintained obdurately. "We haven't turned up a shred of evidence that your wife ever saw the inside of this house. Don't try to get around that."

The local officer, meanwhile, had gone outside to put some water in his car. "Close the door good after you as you come out," he called out to them.

They were already at the door, but Bliss unaccountably turned and went back inside again. When Stillman followed him a moment later, he was sitting there in the living-room raking his fingers perplexedly through his hair.

"Come on," the detective said, as considerately as he could, "let's get going. He's waiting for us."

Bliss looked up at him helplessly. "Don't you get it? Doesn't this room bother you?"

Stillman looked around vaguely. "No. In what way? What's wrong with it? To me it seems clean, well kept, and comfortable. All you could ask for."

"There's something about it annoys me. I feel ill at ease in it. It's not *restful,* for some reason. And I have a peculiar feeling that if I could figure out *why* it isn't restful, it would help to partly clear up this mystery about Smiles."

Stillman sliced the edge of his hand at him scornfully. "Now you're beginning to talk plain crazy, Bliss. You say this room isn't restful. The room has nothing to do with it. It's you. You're all tense, jittery, about your wife. Your nerves

are on edge, frayed to the breaking point. That's why the room don't seem restful to you. Naturally it don't. No room would."

Bliss kept shaking his head baffledly. "No. No. That may sound plausible, but I know that isn't it. It's not *me,* it's the room itself. I'll admit I'm all keyed up, but I noticed it already the other night when I wasn't half so keyed up. Another thing: I don't get it in any of the other rooms in this house; I only get it in here."

"I don't like the way you're talking; I think you're starting to crack up under the strain," Stillman let him know, but he hung around in the doorway for a few minutes, watching him curiously, while Bliss sat there motionless, clasped hands hanging from the back of his neck now.

"Did you get it yet?"

Bliss raised his head, shook it mutely, chewing the corner of his mouth. "It's one of those things; when you try too hard for it, it escapes you altogether. It's only when you're sort of not thinking about it that you notice it. The harder I try to pin it down, the more elusive it becomes."

"Sure," said Stillman with a look of sympathetic concern, "and if you sit around in here brooding about it much more, I'll be taking you back with me in a straitjacket. Come on, we've only got ten more minutes to make that bus."

Bliss got reluctantly to his feet. "There it goes," he said. "I'll never get it now."

"Ah, you talk like these guys that keep trying to communicate with spirits through a ouija board," Stillman let him know, locking up the front door after them. "The whole thing was a wild-goose chase."

"No, it wasn't."

"Well, what'd we get out of it?"

"Nothing. But that doesn't mean it isn't around here waiting to be seen. It's just that we've missed seeing it, whatever it is."

“There’s not a sign of her around that house. Not a sign of her ever having been there. Not a sign of violence.”

“And I know that, by going away from here, we’re turning our backs on whatever there is to be learned about what became of her. We’ll never find out at the other end, in the city. I nearly had it, too, when I was sitting in there. Just as I was about to get it, it would slip away from me again. Talk about torture!”

Stillman lost his temper. “Will you lay off that room! If there was anything the matter with it, I’d notice it as well as you. My eyes are just as good, my brains are just as good. What’s the difference between you and me?” The question was only rhetorical.

“You’re a detective and I’m an architect,” Bliss said inattentively, answering it as asked.

“Are you fellows going to stand there arguing all night?” the constable called from the other side of the wall.

They went out and got into the open car, started off. Bliss felt like groaning: “Good-bye, Smiles.” Just as they reached the turn of the road that would have swept the house out of sight once they rounded it, Stillman happened to glance back for no particular reason, at almost the very last possible moment that it could still be seen in a straight line behind them.

“Hold it,” he ejaculated, thumbing a slim bar of light narrowed by perspective. “We left the lights on in that last room we were in.”

The constable braked promptly. “Have to go back and turn them off, or they’ll—”

“We haven’t time now, we’ll miss the bus,” Stillman cut in. “It’s due in six more minutes. Drive us down to the crossroads first, and then you come back afterward and put them out yourself.”

“No!” Bliss cried out wildly, jumping to his feet. “This has a meaning to it! I’m not passing this up! I want another look at those lights; they’re asking me to, they’re begging me

to!” Before either one of them could stop him, he had jumped down from the side of the car without bothering to unlatch the door. He started to run back up the road, deaf to Stillman’s shouts and imprecations.

“Come back here, you welsher! You gave me your word of honor!”

A moment later the detective’s feet hit the ground and he started after his prisoner. But Bliss had already turned in through the opening in the wall, was flinging himself bodily against the door, without waiting for any master key this time. The infuriated detective caught him by the shoulder, swung him violently around, when he had reached him.

“Take your hands off me!” Bliss said hoarsely. “I’m going to get in there!”

Stillman swung at him and missed. Instead of returning the blow, Bliss threw his whole weight against the door for the last time. There was a rendering and splintering of wood, and it shot inward, leaving the whole lock intact against the frame. Bliss went flailing downward on his face into the hallway. He scrambled erect, reached the inner doorway, put his hand inside, and put the lights out without looking into the room.

“It’s when they go on that counts,” he panted.

The only reason Stillman wasn’t grappling with him was that he couldn’t locate him for a minute in the dark. The switch clicked a second time. Light flashed from the dazzingly calcimined ceiling. Bliss was standing directly in the middle of the opening as it did so, just as he had been the first night.

Stillman was down the hall a few steps, couldn’t see his face for a minute. “Well?” he asked.

Bliss turned to him without saying anything. The look on his face answered for him. He’d gotten what he wanted.

“Why, they’re not in the center of the ceiling! They’re offside. That’s what made them seem glaring, unexpected. They took my eyes by surprise. I’ve got professionally

trained eyes, remember. They didn't go on where I expected them to, but a little farther over. And now that I have that much, I have it all." He gripped Stillman excitedly by the biceps. "Now I see what's wrong with the room. Now I see why I found it so unrestful. It's out of true."

"What?"

"Out of proportion. Look. Look at that window. It's not in the center of that wall. And d'you see how cleverly they've tried to cover the discrepancy? A thin, skinny, up-and-down picture on the short side; a big, wide, fat one on the longer side. That creates an optical illusion, makes both sides seem even. Now come over here and look this way." He pulled the detective in after him, turned him around by the shoulder. "Sure, same thing with the door frame; that's not dead center, either. But the door opens inward into the room, swings to that short side and partly screens it, throws a shadow over it, so that takes care of that. What else? What else?"

He kept pivoting feverishly, sweeping his glance around on all sides. "Oh, sure, the rug. I was sitting here and I dropped some ashes and looked down at the floor. See what bothered me about that? Again there's an unbalance. See the margin of polished woodwork running around on three sides of it? And on the fourth side it runs right smack up against the baseboard of the wall. Your eye wants proportion, symmetry; it's got to have it in all things. If it doesn't get it, it's uncomfortable. It wants that dark strip of woodwork on all *four* sides, or else the rug should touch all four baseboards, like a carpet—"

He was talking slower and slower, like a record that's running down. Some sort of tension was mounting in him, gripping him, Stillman could tell by looking at him. He panted the last few words out, as if it took all his strength to produce them, and then his voice died away altogether, without a period.

“What’re you getting so white around the gills for?” the detective demanded. “Suppose the room is lopsided, what then? Your face is turning all green—”

Bliss had to grab him by the shoulder for a minute for support. His voice was all furry with dawning horror. “Because—because—don’t you see what it means? Don’t you see *why* it’s that way? One of these walls is a dummy wall, built out *in front* of the real one.” His eyes were dilated with unbelieving horror. He clawed insensately at his own hair. “It all hangs together so damnably! He was a mason before he married her mother; I told you that. The storekeeper down at the crossroads said that Alden built a low brick wall in front of the house, ‘just to keep in practice,’ he guessed. No reason for it. It wasn’t high enough for privacy, it didn’t even run around all four sides of the plot.

“He didn’t build it just to keep in practice! He did it to get the bricks in here from the contractor. More than he needed. He put it up just to have an excuse to order them. Who’s going to count—Don’t stand there! Get an ax, a crowbar; help me break this thing down! Don’t you see what this dummy wall is for? Don’t you see what we’ll find —”

The detective had been slower in grasping it, but he finally got it, too. His own face went gray. “Which one is it?”

“It must be on this side, the side that’s the shortest distance from the window, door, and light fixture.” Bliss rushed up to it, began to pound it with his clenched fists, up and down, sounding it out. Sweat flew literally off his face like raindrops in a stiff wind.

The detective bolted out of the room, sent an excited yell at the open front door:

“Cochrane! Come in here, give us a hand, bring tools!”

Between the two of them they dug up a hatchet, a crowbar, cold chisel, and bung starter. “That wall,” the detective explained tersely for the constable’s benefit,

without going into details. Cochrane didn't argue; one look at both their faces must have told him that some unspeakable horror was on the way to revelation.

Bliss was leaning sideways against it by now, perfectly still, head lowered almost as though he were trying to hear something through it. He wasn't. His head was lowered with the affliction of discovery. "I've found it," he said stifledly. "I've found—the place. Listen." He pounded once or twice. There was the flat impact of solidity. He moved farther over, pounded again. This time there was the deeper resonance of a partly, or only imperfectly, filled orifice. "Half bricks, with a hollow behind them. Elsewhere, whole bricks, mortar behind them."

Stillman stripped his coat off, spit on his hands. "Better get out of the room—in case you're right," he suggested, flying at it with the hatchet, to knock off the plaster. "Wait outside the door; we'll call you—"

"No! I've got to know, I've got to see. Three of us are quicker than two." And he began chipping off the plaster coating with the cutting edge of the chisel. Cochrane cracked it for them with the bung starter. A cloud of dust hovered about them while they hacked away. Finally, they had laid bare an upright, *coffin-shaped* segment of pinkish-white brickwork in the plaster finish of the wall.

They started driving the chisel in between the interstices of the brick ends, Stillman steadying it, Cochrane driving it home with the bung starter. They changed to the crowbar, started to work that as a lever, when they'd pierced a big enough space.

"Look out. One of them's working out."

A fragment of brick ricocheted halfway across the room, dropped with a thud. A second one followed. A third. Bliss started to claw at the opening with his bare nails, to enlarge it faster.

"You're only impeding us; we can get at it faster this way," Stillman said, pushing him aside. A gray fill of

imperfectly dried clayey mortar was being laid bare. It was only a shell; flakes of it, like dried mud, had begun dropping off and out, some of their own weight, others with the impact of their blows, long before they had opened more than a “window” in the brickwork façade.

“Get back,” Stillman ordered. His purpose was to protect Bliss from the full impact of discovery that was about to ensue.

Bliss obeyed him at last, staggered over to the other end of the room, stood there with his back to them as if he were looking out the window. Only the window was farther over. A spasmodic shiver went down his back every so often. He could hear the pops and thuds as brick fragments continued to drop out of the wall under the others’ efforts, then a sudden engulfing silence.

He turned his head just in time to see them lowering something from the niche in the wall. An upright something. A rigid, mummified, columnar something that resembled nothing so much as a log covered with mortar. The scant remainder of bricks that still held it fast below, down toward the floor, shattered, spilled down in a little freshet as they wrenched it free. A haze of kindly concealing dust veiled them from him. For a minute or two they were just white shadows working over something, and then they had this thing lying on the floor. A truncated thing without any human attributes whatever, like the mold around a cast metal statue—but with a core that was something else again.

“Get out of here, Bliss,” Stillman growled. “This is no place for you!”

Wild horses couldn’t have dragged Bliss away. He was numbed beyond feeling now, anyway. The whole scene had been one that could never again be forgotten by a man who had once lived through it.

“Not with that” he protested, as he saw the crouching Stillman flick open the large blade of a penknife.

“It’s the only thing I *can* use! Go out and get us some water, see if we can soften this stuff up a little, dissolve it.”

When Bliss came back with a pail of it, Stillman was working away cautiously at one end of the mound, shaving a little with the knife blade, probing and testing with his fingers. He desisted suddenly, flashed the constable a mutely eloquent look, shifted up to the opposite end. Bliss, staring with glazed eyes, saw a stubby bluish-black wedge peering through where he had been working—the tip of a woman’s shoe.

“Upside down at that,” grunted Cochrane, trying not to let Bliss overhear him. The latter’s teeth were chattering with nervous shock.

“I told you to get out of here!” Stillman flared for the third and last time. “Your face is driving me crazy!” With as little effect as before.

Fine wires seemed to hold some of it together, even after he had pared it with the knife blade. He wet the palms of his hands in the pail of water, kneaded and crumbled it between them in those places. What had seemed like stiff wires were strands of human hair.

“That’s enough,” he said finally in a sick voice. “There’s someone there; that’s all I wanted to be sure of. I don’t know how to go about the rest of it, much; an expert’ll have to attend to that.”

“Them devils,” growled Cochrane deep in his throat.

Bliss suddenly toppled down between them, so abruptly they both thought he had fainted for a minute. “Stillman!” he said in a low throbbing voice. He was almost leaning across the thing. “These wisps of hair—Look! They show through dark, bluish-black! *She was blond!* Like an angel. It’s somebody else!”

Stillman nodded, held his forehead dazedly. “Sure, it must be. I don’t have to go by that; d’you know what should have told me from the beginning? Your wife’s only been missing since Tuesday night, three days ago. The condition

of the mortar shows plainly that this job's been up for weeks past. Why, the paint on the outside of the wall would have hardly been dry yet, let alone the fill in back of it. Apart from that, it would have been humanly impossible to put up such a job single-handed in three days. We both lost our heads; it shows you it doesn't pay to get excited.

"It's the mother, that's who it is. There's your answer for the discrepancy in the handwriting on the two notes, the snapshot, and that business about the nickname that puzzled you. Come on, stand up and lean on me, we're going to find out where he keeps his liquor. You need a drink if a man ever did!"

They found some in a cupboard out in the kitchen, sat down for a minute. Bliss looked as if he'd been pulled through a knothole. The constable had gone out on wobbly legs to get a breath of fresh air.

Bliss put the bottle down and started to look alive again.

"I think I'll have a gulp myself," Stillman said. "I'm not a drinking man, but that was one of the nastiest jobs in there just now I've ever been called on to participate in."

The constable rejoined them, his face still slightly greenish. He had a drink, too.

"How many of them were there when they first moved in here?" Stillman asked him.

"Only two. Only him and his wife, from first to last."

"Then you never saw her; they hid her from sight, that's all."

"They've been kind of standoffish; no one's ever been inside the place until tonight."

"It's her, all right, the real mother," Bliss said, as soon as he'd gotten his mental equilibrium back. "I don't have to see the face; I know I'm right. No, no more. I'm O.K. now, and I want to be able to think clearly. Don't you touch any more of it, either, Still. That's who it must be. Don't you see how the whole thing hangs together? Smiles *did* show up here Tuesday night, or rather in the early hours of

Wednesday morning; I'm surer than ever of it now. You asked me, back at my house, for a motive that would overshadow that possible insurance one of mine. Well, here it is; this is it. She was the last one they expected to see, so soon after her own marriage to me. She walked in here and found an impostor in the place of her own mother, a stranger impersonating her. They had to shut her up quick, keep her from raising an alarm. There's your motive as far as Smiles is concerned."

"And it's a wow," concurred Stillman heartily. "The thing is, what've they done with her, where is she? We're no better off than before. She's not around here; we've cased the place from cellar to attic. Unless there's another of those trick walls that we've missed spotting."

"You're forgetting that what you said about the first one still goes. There hasn't been time enough to rig up anything that elaborate."

"I shouldn't have taken that drink," confessed Stillman.

"I'm convinced she was here, though, as late as Thursday night, and still alive in the place. Another of those tantalizing things just came back to me. There was a knock on one of the water pipes somewhere; I couldn't tell if it was upstairs or down. I bet she was tied up someplace, the whole time I was sitting here."

"Did you hear one or more than one?"

"Just one. The woman got right up and went out, I noticed, giving an excuse about getting a fresh handkerchief. They probably had her doped, or under some sedative."

"That's then, but now?"

"There's a lot of earth around outside, acres of it, miles of it," Cochrane put in morbidly.

"No, now wait a minute," Stillman interjected. "Let's get this straight. If their object was just to make her disappear, clean vanish, as in the mother's case, that would be one thing. Then I'm afraid we might find her lying somewhere

around in that earth you speak of. But you're forgetting that her clothes turned up in your own furnace at home, Bliss—showing they didn't want her to disappear; they wanted to pin her death definitely on you."

"Why?"

"Self-preservation, pure and simple. With a straight disappearance, the investigation would have never been closed. In the end it might have been directed up this way, resulted in unearthing the first murder, just as we did tonight. Pinning it on you would have not only obviated that risk, but eliminated you as well—cleaned the slate for them. A second murder to safeguard the first, a legal execution to clinch the second. But—to pin it successfully on you, that body has to show up down around where you are, and not up here at all. The clothes were a forerunner of it."

"But would they risk taking her back to my place, knowing it was likely to be watched by you fellows, once they had denounced me to you themselves? That would be like sticking their own heads in a noose. They might know it would be kept under surveillance."

"No, it wouldn't have been. You see, your accidental switch to that hitchhike from the bus resulted in two things going wrong. We not only went out to your house to look for you when you didn't show up at the terminal, but, by going out there, we found the clothes in the furnace sooner than they wanted us to. I don't believe they were meant to be found until—the body was also in position."

"Then why make two trips, instead of just one? Why not take poor Smiles at the same time they took her clothes?"

"He had to make a fast trip in, the first time, to beat that bus. They may have felt it was too risky to take her along then. He also had to familiarize himself with your premises, find some way of getting in, find out if the whole thing was feasible or not before going ahead with it. They felt their call to us—it wasn't an accusation at all, by the way, but simply a request that we investigate—would get you out of

the way, clear the coast for them. They expected you to be held and questioned for twenty-four, forty-eight hours, straight. They thought they'd given themselves a wide enough margin of safety. But your failure to take the bus telescoped it."

Bliss rose abruptly. "Do you think she's—yet?" He couldn't bring himself to mention the word.

"It stands to reason that they'd be foolish to do it until the last possible moment. That would increase the risk of transporting her a hundredfold. And they'd be crazy to do it anywhere else but on the exact spot where they intend her to be found eventually. Otherwise, it would be too easy for us to reconstruct the fact that she was killed somewhere else and taken there afterward."

"Then the chances are she was still alive when they left here with her! There may still be time even now; she may still be alive! What are we sitting here like this for?"

They both bolted out together, but Bliss made for the front door, Stillman headed for the phone in the hall.

"What're you doing that for?"

"Phone in an alarm to city headquarters. How else can we hope to save her? Have them throw a cordon around your house—"

Bliss pulled the instrument out of his hands. "Don't! You'll only be killing her quicker that way! If we frighten them off, we'll never save her. They'll lose their heads, kill her anywhere and drop her off just to get rid of her. This way, at least we know it'll be in or somewhere around my house."

"But, man, do you realize the head start they've had?"

"We only missed them by five or ten minutes. Remember that coffeepot on the stove?"

"Even so, even with a State police escort, I doubt if we can get in under a couple of hours."

"And I say that we've got to take the chance! You noticed their tire treads before. He has a walloping bad patch, and he's never going to make that bad stretch on the road with

it. I saw his car last night when it raced past, and he had no spares up. There's no gas station for miles around there. All that will cut down their head start."

"You're willing to gamble your wife's life against a flat tire?"

"There isn't anything else I *can* do. I'm convinced if you send an alarm ahead and have a dragnet thrown around my house, they'll scent it and simply shy away from there and go off someplace else with her where we *won't* be able to get to her in time, because we won't know where it is. Come on, we could be miles away already, for the time we've wasted talking."

"All right," snapped the detective, "we'll play it your way! Is this car of yours any good?" he asked Cochrane, hopping in.

"Fastest thing in these parts," said the constable grimly, slithering under the wheel.

"Well, you know what you've got to do with it: cut down their head start to nothing flat, less than nothing; you've got to get us there five minutes to the good."

"Just get down low in your seats and hang onto your back teeth," promised Cochrane. "What we just turned up in there happened in my jurisdiction, don't forget—and the law of the land gives this road to us tonight!"

It was an incredible ride; incredible for the fact that they stayed right side up on the surface of the road at all. The speedometer needle clung to stratospheric heights throughout. The scenery was just a blurred hiss on both sides of them. The wind pressure stung the pupils of their eyes to the point where they could barely hold them open. The constable, luckily, used glasses for reading and had happened to have them about him when they started. He put them on simply in order to make sure of staying on the road at all.

They had to take the bad stretch at a slower speed in sheer self-defense, in order not to have the same thing

happen to them that they were counting on having happened to the Alden car. An intact tire could possibly get over it unharmed, but one that was already defective was almost sure to go out.

"Wouldn't you think he'd have remembered about this from passing over it last night, and taken precautions?" Stillman yelled above the wind at Bliss.

"He took a chance on it just like we're doing now. Slow up a minute at the first gas station after here, see if he got away with it or not." He knew that if he had, that meant they might just as well turn back then and there; Smiles was as good as dead already.

It didn't appear for another twenty minutes even at the clip they had resumed once the bad stretch was past. With a flat, or until a tow car was sent out after anyone, it would have taken an hour or more to make it.

"Had a flat to fix, coming from our way, tonight?" Stillman yelled out at the attendant.

"And how!" the man yelled back, jogging over to them. "That was no flat! He wobbled up here with ribbons around his wheel. Rim all flattened, too, from riding so long on it."

"*He?*" echoed Stillman. "Wasn't there two women or anyway one, with him?"

"No, just a fellow alone."

"She probably waited for him up the road out of sight with Smiles," Bliss suggested in an undertone, "to avoid being seen; then he picked them up again when the job was finished. Or if Smiles was able to walk, maybe they detoured around it on foot and rejoined the car farther down."

"Heavy-set man with a bull neck, and little eyes, and scraggly red hair?" the constable asked the station operator.

"Yeah."

"That's him. How long ago did he pull out of here?"

"Not more than an hour ago, I'd say."

“See? We’ve already cut their head start plenty,” Bliss rejoiced.

“There’s still too damn much of it to suit me,” was the detective’s answer.

“One of you take the wheel for the next lap,” Cochrane said. “The strain is telling on me. Better put these on for goggles.” He handed Stillman his reading-glasses.

The filling-station and its circular glow of light whisked out behind them and they were on the tear once more. They picked up a State police motorcycle escort automatically within the next twenty minutes, by their mere speed in itself; simply tapered off long enough to show their badges and make their shouts of explanation heard. This was all to the good; it cleared their way through such towns and restricted-speed belts as lay in their path. Just to give an idea of their pace, there were times, on the straightaway, when their escort had difficulty in keeping up with them. And even so, they weren’t making good enough time to satisfy Bliss. He alternated between fits of optimism, when he sat crouched forward on the edge of the seat, fists clenched, gritting: “We’ll swing it; we’ll get there in time; I know it!” and fits of despair, when he slumped back on his shoulder blades and groaned, “We’ll never make it! I’m a fool; I should have let you phone in ahead like you wanted to! Can’t you make this thing *move* at all?”

“Look at that speedometer,” the man at the wheel suggested curtly. “There’s nowhere else for the needle to go but off the dial altogether! Take it easy, Bliss. They can’t possibly tear along at this clip; we’re official, remember. Another thing, once they get there, they’ll do a lot of cagey reconnoitering first. That’ll eat up more of their head start. And finally, even after they get at it, they’ll take it slow, make all their preparations first, to make it look right. Don’t forget, they think they’ve got all night; they don’t know we’re on their trail.”

“And it’s still going to be an awful close shave,” insisted Bliss through tightly clenched teeth.

Their State police escort signed off at the city limits with a wave of the arm, a hairpin turn, and left them on their own. They had to taper down necessarily now, even though traffic was light at this night hour. Bliss showed Stillman the shortcut over, which would bring them up to his house from the rear. A block and a half away Stillman choked off their engine, coasted to a stealthy stop under the overshadowing trees, and the long grueling race against time was over—without their knowing as yet whether it had been successful or not.

“Now follow me,” Bliss murmured, hopping down. “I hope we didn’t bring the car in too close; sounds carry so at an hour like this.”

“They won’t be expecting us.” One of Stillman’s legs gave under him from his long motionless stint at the wheel; he had to hobble along slapping at it until he could get the circulation back into it. Cochrane brought up at the rear.

When they cleared the back of the house next door to Bliss’s and could look through the canal of separation to the street out in front, Bliss touched his companions on the arm, pointed meaningly. The blurred outline of a car was visible, parked there under the same leafy trees where Stillman himself had hidden when he was waiting for Bliss. They couldn’t make out its interior.

“Someone in it,” Cochrane said, breathing hard. “I think it’s a woman, too. I can see the white curve of a bare arm on the wheel.”

“You take that car, we’ll take the house; he must be in there with her long ago at this stage of the game,” Stillman muttered. “Can you come up on it quietly enough so she won’t have time to sound the horn or signal him in any way?”

“I’ll see to it I do!” was the purposeful answer. Cochrane turned back like a wraith, left the two of them alone.

They couldn’t go near the front of the house because of the lookout, and there was no time to wait for Cochrane to incapacitate her. “Flatten out and do like I do,” Bliss whispered. “She’s probably watching the street out there more than this lot behind the house.” He crouched, with his chin nearly down to his knees, darted across the intervening space to the concealment provided by the back of his own house.

“We can get in through the kitchen window,” Bliss instructed, when Stillman had made the switch-over after him. “The latch never worked right. Give me a folder of matches, and make a footrest with your hands.”

When he was up with one foot on the outside of the sill, his companion supporting the other, Bliss tore off and discarded the sandpaper and matches adhering to it, used the cardboard remainder as a sort of impromptu jimmy, slipping it down into the seam between the two window halves, and pushing the fastening back out of the way with it. A moment later he had the lower pane up and was inside the room, stretching down his hands to Stillman to help him up after him.

They both stood perfectly still there for a minute in the gloom, listening for all they were worth. Not a sound reached them, not a chink of light showed. Bliss felt a cold knife of doubt stab at his heart.

“Is he in here at all?” He breathed heavily. “That may be somebody else’s car out there across the way.”

At that instant there was the blurred but unmistakable sound that loose, falling earth makes, dropping back into a hollow or cavity. You hear it on the streets when a drainage ditch is being refilled. You hear it in a cemetery when a grave is being covered up. In the silence of this house, in the dead of night, it had a knell-like sound of finality. *Burial*.

Bliss gave a strangled gasp of horror, lurched forward in the darkness.

“He’s already—through!”

The sound had seemed to come from somewhere underneath them. Bliss made for the basement door. Stillman's heavy footfalls pounded after him, all thought of concealment past.

Bliss clawed open the door that gave down to the cellar, flung it back. For a split second, and no more, dull-yellow light gleamed up from below. Then it snuffed out, too quickly to show them anything. There was pitch blackness below them, as above, and an ominous silence.

Something clicked just over Bliss's shoulder, and the pale moon of Stillman's torch glowed out from the cellar floor below them, started traveling around, looking for something to center on. Instantly a vicious tongue of flame spurted toward the parent orb, the reflector, and something flew past Bliss, went *spat* against the wall, as a thunderous boom sounded below.

Bliss could sense, rather than tell, that Stillman was raising his gun behind him. He clawed out, caught the cuff of the detective's sleeve, brought it down. "Don't! She may be down there somewhere in the line of fire!"

Something shot out over his shoulder. Not a gun or slug, but the torch itself. Stillman was trying to turn it into a sort of readymade star shell, by throwing it down there still lighted. The light pool on the floor streaked off like a comet, flicked across the ceiling, dropped down on the other side, and steadied itself against the far wall—with a pair of trouser legs caught squarely in the light, from the knees down. They buckled to jump aside, out of the revealing beam, but not quickly enough. Stillman sighted his gun at a kneecap and fired. The legs jolted, wobbled, folded up forward toward the light, bringing a torso and head down into view on the floor. When the fall ended, the beam of the torch was weirdly centered on the exact crown of a bald head surrounded by a circular fringe of reddish hair. It rolled from side to side like a giant ostrich egg, screaming agonizedly into the cellar floor.

“I’ll take him,” Stillman grunted. “You put on that light!”

Bliss groped for the dangling light cord that had proved such a hindrance to them just now by being down in the center of the basement instead of up by the doorway where they could get at it. He snagged it, found the finger switch, turned it. Horror flooded the place at his touch, in piebald tones of deep black shadow and pale yellow. The shovel Alden had just started to wield when he heard them coming lay half across a mound of freshly disinterred earth. Near it were the flat flagstones that had topped it, flooring the cellar, and the pickax that had loosened them. He must have brought the tools with him in the car, for they weren’t Bliss’s.

And on the other side of that mound—the short but deep hole the earth had come out of. Alden must have been working away down here for some time, to get so much done single-handed. And yet, though they had arrived before he’d finished, they were still too late—for in the hole, filling it to within an inch or two of the top, and fitting the sides even more closely, rested a deep old-fashioned trunk that had probably belonged to Smiles’ mother and come down in the trunk compartment of the car. And four-square as it was, it looked ominously small for anyone to fit into—whole.

Bliss pointed down at it, moaned sickly. “She—she—”

He wanted to fold up and let himself topple inertly across the mound of earth before it. Stillman’s sharp, whiplike command kept him upright. “Hang on! Coming!”

He had clipped the back of Alden’s skull with his gun butt, to put him out of commission while their backs were turned. He leaped up on the mound of earth, and across the hole to the opposite side, then dropped down by the trunk, tugging at it.

“There’s no blood around; he may have put her in alive. Hurry up, help me to get the lid up! Don’t waste time trying

to lift the whole thing out; just the lid. Get some air into it —”

It shot up between the two of them, and within lay a huddled bulk of sacking, pitifully doubled around on itself. *It was still moving feebly.* Fluttering spasmodically, rather than struggling any more.

The blade of the penknife Stillman had already used once before tonight flew out, slashed furiously at the coarse stuff. A contorted face was revealed through the rents, but not recognizable as Smiles’ any more—a face black with suffocation, in which the last spark of life had been about to go out. And still might, if they didn’t coax it back in a hurry.

They got her up out of it between them and straightened her out flat on the floor. Stillman sawed away at the short length of rope cruelly twisted around her neck, the cause of suffocation, severed it after seconds that seemed like centuries, unwound it, flung it off. Bliss, meanwhile, was stripping off the tattered remnants of the sacking. She was in a white silk slip.

Stillman straightened up, jumped for the stairs. “Breathe into her mouth like they do with choking kids. I’ll send out a call for a Pulmotor.”

But the battle was already won by the time he came trooping down again; they could both tell that, laymen though they were. The congested darkness was leaving her face little by little, her chest was rising and falling of its own accord, she was coughing distressedly, and making little whimpering sounds of returning consciousness. They carried her up to the floor above when the emergency apparatus arrived, nevertheless, just to make doubly sure. It was while they were both up there, absorbed in watching the Pulmotor being used on her, that a single shot boomed out in the basement under them, with ominous finality.

Stillman clapped a hand to his hip. “Forgot to take his gun away from him. Well, there goes one of Cochrane’s prisoners!”

They ran for the basement stairs, stopped halfway down them, one behind the other, looking at Alden's still form lying there below. It was still face-down, in the same position as before. One arm, curved under his own body at chest level, and a lazy tendril of smoke curling up around his ribs, told the difference.

"What a detective I am!" Stillman said disgustedly.

"It's better this way," Bliss answered, tight-lipped. "I think I would have killed him with my own bare hands, before they got him out of here, after what he tried to do to her tonight!"

By the time they returned upstairs again, Cochrane had come in with the woman. They were both being iodined and bandaged by an intern.

"What happened?" Stillman asked dryly. "Looks like she gave you more trouble than he gave us."

"Did you ever try to hang onto the outside of a wild car while the driver tried to shake you off? I'd gotten up to within one tree length of her, when the shots down in the basement tipped her off Alden was in for it. I just had time to make a flying tackle for the baggage rack before she was off a mile a minute. I had to work my way forward along the running-board, with her swerving and flinging around corners on two wheels. She finally piled up against a refuse-collection truck; dunno how it was we both weren't killed."

"Well, she's all yours, Cochrane," Stillman said. "But first I'm going to have to ask you to let me take her over to headquarters with me. You, too, Bliss." He looked at his watch. "I promised my lieutenant I'd be in with you by nine the latest, and I'm a stickler for keeping a promise. We'll be a little early, but unforeseen circumstances came up."

At headquarters, in the presence of Bliss, Stillman, Cochrane, the lieutenant of detectives, and the necessary police stenographer, Alden's accomplice was prevailed on to talk.

“My name is Irma Gilman,” she began, “and I’m thirty-nine years old. I used to be a trained nurse on the staff of one of the large metropolitan hospitals. Two of my patients lost their lives through carelessness on my part, and I was discharged.

“I met Joe Alden six months ago. His wife was in ill health, so I moved in with them to look after her. Her first husband had left her well off, with slews of negotiable bonds. Alden had already helped himself to a few of them before I showed up, but now that I was there, he wanted to get rid of her altogether, so that we could get our hands on the rest. I told him he’d never get away with anything there, where everybody knew her; he’d have to take her somewhere else first. He went looking for a house, and when he’d found one that suited him, the place in Denby, he took me out to inspect it, without her, and palmed me off on the agent as his wife.

“We made all the arrangements, and when the day came to move, he went ahead with the moving van. I followed in the car with her after dark. That timed it so that we reached there late at night; there wasn’t a soul around any more to see her go in. And from then on, as far as anyone in Denby knew, there were only two of us living in the house, not three. We didn’t keep her locked up, but we put her in a bedroom at the back, where she couldn’t be seen from the road, and put up a fine-meshed screen on the window. She was bed-ridden a good part of the time, anyway, and that made it easier to keep her presence concealed.

“He started to make his preparations from the moment we moved in. He began building this low wall out in front, as an excuse to order the bricks and other materials that he needed for the real work later on. He ordered more from the contractor than he needed, of course.

“Finally it happened. She felt a little better one day, came downstairs, and started checking over her list of bonds. He’d persuaded her when they were first married not to

entrust them to a bank; she had them in an ordinary strongbox. She found out some of them were already missing. He went in there to her, and I listened outside the door. She didn't say very much, just: 'I thought I had more of these thousand-dollar bonds.' But that was enough to show us that she'd caught on. Then she got up very quietly and went out of the room without another word.

"Before we knew it, she was on the telephone in the hall—trying to get help, I suppose. She didn't have a chance to utter a word; he was too quick for her. He jumped out after her and pulled it away from her. He was between her and the front door, and she turned and went back upstairs, still without a sound, not even a scream. Maybe she still did not realize she was in bodily danger, thought she could get her things on and get out of the house.

"He said to me, 'Go outside and wait in front. Make sure there's no one anywhere in sight, up and down the road or in the fields.' I went out there, looked, raised my arm and dropped it, as a signal to him to go ahead. He went up the stairs after her.

"You couldn't hear a thing from inside. Not even a scream, or a chair falling over. He must have done it very quietly. In a while he came down to the door again. He was breathing a little fast and his face was a little pale, that was all. He said, 'It's over. I smothered her with one of the bed pillows. She didn't have much strength.' Then he went in again and carried her body down to the basement. We kept her down there while he went to work on this other wall; as soon as it was up high enough, he put her behind it and finished it. He repainted the whole room so that one side wouldn't look too new.

"Then, without a word of warning, the girl showed up the other night. Luckily, just that night Joe had stayed down at the hotel late having a few beers. He recognized her as she got off the bus and brought her out with him in the car. That did away with her having to ask her way of anyone. We

stalled her for a few minutes by pretending her mother was fast asleep, until I had time to put a sedative in some tea I gave her to drink. After that it was easy to handle her; we put her down in the basement and kept her doped down there.

"Joe remembered, from one of her letters, that she'd said her husband had insured her, so that gave us our angle. The next day I faked a long letter to her and mailed it to the city, as if she'd never shown up here at all. Then when Bliss came up looking for her, I tried to dope him, too, to give us a chance to transport her back to his house during his absence, finish her off down there, and pin it on him. He spoiled that by passing the food up and walking out on us. The only thing left for us to do after that was for Joe to beat the bus in, plant her clothes ahead of time, and put a bee in the police's bonnet. That was just to get Bliss out of the way, so the coast would be left clear to get her in down there.

"We called his house from just inside the city limits when we got down here with her tonight. No one answered, so it seemed to have worked. But we'd lost a lot of time on account of that blowout. I waited outside in the car, with her covered up on the floor, drugged. When Joe had the hole dug, he came out and took her in with him.

"We thought all the risk we had to run was down at this end. We were sure we were perfectly safe up at the other end; Joe had done such a bang-up job on that wall. I still can't understand how you caught onto it so quick."

"I'm an architect, that's why," Bliss said grimly. "There was something about that room that bothered me. It wasn't on the square."

Smiles was lying in bed when Bliss went back to his own house, and she was pretty again. When she opened her eyes and looked up at him, they were all crinkly and smiling just as they used to be.

"Honey," she said, "it's so good to have you near me. I've learned my lesson. I'll never walk out on you again."

“That’s right, you stay where you belong, with Ed,” he said soothingly, “and nothing like that’ll ever happen to you again.”

SEÑOR FLATFOOT

Explosive and devious is the course of Latin-American politics—but not without fascination. Today's lesson includes a general with a failing for wrist-watches; another general who added one and one to get approximately five; at non-com who preferred Marx to local history; and a girl who should have been labeled TNT . . .

I

O'Rourke was enjoying a gin-and-lime under the arcade fronting the Plaza when the government changed on him. Or around him, whichever way you care to put it.

O'Rourke kept right on being good Manhattan, but Zacamoras did a flip-up from Federalista to Liberalista at one past five in the afternoon. By ten after it was all over.

A shot at the edge of the town was the signal. Then there were a lot more. *Sput-sput-sput-sput.* O'Rourke stayed where he was, lit another blistering native cigarette, and wondered what the boys back on Centre Street were doing just then.

A handful of men in dusty yellow khaki came backing slowly into the Plaza, occasionally raising antiquated

Mausers to their shoulders and letting fly. This was the local garrison in retreat.

Other shots, from the outskirts, came back in answer. That was the oncoming Feds, or maybe it was the Libs; O'Rourke should know the difference.

This banging kept up questioningly for moment or two longer, after the local defenders had moved out. Getting no answer, it broke off; there was a triumphant rebel yell, and a bevy of horsemen in cartwheel sombreros came clattering into the Plaza, wheeling and rearing their mounts in approved Wild West fashion.

After them, amid appropriate *"vivas!"* throwing-up of sombreros, and sky-shots, a Model T Ford arrived. From it descended the dreaded General Inocencia Escobar and his equally dreaded half-brother Angelito, "liberators of the people."

Their given names, from what O'Rourke had gathered, were slightly misleading. They were said to be bad medicine. To his experienced eye they were just a pair of *micky finns* with no takers; he'd handled tougher guys every day of his life.

They stalked in and promptly turned O'Rourke's hotel into their revolutionary headquarters. When he went in himself later, he found them dining in state in the middle of the patio, with assorted underlings and soldierettes, at a long table made up of a lot of little tables pushed together.

Which meant O'Rourke had to do without supper or eat it in his lap. He didn't mind; he was getting sick of rice and beans by now anyway. He'd often wondered, since he'd been here, who was taking the most punishment the wanted killer he'd come down after, who was laid up in the hospital with typhoid, or himself, forced to louse around outside waiting for him to get well enough to travel.

He yawned and made the mistake of hitching up his cuff and looking at his wristwatch. An honor guard of two was promptly sent to bring him over. The generals had never seen a wristwatch before. O'Rourke accommodatingly took it off for them. There were too many automatics lying beside the knives and forks for him to be selfish about it.

Inocencia tried it on first. Then Angelito tried it on. Then it went all around the table from wrist to wrist, until it got back to Inocencia again. By that time O'Rourke wasn't sure he wanted to put it on again, without first dipping the strap in carbolic acid or something.

"I'll buy," glared the general. "How much?" His expression indicated it wouldn't have been tactful to refuse to do business.

O'Rourke didn't mind. You didn't need a watch in Zacamoras as much as in New York; there was no place to go. He named a good stiff price.

The general didn't balk. He thumbed over an adjutant or quartermaster of some kind. "Pay him, Pablito," he ordered. The quartermaster whispered something in his ear.

The general looked unconcerned. "No?" he said. "Well, levy a contribution on the town, to replenish our war chest. Get hold of the *alcalde* and hold him as a hostage until he digs it up."

The mayor was going to be the fall guy. Inocencia turned back to O'Rourke again. "I'll give you an iou, until our campaign funds have caught up with us."

"That'll be as good as gold," said O'Rourke caustically.

"You bet," agreed the general, quite without guile.

The quartermaster presented a voucher and he duly made his mark, an x, at the bottom of it.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" O'Rourke said with a straight face. "How does one tell the difference between your own signature and that of the other general, here?"

“Oh, that’s easy,” said Escobar blandly. “Mine goes up and down, like this: +. His goes from side to side, like this: **X**.”

“You military men think of everything,” said O’Rourke with mock admiration.

He went back to where he’d been sitting and waited to see what would happen next. A cowering old man was thrust forward between two soldiers. “You the *alcalde?”* glowered Inocencia.

“The *ex-alcalde,”* corrected his half-brother. “We’ll appoint one of our own tomorrow.”

There was a whispered consultation. Then one of the two generals pointed a menacing finger at the quailing official before him. “We assess you ten thousand pesos for support of the cause. And it’s got to be in by nine tomorrow morning.”

“There isn’t that much in the whole town!” wailed the victim.

“That’s your tough luck. You’re going to stay in jail until that money’s in.”

“But I’m an old man, I’m not well.”

“We’ll cure you. Take him away and lock him up, Pablito.”

The terrified *alcalde* was trundled off, still protesting. “It always works,” the general told his associates, with a ponderous wink. They all had a good belly laugh over it.

O’Rourke considered it pretty poor sport, but it was no skin off his nose. He was out of jurisdiction here. Just the same he wouldn’t have minded having one or two of them—especially that quartermaster, Pablito—alone with him in the basement of a nice out-of-the-way Jamaica station house for a half-hour workout.

He checked upstairs around ten or so. But if he thought he was going to get any sleep, he didn’t know his revolutions. One of the two generals—Inocencia, the one who had

chiseled his wristwatch—requisitioned a large room a few doors down from his own, at the end of the same corridor.

Both rooms gave onto a long outside gallery or balcony, which ran around the entire face of the building at second-story height. The other general had apparently chosen quarters in the opposite wing; he didn't show up.

A sentry was posted outside the door, not so much for protection as to add a touch of swank; and from then on the amount of noise that went on in there made O'Rourke think the whole army must be bivouacked inside. But it was evidently only the general and a few choice staff-members having a nightcap to celebrate the afternoon's victory. It finally tapered off and the silence of tropic night descended on Zacamoras.

Then just as he was dozing off under his mosquito netting, a feather-light tap came on his own door. He knew to begin with it must be a mistake; he didn't know a soul in town except that guy in the hospital, and he had a leg-chain fastening him to his cot.

It didn't improve his temper any. He started to talk to himself in a seething undertone, while he swung his feet to the floor and battled lengths of mosquito netting.

"They make me eat my meal on the cuff, they take my watch, they keep me awake half the night with their racket—and then their dates show up at my door by mistake!"

He knew it must be a woman; no man would have tapped so daintily. He got into his pants, strode over to the door barefooted, swung it back, and glared.

"No ice today, lady," he barked. Then he scotched it quick, and felt like a fool.

The girl before him wasn't anybody's date, least of all a revolutionary general's. She wasn't more than nineteen. Her skin had the camelia-like whiteness that comes from seldom being exposed to the sun. It made her eyes seem twice as dark as they were, which made them four times darker than he'd ever known eyes could be.

She was all in black, with a lace shawl hooded around her head, one end of it drawn across her mouth in semi-Oriental fashion. A small jet cross peering from her breast was her only ornament.

She drew back a startled step before his outburst. “Oh,—I’m so sorry, *Señor.* I’m looking for this general Escobar.” The way she said it made the “general” a discourtesy title, rather than anything else.

“Up there where that sentry—” he started to say. Then he saw the reason for her loss of bearings. The sentry had momentarily deserted his post, presumably to hoist a quick one down in the patio. “That end door up there,” he explained.

He stood there a moment looking after her. She was moving down the tiled corridor with such obvious trepidation, that he couldn’t resist asking: “Pardon me, *Señorita,* but—did you come here alone?”

Her dark eyes grew larger as she turned her head, as if he were only naming her own fears. “I had to. There was no one I could bring with me.”

“Well, excuse me for butting in; but are you sure you want to go in there by yourself.”

“I have to. You see, my father—”

“Oh, the *alcalde.* Yes, I watched that.”

“He has a weak heart. I’m afraid the excitement and fright alone are enough to—We are raising the money. My brother is out getting it right now. I have come to intercede for him with the general.”

“I know, but he’s probably had a few drinks by now; see what I mean?”

She moistened her lips nervously. “I have a knife with me.” It was evidently concealed in her dress.

“Want me to go in with you? Be only too glad to.”

“Thank you, *Señor,* but it is better if I go alone. People of his breed think that to show generosity is a sign of weakness. In the presence of a third person he is likely to make it a point to be relentless. It is only if I can see him alone that I have any chance of winning him over. That is why I came even without my brother’s knowledge.”

O’Rourke had to admit there might be something to what she said.

“Cali out if you need me,” he suggested crisply.

The truant sentry reappeared just then, wiping his mouth along his sleeve. “Ask your general if a lady may come in and speak to him,” O’Rourke heard her murmur tremulously.

The sentry came out again, said: “Sure, any time—day or night.” There was a leer in it if O’Rourke had ever heard one. The door at the upper end of the passageway closed. O’Rourke closed his own door. He didn’t get back under the netting, but decided he’d wait up until he heard her come out again. He lit a cigarette, to take the place of the netting while he waited.

The payoff came in no time at all. She’d been in there hardly five minutes than a short, swift scream came winging up in the silence. It sounded more indignant than terrified.

O’Rourke jumped, took a hitch in his belt, and started for his own door. Before he could get to it, he heard her come outside on the balcony that ran past both rooms. “Will you let me leave?” she said sharply.

O’Rourke turned and went out that way instead. She was alone out there, groping her way toward O’Rourke’s room. A swath of yellow light behind her placed the general’s room. He hadn’t come out after her; evidently couldn’t make the window embrasure, wide as it was, without a compass. She ran the few remaining steps toward O’Rourke with delighted relief.

“So he got out of line, huh?” he said gruffly.

“He’s hopelessly drunk in there, and to make matters worse I find that the entire sum has already been raised and delivered to him by my brother and our friends, so I sought him out for nothing. He showed it to me in there.

“Now he still refuses to release my father. Need you ask what the new conditions are? He pulled the knife out of my hand like a stick of candy when I drew it to make him keep his distance. I left it in there with him.”

“I think I’ll go in and have a word with him,” O’Rourke growled truculently.

She edged him back into the room before her. “No, don’t *Señor.* You will only antagonize him, and then we will never secure my father’s release. Come inside before he sees us.”

“But he’s coming after you now.” A surreptitious footfall sounded on the balcony floor; vine leaves rustled as if somebody had brushed into them, then there was silence. “I’ll quiet him down for the night,” O’Rourke promised grimly.

Again she forestalled him. “Please! It will only make matters worse. The best thing is for me to leave quietly by the door of your room.”

He opened it and looked out. The ambulating sentry had again gone off looking for liquid refreshment. O’Rourke signaled to her that the coast was clear. “Let me take you as far as your door. The town’s full of soldiers.”

“No, it is not far. I will be all right. Thank you for your kindness, *Señor.”* She started to tiptoe down the passage, to avoid bringing the general out.

Suddenly the bottom of her dress flared like a hoopskirt and she had darted back and fled inside his doorway again. “My brother!” she whispered. “I recognized him on the stairs just now. He must be coming to find out why the release wasn’t granted.”

O’Rourke motioned her behind him, narrowed his door, peered watchfully through the crack. The man he saw was little more than a boy himself, with the girl’s same fairness of skin.

O’Rourke saw him go up to the general’s door, knuckle it lightly. The answer from inside was too low for O’Rourke to catch. He saw him try the knob, step in, and close the door behind him.

The girl brushed by O’Rourke, flashed him a look of thanks; there was a flurry of black skirts and filmy shawl, and she had vanished around the turn of the passage leading to the stairs.

O’Rourke kept watch to find out what iuck her brother would have with the general. Young Pascal came out backwards, inside of five minutes. He closed the door and stood there for a moment, his face ghostly.

O’Rourke could see both his wrists shaking slightly as he held up something between them. It was a small oblong of paper, somewhat resembling the iou the general had given O’Rourke earlier in the evening. O’Rourke guessed that it must be the order for the elder Pascal’s release.

The boy hastily pocketed it, looked warily about him, then moved off in the same direction his sister had taken, trying to step as soundlessly as possible. One o’clock tolled dismally from the belfry of the venerable church.

O’Rourke closed his door and turned back into his room for the last time that night. “Heavy traffic,” he grunted.

II

A commotion in the hall roused him sometime after daybreak. First he thought the opposition must have counterattacked; but there was no gunfire—only a constant

stomping back and forth of many feet, and a welter of jabbering voices.

Someone—it sounded like one of the two generals—was sputtering rapid-fire orders and imprecations right and left. “I will burn the town to the ground! I will shoot every able-bodied man! Who was in there last?”

“A girl, I think it was the old *alcalde’s* daughter.”

“Take a squad and get over there fast. If they’re gone already, go after them. They’ll head for the front lines, try to get through to the other side. But they’ve got to go on foot; we commandeered every horse in the place ourselves last night. Don’t come back without them, *comprende?* They’ll pay for this!”

O’Rourke finished his dressing fast, to get out there and learn just what the thing was. He came barging out still spinning the ends of his necktie around in a loop. “What’s the matter, General?” It was the one who hadn’t taken his wristwatch—Angelito. “My brother has been foully murdered in the middle of the night!” he boomed, too excited to recall that, technically, it was none of O’Rourke’s business and he had no right asking questions. He pointed dramatically to the open doorway behind him. “Come in and see for yourself.”

O’Rourke did, without waiting to be asked twice. The general lay sprawled inertly across his bed, one leg trailing down to the floor as if he had started to rear up when it happened.

The mother-of-pearl haft of a small but malignant dagger sat like a valve directly over his heart. It had been driven in up to the guard. His arms had flopped wide at the instant of death, palms up. They more than spanned the bed, for he had a good reach.

A neat little tortoise-shell scabbard lay on the floor close by. On it, in silver, was the initial P, in a wreath.

O’Rourke was thinking of the girl as he picked it up, tapped it thoughtfully across his pulse. “Want me to work

on it for you?" he hazarded.

"Work on it? What for? I can work on it myself." The general, misunderstanding, reached down toward the corpse, wrenched, and the knife came up.

"There, what was hard about that?" he said, and carefully proceeded to wipe both handle and blade on a corner of the bedding. But then there weren't any facilities for handling prints down here anyway, O'Rourke reminded himself after his first moment of consternation.

He tried again. "I'm a detective. You know what a detective is, don't you?"

"No. What's a detective?"

"Look," explained O'Rourke patiently. "In my country we have people killed like that too. We have special men to find out who did it. I'm one of them. Why don't you let me find out who did."

"But we already know that, we don't have to find out. The *alcalde's* daughter, that Pascal girl, did it. The sentry saw her come in here last night."

O'Rourke thumbed the sentry disparagingly. "Can he tell you what time it happened? *I* can, and I wasn't even in here at all. It happened at ten past one." The general made a rubber tire out of his lower lip. "How do you know?" Which was just what he'd wanted them to ask. All this was by way of buildup, to get the job. He picked up the corpse's right arm, held it aloft, pointed to the wrist. A couple of little glistening shards trickled down inside the sleeve.

"What do the hands say? One and two. His arms flopped wide as the knife went in. One of them went a little too far over the side, hit the edge of the bedboard down there smack across the face of the watch, shattered the crystal. It stopped dead on the minute, at the instant of attack. Now do you see what a detective is?"

It went over big. A hum of admiration went up. It might have been elementary in Elmhurst or Elmira: down here it was black magic. O'Rourke cashed in while the cashing was good. "How about it? Will you let me handle it for you?"

"Can you do it as quick as that?"

"Not exactly, but what's the rush? I thought you people were never in a hurry down here?"

"But I want to shoot someone right today for killing my brother," the general explained reasonably.

"Do you want to shoot someone and then find out later you shot the wrong person?"

"No-o," admitted the general, but with an air of merely splitting hairs.

"Then just give me time, and you can shoot to your heart's content." Multiple feet were coming back along the passageway outside. Rifle butts cracked to the floor. Luisa Pascal and her brother were thrust into the room. The boy's hands were bound behind his back; the girl's had been left free.

Her eyes met O'Rourke's briefly, but she gave no sign of ever having seen him before.

"We stopped them halfway to the opposition's outposts," gloated the subaltern who'd been sent out after them. 'They'd gotten a lift in a burro cart driven by an old Indian woman who was gathering maguey leaves. We let her go on after we pulled them out of it."

"Where's the old man?"

"He wasn't with them; must be hiding back here in town." The girl and her brother exchanged a complacent look.

Escobar raised clenched fists high. over his head in exasperation. "You fools! He must have been the old woman with a *reboso* covering his head. You let him slip through your fingers! I ought to—"

So the kids had sacrificed themselves for the father. More power to them, thought O'Rourke. He felt more than ever like giving them a helping hand.

But all sentimentality aside, the determining factor was that he didn't believe either one of them had done it. One o'clock had struck as young Pascal tiptoed out of the room. The girl had left even a minute or two sooner. The general had lived until ten after.

He was watching them closely. Their present actions showed that neither one of them had known until now that the general was dead. The girl gave a start; her gaze traveled speculatively to her brother, then she closed her eyes fearfully.

The boy looked at the pearl-handled knife, his face paled with recognition; then his glance sought out his sister's face in turn. "I did it," he muttered doggedly all at once.

The girl tilted her head defiantly. "No, I was the one who did it."

Each thought the other guilty, each was trying to save the other. O'Rourke had stopped thinking they were cute by now, was scowling at them. They were only gumming up the works.

"I want to talk to the suspects alone for a minute, before we go any further," he told the general. "It's always done in my country. You can stay here in the room; I'll just take them over in the corner one at a time."

He tackled the girl first. "He didn't do it. The church bell struck one when he came out, and the general didn't die until one-ten. The watch on his wrist fixes that.

"I know you didn't either; I don't have to ask that."

"No, he was still alive when I escaped through the window. But if they try to shoot Ricardo for it, then I will say I did it."

"If I promise to do everything in my power to save your brother, will you agree to keep quiet from now on? It's going to be tough enough as it is."

She bowed her head.

"I place myself in your hands, *Señor,"* she murmured submissively.

. . . Then to the brother: “Your sister didn’t do it.”

“But it is a knife that used to belong to my father,” breathed the boy fearfully. “I recognize it, and I didn’t bring it here, so she must have.”

“She did go to the general last night, bringing the knife for protection; he took it from her and it stayed in there with him. Answer me one thing: was he dead yet when you went in there?”

“No, he was snoring through his mouth.”

“Well, she left before you did. I was the means of helping her to evade him, so I ought to know what I’m talking about. Now are you convinced? Will you quit balling things up? As for that spiked release you signed yourself in there, did you put his full name to it?”

“Yes.”

“He couldn’t sign his name, so we can’t use it as proof he was still alive when you left. On the contrary, it will count heavily against you; but maybe I can get hold of it and destroy it. Now for the present I can keep only one of you out of jail. So we’d better make it your sister.”

“Naturally,” agreed Pascal.

O’Rourke turned to the general. “They didn’t both do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because there’s only one knife.” Another of those buzzes of amazed agreement went up. There was a lot of head-wagging, animated gesturing. O’Rourke hit while the iron was hot. “So hang onto the man, and let the girl go back to her house. You can always get hold of her again if you change your mind.”

The general looked vaguely doubtful.

“A great general like you doesn’t have young girls taken out and shot. Napoleon never had women shot.” He didn’t like the dead pan he got on this. “You’ve heard of Napoleon, haven’t you?” he faltered.

“No. Who was *he?”* asked the general interestedly.

O’Rourke took a deep breath. This reminded him of kindergarten. He tried another means of approach. “Did you lose one brother or two, General?”

Escobar glanced at the bier as if to make sure. “One.”

Then how many people should you execute for killing him?”

“All the people I can lay hands on,” said the general hopefully.

“No. One murder, one execution. Two murders, two executions.” He told it off on his fingers to illustrate.

The general looked anything but convinced, but he finally gave in, overawed by O’Rourke’s appalling mathematics. “All right, throw him in jail and let her go. I’ll see how I feel after we shoot him. If I’m still not satisfied, I can have her taken out and shot after all.”

O’Rourke didn’t argue that point yet. He motioned to the girl to get out fast, before they changed their minds. She stopped a moment before him, whispered: “You’ll do what you can for Ricardo, *Señor?* I’ll burn a candle for you tonight.” He felt like saying “Better make it two; I’ll need them.” He gave her an encouraging wink instead. Escobar sent a couple of his men over with orders to stand guard outside her house and see that she didn’t try to get away.

The girl safely out of it, the remaining prisoner was hauled unceremoniously from the room on his way to jail. The dead general went next, and that cleared the decks for action.

Down here there could be no question of autopsies, photographs, print dusting, chemical analyses, or any of the rest of it. Burial had to be fairly fast because of the climate, too.

In other words, O’Rourke had to work from scratch; there wasn’t so much as a tape measure or high-powered glass in the whole town. It was, roughly, like working on an early

nineteenth-century murder case, with nothing more than your hands and eyes and brains.

"You knew, General, that the assessment on the city had already been turned in to your brother before he met his death?" he began, with a lot more assurance than he felt.

Escobar scowled blackly. This was evidently more of a sore point than the loss of his relative. "Of course. And now it's gone. That murdering *alcalde's* son stole it at the same time he took my poor brother's life. It was undoubtedly under those maguey leaves in the cart in which the father made his getaway."

"Excuse me, my General," faltered the subaltern nervously, "but we dumped out all the leaves, and there wasn't anything hidden in the cart."

The general scowled and appeared to be still unconvinced.

"Just who was present when it came in?" resumed O'Rourke.

"All of us."

III

O'Rourke was remembering that surreptitious football, accompanied by a rustling of leaves, that he had heard out on the balcony a moment after admitting the girl to his room.

It obviously hadn't been the general floundering after her in pursuit, as he had thought at the time, or he would have come all the way to O'Rourke's window himself. It hadn't been any third party leaving the room either, because she had just left it herself and there had been no one in there but the general.

That meant it must have been someone entering, by clambering up one of the balcony supports from below, using the thick vine-tendrils that twined around them for footrests. Not a very difficult feat, in any case.

A moment after he had entered, Ricardo had knocked on the door. The interrupted intruder, who hadn't counted on this, must have retreated to the darkened balcony once more, waited out there until he left, and then re-entered.

But this time the general had roused from his drunken torpor and had to be swiftly silenced with that knife the girl had left behind. With a sentry supposedly within hearing the intruder couldn't risk using any other means.

The point was, if his theoretical reconstruction was accurate, the murderer-to-be had spent a good five minutes on the balcony waiting for Ricardo to clear out of the room.

O'Rourke strolled out there to look it over. Practically the whole army had been in and out of the bedroom by this time, but as far as he knew no one had been on the balcony since the night before.

It was floored in red tile. A cast-iron railing loaded with vine leaves ran along one side of it, the whitewashed plaster wall of the hotel along the other side. A couple of lazy bottle-flies were droning about over the leaves. There must be caterpillars at work somewhere around too; there seemed to be traces.

He bent closer, peering at the leaves, handling them. He dropped down and went painstakingly over the tiled flooring, picking up something here and there. Not caterpillars; who ever heard of expectorating caterpillars?

He straightened up, strode back into the room, blurted out: "Who chews leaves in your army?"

Escobar looked insulted. "What do you think we are, cows?"

"Don't pass it off like that. There must be somebody who does. You men have been together throughout the entire campaign. You've had a chance to notice each other's little

traits and habits, day by day. You ought to be able to answer that."

The general scratched the middle of his forehead. Then the back of his head. Then the side. "Leaves? Leaves?" He groped. "I don't know about leaves. Sometimes I've seen Pablito, that's our quartermaster, stand before me waiting for orders with a blade of grass between his teeth."

Someone else in the room nodded, said: •'That's right. I was up in a tree with him once, observing the enemy's position, and he kept pulling off leaves and chewing them the whole time we were up there." O'Rourke opened his palm, showed them little tattered fragments, almost like confetti, he'd picked up on the balcony floor. They followed him outside; he pointed out the ripped ends on some of the leaves still on the vine, jagged tears such as no insect would have the strength to make.

They were all only in one small area, just to one side of the general's window embrasure.

Escobar couldn't see anything in it. "That's nothing," he said. "He must have been up here earlier, to apply for a little furlough. He went home last night, you know."

"Did he apply for his furlough out on the balcony?" O'Rourke asked.

"No, he couldn't have," admitted the general, kneading the back of his neck perplexedly. "I just remembered, we hadn't found out how to open those windows yet.

You have to pull up that long rod that goes into a socket in the floor. We all took turns trying to kick them open. Finally one of the waiters came up and showed us, but that was long after."

"What more do you want? Doesn't that show he came back later and climbed up the outside? Those tattered leaves are out on the balcony, not in here where he and the rest of you were earlier. Pablito's your man."

He saw he hadn’t convinced them. They weren’t used to taking trivial things like tattered leaves into account. Concrete things like who had been in a room last and whom a knife belonged to, were all their minds were used to grasping. He kept hammering away at them.

“Had the money been brought in before he left?”

“Yes. His horse was all saddled, but he came up a minute to take a look at it before starting.”

“And were the windows open by that time?”

“Yes, the *moso* had just finished showing us how they worked.”

“So he knew the money was already up here. And he knew he could get in through the balcony, even if there was a sentry outside the door. The rank and file didn’t know anything about this money coming in. And of your staff members who did, who else is away on leave today?”

“Only him,” admitted Escobar unwillingly. “You see, he came from around here originally. His home town’s Tlaxco, just across the mountain, so naturally he wanted to go back and look up old friends while we were campaigning this close by.”

“Yeah, sure,” said O’Rourke drily.

The general didn’t want to give in. “But he left long before it happened,” he argued. “The money was in here already by ten-thirty, and that’s when he started out. You said yourself my brother didn’t die until one-ten.”

That lousy wristwatch gag, which had made such a big splash in his favor in the beginning, was now an obstacle. “How do you know he didn’t hang around the outskirts of town for the next few hours, then come back again, probably on foot, when you were all asleep?”

Escobar mulled this over broodingly. Suddenly he came to a decision. “Well, there’s an easy enough way to find out for sure. It all depends on what time he showed up in Tlaxco. It’s an all-night ride. If he left here when he seemed to, at 10.30, he’d get there by eight or nine in the morning.

But if he didn’t leave until you say he did, past one, the earliest he could get there would be noon. I know that road well.”

He motioned forward one of the non-coms. “Espinosa, take another man with you, ride down to Tlaxco, and find out what time he reached there. Don’t take his word for it, ask others.”

O’Rourke said, “I’m going to be the other man he takes with him. I believe in getting my evidence at first hand.”

“Can you ride?” the general asked doubtfully. “It’s a ten-hour trip.”

“Sure I can ride, I used to be a mounted cop on Lenox Avenue. How far away is the place?”

“About fifty miles.”

“Then why should it take that long?”

“Because you can’t go in a straight line.” Escobar led him to the window. “See that baldheaded mountain there, standing straight up before you? El Pico Pelado we call it. The top is bare rock, no horse can get up over it. The trail has to go all the way around the base to get across to the other side. It more than doubles the riding distance.”

“I’m still going,” muttered O’Rourke doggedly. “I want your word, General, that you won’t do anything to that Pascal kid until I get back.”

“Why not?” The general shrugged amiably. “If Pablito killed my brother and stole the campaign funds, he’s the one gets shot. I’ll wait until I find out for sure.”

They saddled the late general’s own personal mount for O’Rourke, and he and this Espinosa started out at once.

The archaic Ford couldn’t be used because the Tlaxco road narrowed in places to a one-abreast defile, was impassable for anything on wheels.

It felt good to be on a horse again—at first anyway. The going was easy for a while—just a wide dirt road out of the

town—although the dust was tough and the sun was tougher.

Then it started to tilt little by little in front of them and narrow down, and from then on it was a steady upgrade. A small but rapid little stream suddenly turned in from nowhere and ran downward past them.

When they had progressed about a third of the distance up the looming height before them, they came upon its source, a slender but high-powered waterfall pouring perpendicularly down from some hidden spring high up near the top. A small amphitheater of large flat stones formed a natural pool at its base.

The mountain, which until now had been simply an inclined plane, thrust up vertically before them from this point on, abrupt as a cliff. The road, blocked, swerved aside and started that long loop around it the general had spoken of. It continued to climb, but in a spiral, like a trackless scenic railway—and just about as narrow.

They dismounted by the foam-lathered pool, watered their horses, filled their canteens, and smoked a cigarette apiece before going on. “No more water until Tlaxco now,” grunted Espinosa.

“Wonder where it comes from?” O’Rourke said, craning his neck. “There’s no snow on top of the peak to feed it.”

Espinosa shrugged.

“Quien sabe? From inside somewhere. They say the Aztecs had a mine drilled into this mountain. Then when the Spaniards came, they didn’t want them to find it, so they prayed to the mountain gods and—s*sht!* Water started to pour out of the mine bore, just like that. Foolishness I” he pronounced contemptuously.

“Don’t take much stock in local superstitions, eh?” O’Rourke suggested.

“Anything that isn’t in Marx’ *Das Kapital,* isn’t true,” was the somewhat startling answer he got on this.

They remounted and rode on. They had to go single file now, and they had to cut out the galloping. The mountainside was almost perpendicular on one side of them, and a steadily lengthening drop down into space was on the other.

They had left Zacamoras at ten that morning. It was well after dark before they finally made Tlaxco. The place was Zacamoras all over again,—same plaza, same arcades, same church. They asked directions and the house of Pablito's married sister was pointed out.

They knocked and an Indian woman came to the door, her hands all mealy from kneading tortillas.

"Pablito here?"

"My brother's been down at *the cantina* all day."

"We'd like to come in and look around."

She stepped readily aside. The bare-walled, dirt-floored rooms had nothing to hide and nothing to reveal.

"When did he get here?"

"At daybreak."

O'Rourke and his companion exchanged a long look. "You lose," Espinosa finally murmured under his breath.

"I never know when to give up," answered the American. "They're all his relatives in this house; they'd go to bat for him anyway. Where's his horse?" he asked the woman.

"Out in back."

He went out there to take a look at it, Espinosa at his heels.

"This the same one he rode out of Zacamoras?"

Espinosa peered at it in the dark. "Yes, I recognize it by the white star on its forehead."

O'Rourke bent down, felt its legs and examined its hoofs. "Doesn't seem in bad shape. How did he do it?"

"The answer apparently is that he left when he seemed to, and didn't have to force it any."

The American snapped one word. “Apparently.” He moved over to a line stretched between two poles, fingered the saddle, blanket, and other equipment hanging on it. They were biscuit-dry after being out in the hot sun all day. He carried his question back inside to the woman.

“His horse stumbled and fell to its knees with him, when he stopped to water it at that mountain pool on the way. His things were still a little damp, so I thought I’d better see they got dried out.”

Espinosa answered O’Rourke’s questioning look. “It could happen. I’ve often stayed in the saddle myself at that place and let my horse wade in. Come on; there’s nothing else this place can show us. Let’s go look him up.”

They found him, as she had said, in the *cantina* or local tavern; relating his campaign experiences to a circle of spellbound listeners and being very much of a hero. He didn’t show any fear at sight of Espinosa, just the right amount of cordial surprise. “What are *you* doing down here?”

“Report back with me to Escobar. The funds have disappeared and his brother was knifed to death. You’re wanted for questioning.”

Pablito looked hurt. “That’s a fine thing. So my own superior thinks I could do a thing like that.” He gave himself a couple of wallops on the chest. “After I’ve sweated through the whole campaign with him, that’s gratitude for you.” He eyed O’Rourke malevolently. “Where does this gringo come in?”

O’Rourke took over personally at this point, being a firm believer in having suspects answer the questions and not ask them. “I hear you got in at daylight. Anyone see you—outside of your own relatives, that is?”

“Ask anyone in town,” Pablito said sultrily.

They did. O’Rourke saw to it that they did. They combed the town, and all they got was affirmation. Even the *alcalde* was a witness in his behalf. “He had breakfast with me. He

stopped by my house to say hello, and I insisted that he sit down with me. And I've never breakfasted later than 6.30 in my life. If there's any question about it, I'll ride back there and testify in his behalf," he offered staunchly.—

They were all his fellow townspeople, O'Rourke knew. Still, would the whole town come to his defense as one man? He could fix one witness, or even two, but could he fix the whole town? The thing had him stopped.

IV

After spending the night at the *alcalde's* house, they started back the following morning. Pablito insisted on bringing one of his witnesses back. He picked a good one, too. The *alcalde.*

The defendant and his star witness rode in the lead, Espinosa and O'Rourke behind them. A short distance out of Tlaxco they passed under a row of trees growing close by the road. Pablito absent-mindedly snatched at a branch hanging low as he went by, pulled off a handful of leaves, began to nibble them.

O'Rourke's eyes narrowed and bored into the quartermaster's back, but he didn't say anything. The thing didn't have him stopped any more; just held up.

When they got to the pool at the foot of the cascade and stopped to water their horses, O'Rourke signaled surreptitiously to Espinosa to stay in his saddle. Then he watched closely to see what Pablito would do. He was the only one of the four to dismount.

"Horse slipped and ducked me headfirst into there yesterday," he explained unasked. "I'm not taking any more chances."

O’Rourke leaned over his horse’s head and scowled down at his own reflection in the quivering water. The guy was airtight on all sides.

It was late afternoon by the time they reached Zacamoras. “Well?” snapped the general to Espinosa, when they’d reported upstairs to his room.

“He got there at daylight. Everyone in the place says so, and the *alcalde* has made the trip back with us specially to testify to that effect. There was no sign of the money bags down there anywhere.” Escobar gave the American a disgusted look. “*Hnh!”* he snorted. Pablito just stood there with his arms folded, a complacent expression on his face, like a man who has been much abused but is willing to overlook it.

“Wait out there on the balcony a minute,” O’Rourke ordered him. He closed the windows behind him after he’d gone out.

“What did you have him do that for?” Escobar asked.

“I’ll show you. Just let him stay out there by himself a couple of minutes.” He waited a short while, then motioned the general.

“Take a squint out at him through the glass. You do it yourself. Don’t open the window; just peep out without letting him see you. What’s he doing?”

“Nothing.” Escobar turned away again blankly. “Just standing there, nibbling on a leaf.”

O’Rourke brought his hand down flat on the table before him, not violently but firmly. “Once more I tell you this is the guy that killed your brother, whatever time he rode into Tlaxco.”

“And I say no man can get from here to Tlaxco between 1:10 in the morning and 5:30. It’s humanly impossible,” retorted the general.

He wasn’t wasting any more time. “Attention, corporal. Pick four men for a firing squad, take the prisoner Pascal out, stand him against the wall of the prison courtyard, and

shoot him immediately. As for the hiding place of the money, we can find that out from the girl afterwards; there are ways and ways. I'm ashamed of myself for listening to this gringo and waiting so long. He should have been dead already by now."

O'Rourke said, "Listen to me, will you . . ."

"I've listened to you long enough. You got my order, corporal. Carry it out, and report back as soon as you have."

"Si, *mi general."* The corporal saluted, turned on his heel.

"Wait, will you?" O'Rourke groaned. "Don't be in such a hurry. I tell you you're letting this guy get away with murder." The corporal had reached the doorway already, was about to step through it. "Can *you* ride between here and Tlaxco in four and a half hours or better?" the general demanded.

There was no choice in the matter. He bad to talk fast, for the corporal was over the threshold by now. "Sure I can," O'Rourke said. "I'll show you I can. Only call him back, cancel that execution order."

A roar of laughter went up. The general made pinwheels at the side of his head to show he thought O'Rourke was crazy. He brought his fist crashing down on the table before him. *"Bueno!* You ride from here to Tlaxco, between one A.M. and dawn, and I will be convinced that Pablito did it. If not, we shoot the Pascal boy."

"That's a bargain." O'Rourke was in for it now; there wasn't much else he could say. If they'd watched his Adam's apple they would have seen it fluctuate above his collar.

"You want anyone to ride with you, American?"

"No. There's an old saying with us.

He travels fastest who travels alone.' Just send someone down ahead to time me, that's all."

"I'll go," volunteered Espinosa, sympathetically. "He'll never make it in a hundred years, but he's got nerve for even trying at all. I'll start now. Good luck, O'Rourke."

“I’m going to need it,” thought O’Rourke glumly. It was hopeless, a physical impossibility; he knew that already. The most it was getting him was a twenty-four-hour stay on the boy’s life. There was something phony about the way Pablito had accomplished it, but how was he to find out what it was in time? He’d been over the road for the first time in his life yesterday, and Pablito had been brought up around here, knew every inch of the ground by heart.

Escobar speared a warning forefinger at him. “And if you show up in Tlaxco any later than five-thirty in the morning—you know the answer.” He mimicked sighting a rifle. *“Boom!”*

“Boom is right,” thought O’Rourke.

He went back to his own room, rested up for the ordeal ahead, and reported back to the general a few minutes before one in the morning. He still ached all over from the two days’ strenuous riding he’d already put in. But the point was, he could get over aching, young Pascal couldn’t get over being shot.

A fresh horse was furnished him; they weren’t stingy about that. He didn’t even bother looking it over. He knew speed and endurance would play no part in this anyway; they couldn’t possibly. There were stretches of that defile where no horse could go any faster than a slow walk.

He packed a battery light with him. It seemed a forlorn hope to expect its feeble rays to reveal some possible bypass or short cut along the way, when he’d failed to detect a single one in the full light of the glaring sun.

They had all come out on the balcony to give him the starting gun, so to speak. They were enjoying themselves hugely at his expense, especially Pablito. O’Rourke thrust out his jaw, mounted.

“Not yet,” the general called down warningly. “You have five minutes yet. You leave at exactly one-ten as he did,

according to what you say.” He had obtained an everyday kitchen alarm clock from somewhere, was holding it up by the nipple of the bell, pointing to it.

“I give him those extra five minutes, I make him a present of them,” Pablito jeered.

O’Rourke countered with a suggestion of his own as to what Pablito could do with them.

An old Indian woman sidled up to him out of the surrounding darkness, furtively pressed something into his hand. It was the little jet cross on a gold chain he had seen Luisa Pascal Wearing. “The *señorita* heard. She sends you this for a *relicario.* She will pray for your success all night long.”

He took the talisman, and smiled.

“Tell her now I surely can’t go wrong,” he murmured, with more assurance than he felt.

“Start!” bellowed the general across the balcony rail. “Ten after one *en punto!”*

O’Rourke wheeled his horse and set out at a leisurely canter down the dark Tlaxco mountain road. The lights of the Plaza blinked out behind him.

He paced along even more slowly than he and Espinosa had yesterday morning. He bracketed all the possibilities there were, while his horse’s hoofbeats thudded a rhythmic accompaniment.

A short cut over the mountain, in the straightest possible line between the two places.

A short cut around the opposite side of it, to the right instead of to the left.

A short cut down along the floor of the ravine between the mountain and its neighbor, instead of along the sky-trail clinging halfway up its side.

None of them was any good at all. The first two were physical impossibilities; the third was not a short cut at all,

but a longer, far more roundabout way.

The offside stream showed up, murmuring plaintively in the night silence. “How did he do it?” he thought desperately. “I’ve got to get it soon. If I wait until I’m too far along, it’ll be too late to help.”

When he reached the waterfall he dismounted a minute, to water his horse and have a drink for himself. The animal overstepped the nearest of the flat slabs, stood with its forelegs in the pool. O’Rourke caught it, pulled it back over the brink.

“Come out of there, I don’t want to ride on a wet saddle the rest of the way like he did,” he muttered. But the girths and lower edge of the saddle were already soaked.

Heavy-hearted with a sense of impending failure, he remounted and started off up the precarious sky-trail.

He pulled his pocket light out, held it trained steadily against the mountain wall on his right as he rode along. But all it showed was inaccessible rock, with an occasional little stunted shrub growing out of a fissure where some soil had collected. If there’d been anything that offered a ghost of a foothold up, he would have seen it yesterday in the sunlight.

He let his horse falter to a dead stop, clicked the light off, reclamped it to his waist. It was going to be like this all the rest of the way, so there was no use going any further. He took out a cigarette and a sulphur-headed match, absent-mindedly stroked it along the lower part of his saddle.

It shouldn’t have flared, but it did. That had been wet less than five minutes ago; he remembered it now. He reached down, tested it with his fingers. Riding in the dry mountain night air had already dried it. And the horse’s coat as well.

He threw the cigarette away unused, straightened alertly in his saddle. Pablito’s equipment had been damp enough when he got in for his sister to notice it—and he’d been riding for hours. O’Rourke had only just come away from the pool and his saddle was already dry. Something didn’t check there.

Espinosa’s chance remark came back to him. “There’s a story the Aztecs used to have a mine drilled into that mountain.”

His eyes narrowed in the dark. He turned his horse about, gave it a decisive whack on the rump, went careening back the way he had just come. The pool—that was the only place along the whole route where there was the slightest variation in the looks of the surroundings. And it was the point where the detour began. Up to there, no mileage was wasted

And yet as he drew up, dismounted, and carefully played his light all over the place, he couldn’t see anything that would help. The rock wall here was sheerer than anywhere else, if possible. The waterfall fell with absolute plumb-line straightness.

V

O’Rourke kicked off his shoes, rolled his trousers above the knees, and stepped into the pool, playing his light down as he advanced. He could see the bottom without any trouble. It was solid rock, hollowed out and worn smooth by the water.

He kept on toward the waterfall until it spattered his shoulders, blew a fine curtain of spray down all around him. He shielded his eyes with one hand, forced his light beam through it, turning it glittering white. Another big solid slab of rock behind it.

He circled around it to the side, pressed up against the rock wall, and aimed his light at it from that angle. There was a big fissure there, a fault in that upright slab that stood directly under the waterfall.

He moved in close, nearly blinded by the water tattooing on his head. His idea was simply to explore the aperture with his hand, although it was obviously too narrow to admit even a man, much less a horse.

But at the first touch of his fingers he could detect a distinct vibration, as if the upright slab were so finely balanced that even the downbeating water was enough to jar it. He swung at it, and to his surprise the fissure widened alarmingly, almost effortlessly.

There was an opening there, under this thin, screen-like slab. And the slab, huge as it was in diameter, was resting on so small a segment of its circumference that it could be swiveled a considerable distance without any undue effort. Only, as it came out now, it dislocated the waterfall and caused a terrific counterspray up above to shoot out at right angles.

He got his shoulders in under it, taking a chance on being crushed to death by the slab suddenly swinging back. He shot the light ahead of him. One glance was enough to show him that here was a definite cave. And a second glance revealed the distinct imprint of a horse’s hoof on the moist, clayey floor.

If Pablito’s horse had gone in there, his could too.

He drew back, climbed out, and led the horse into the pool after him. It balked as soon as he got it over close enough to feel the impact of the falling water. He had to get behind and crowd it forward.

To make matters worse, the downbeat of the water had once more battened back the delicately poised slab into place. He had to hold the rebellious horse by foreshortened bridle with one hand, claw the teetering obstruction out at the end of its arc once more with the other.

There was a short swift struggle. Either Pablito had to go through this too, or else his horse was more accustomed to squirming in through this watery trap. The animal finally scented dryness and security ahead, thrust his head and

neck in, and the rest was easy. It was a fairly tight squeeze, but the horse made it; and O'Rourke himself had no trouble at all.

Within a matter of moments the beat of the water outside had tilted the jittery touchstone back into place. The din of the waterfall quieted to a low, steady drone. O'Rourke and horse both shook themselves free of the excess drops of water clinging all over them.

He could understand now why Pablito had remained damp all the way to his sister's house; he hadn't ridden in the open from here on.

He replaced his shoes, which he had slung over his saddle joined together by their laces, and looked around.

He could tell at a glance that the place was not a natural formation. It had been hewn by hand out of the living rock hundreds of years before. He trained his torch upward, and saw immediately that there could be no question of remounting. The rock roof was too low. He'd have to go first and lead the horse after him, as Pablito must have done.

As a matter of fact, if it hadn't been for those prints he had detected, which were proof positive that Pablito had preceded him through here and lived to come out somewhere on the Tlaxco side of the mountain, he wouldn't have liked the looks of the undertaking any too much. Almost immediately beyond the mouth the passage narrowed down uncomfortably on all four sides. The bore slanted downward, into the very bowels of the mountain, at a grade that was none too easy to maintain footing on. He was subject to the constant risk of having his horse catapulted down on top of him; only the width of its hips, zig-zagging from side to side, served as a sort of brake on it.

The roof and sides were supported every few feet by age-blackened cross timbers, but the fissures that showed

above and around them didn’t inspire confidence. And even as close as he still was to the entrance, the air was none too good; was already close and stiffling.

But Pablito had come out alive.

He played his light ahead down the inclined chute as he went. His horse was nervous and unhappy, with neck held stiffly foreshortened the way it was obliged ‘ to, and he didn’t blame it. The lack of ventilation was growing more noticeable all the time, and as the dampness around the entrance disappeared, they began to raise an age-old fine dust that tickled the nostrils and throat irritatingly. Sweat started out on his face and body from the closeness.

The bore reached a level plane at last, but there were various elbows and shifts of direction to be met with in it, and several times it opened up into wider cubicles, each one containing a black shaft. These were evidently the ancient diggings themselves. Once his horse shied violently, and he picked up a skeleton in the far corner with his light. One of the old Indian mine workers, or some more recent intruder like himself, trapped down here and asphyxiated? It didn’t put him in a happier frame of mind. Suddenly, straight ahead, what he had been subconsciously dreading all along presented itself to view. The tunnel forked in two, with both branches dead alike, nothing to tell one from the other. This was no time, the way his lungs were clamoring for air, to take the wrong one. By the time he found out and got back to the fork, it might be too late.

He stopped dead, chewed his lips, rolled his torch all about the double entrance. The hoofprints of Pablito’s horse might have been able to tell him, but he hadn’t been able to pick up any lately; the flooring was bare rock this far in.

He couldn’t stand there all night trying to make up his mind either; he was getting dizzy from lack of oxygen.

Suddenly he happened to glance up directly overhead. There was a dab of white chalk over the entrance on the right. He grinned as he understood. There must have been a first time for Pablito to work his way through here too.

Only he had probably come through from the Tlaxco side that first time. He hadn't taken any chances; he'd marked the one he'd just emerged from, so he'd know it when he started back. And the mark had stayed there ever since.

"Thanks, pal," O'Rourke muttered, and staggered uncertainly into the entrance to the right.

Confirmation came minutes later; and by that time he was already seeing black specks dancing in front of his eyes from the exertion of the upgrade and the lack of air.

Confirmation was another of those vestibules or loading platforms hollowed out around the passage; and in this one, sitting snugly over in the corner, were the twin money bags that had disappeared from the murdered general's hotel room two nights before.

"Got you now!" he muttered. "If this, place doesn't get me first."

He slung the money bags around his saddle horn, nearly fell over beneath their weight, and shuffled on down the interminable shaft, one hand out against its sides now to keep himself erect. The last few minutes he was swaying from side to side like a drunk, while his horse's breathing sounded asthmatically behind him.

His tongue was hanging out of his mouth by this time and his eyes were protruding from their sockets. Abruptly his light flattened out against what seemed to be a solid barrier of rock face to face with him, as if the shaft had come to a dead end.

He toppled down on all fours before it and started to shove with his shoulders and back. It wouldn't move; either

he was too weak to be able to throw any strength or it was as solid as it looked.

The chalk mark back there may have misled him. Pablito might have put it up not to show the way out, but to show which passage the money was secreted in; and the actual way out might be through the other one.

If that was the case, he was finished now; he'd never be able to get back to the fork, much less retrace his steps along the second branch. He did what he'd heard of mariners doing to detect wind direction; wet his finger and held it up.

A slight coolness hit it on the side toward the rock barrier staring him in the face. A crack through which air was seeping didn't mean he could get out; it might only mean a slower death from thirst and hunger in a day or two.

He jockeyed his horse forward, brought its shoulder up against the barrier, hit it a couple of whacks with his open hand. The horse, trying to shy away from him, exerted more pressure than he had been able to. A lot of dust and small stones rained down around them, as if something had opened momentarily and closed again.

He tried a second time. Suddenly the whole barrier went out at a sixty-degree angle, stayed that way. This time a regular curtain of dirt and gravel streamed down. When it had thinned out again he clambered up over the thing and found himself out in the open. It was harder to get the horse up but he finally managed, after it had skidded back inside two or three times.

He breathed deeply before he even looked around. There was no waterfall here to screen the exit; but a tangled thicket, almost of jungle luxuriance, served the same purpose.

He saw what had happened. The thin slab of solid rock he'd just dislodged was meant to be no more difficult to tilt than its mate at the other end; but since Pablito had last come through and replaced it, one of those minor landslides

of loose earth and stones had come down and all but cemented it in.

There was no sign of the road, so he guessed that he'd come out somewhere beyond Tlaxco. To reach it he'd have to go back a short distance. But there were still stars over him, the sky was only just beginning to pale in the East, and he'd made it; that was all that mattered.

VI

Espinosa was sleeping in the same room in the *alcalde's* house that the two of them had shared the night before when O'Rourke strode in, shook him vigorously awake. "Clock me!" he shouted with a defiant grin. "I just got in."

Espinosa stared unbelievingly at the clock set out in readiness across the room, which he hadn't expected to use for hours yet. "Five-thirty in the morning! H-how did you do it?"

"The same way he did. Get up; we're starting back."

"What're you made of, iron? You just got in!"

"I know, but I'm not taking any chances, Pablito may try to talk the general into executing young Pascal without waiting for us to get back, and if I'm any judge, the general executes awfully easily."

. . . The afternoon sun was already on the downgrade when they rode back into Zacamoras. The reception committee was noticeably missing from the general's balcony as they dismounted under it, but they didn't think anything of that.

O'Rourke pushed into the room upstairs ahead of his companion. There was no one there; neither the general, nor Pablito, nor any of the usual retinue. A foot soldier

answered his alarmed question when they'd gone chasing below again.

"He's over at the prison supervising an execution."

"That double-crossing Pablito talked him into this," bellowed O'Rourke. "And not a telephone line in the town! If they've shot that kid, after all I went through—" Probably no one had ever run through the hot, lazy streets that fast since the town was founded. Espinosa was blocks behind by the time the sprinting O'Rourke reached the barred main entrance to the low, adobe prison building. A woman in black was huddled there on her knees; pressed despairingly up against it. She turned a stricken face toward him.

It was Luisa Pascal. "Listen—the roll of the drums has begun already—"

O'Rourke battered frantically at the wooden doors with his gun butt. A frightened, cinnamon-colored sentry peered out at him. "No admission, by the general's order. There is an exe—"

O'Rourke corkscrewed his .38 around into the sentry's abdomen like an awl, thrust him back out of the way. The rolling of the drums rose to a crescendo. Through them pierced a sharp-voiced command like the crack of a whip". "Ready!"

He hurtled down the broad corridor that led through to the courtyard at the back. The second command had already sounded before he got to it. "Take aim!"

O'Rourke burst out into the open, yelled at the top of his lungs "Down, Pascal—*down flat!"* It was the only way to save him. The blindfolded figure standing there alone against the far wall flung himself face forward to the ground, lay there prone.

O'Rourke leveled his gun at the leg of the commanding officer standing there to one side of the squad, pulled the trigger.

"Fi—!" The man crumpled forward. A volley of musketry rang out, thudded harmlessly into the empty adobe wall.

O’Rourke strode over to where Escobar stood, with Pablito and a select few grouped around him, taking it in. “You gave me your word,” he flared hotly. “This is your man, standing right at your elbow. He rode through an old Indian tunnel under the mountain. I found the money-bags there to prove it. Ask Espinosa what time I—”

Escobar turned accusingly. But Pablito was no longer beside him; had streaked across the courtyard and was just about to gain the entrance.

“Gimme that!” the general snarled, and pulled O’Rourke’s still smoking gun out of his hand. He dropped the fleeing quartermaster in the exact center of the courtyard entrance.

“He talked me into it,” Escobar said indignantly. “He kept saying you’d never make it, so there didn’t seem to be any harm in going ahead.” He darted a resentful after-glance at the huddled figure, hitched the gun up once more. “Is he dead yet?”

“He’s stone dead, my General,” one of the men reported admiringly.

“Give these two a safe conduct to the opposition’s outposts,” suggested O’Rourke. The girl had come in, was hovering anxiously over her brother.

“Sure, why not?” said the general. He felt in good humor again, as long as he had shot someone after all. Then as he laboriously scratched an X at the bottom of the safe conduct, O’Rourke couldn’t resist saying, “Remind me sometime to teach you how to sign your name.”

The girl had come timidly over to him. “How can I ever thank you, *Señor?*” she faltered, clasping his hand between both of hers.

“I don’t want thanks,” remonstrated O’Rourke, wrinkling his forehead at her. “You don’t thank a duck for swimming or a bird for flying, do you? I just don’t know any different, that’s all. That’s my job; that’s why they call me flatfoot.”

He paused, and for the first time in his life felt a shy embarrassment, mixed with certain other emotions which he did not venture to define. He reached into a pocket and drew forth a little jet cross on a gold chain.

"Yours," he said. "It helped, you know." He saw only Luisa's smile; felt only her soft hand closing on his own, folding it over the amulet. "Please," she said, "please you keep it for me—"*Señor Flatfoot*."

DEATH IN DUPLICATE

Bailey and his team-mate, Hastings, both came to a stop, looking down. Murder lay sprawled on the floor between the twin beds. Ben Allen was in an expensive lounging robe, over silk pajamas, the upper parts of both batiked with his own blood. The death-weapon protruded from his chest: the cylindrical wooden handle of an ordinary ten-cent ice pick, driven home through the heart with a terrific overhand impetus, judging by the depth to which it had penetrated.

"Sure, that's Our Friend, all right," Bailey remarked grimly. "He brings one of them with him each time—probably swipes them off some ice truck when the driver isn't looking. All this is part of his technique; wealthy suburban villa, terrace window he entered but left open. We'll probably find that same waffle-pattern sneaker-print down below somewhere, if the ground is soft enough."

He went over to the circular wall-safe lid that stood out into the room like a porthole on the wall opposite. "Come here and I'll show you a funny thing," he said to Hastings. "Look." He was pointing to the wall on one side of the safe. The figures were so small and lightly-traced they were hardly visible until you got up close to them. "4'9-6'3," in a perpendicular column, in red pencil.

"Calmly jotted down the wall-safe combination. Probably forced it out of the victim at gun-point and scribbled it down so he wouldn't forget it, then cold-bloodedly took his ice

pick and finished him off. That way there's no one left to furnish us with his description afterwards. *Thais* why we've never been able to get him."

He drifted around the room, head inclined. He stooped suddenly, picked up a burnt match from a round, scorched spot in the nap of the rug, about the size of a half dollar. "Get this. This is a characteristic trademark of his. Never blows out his matches, lets them fall to the floor still lit and flicker out wherever they land."

He looked around some more, finally picked up a cigarette butt, showed it to the other. "Notice the flat chisel-shaped end on it? He pinches them out between his fingers. He's as good as a whole *modus operandi* file, all by himself. Full of peculiar 'professional' quirks; you can spot them on any job he's been on."

"What about prints?" asked Hastings.

"We've got them by the bushel off these various jobs, and they all check with each other. But the trouble is they don't check with anything on file. They can't be tied up, they seem to be dummies. The closest they came to matching any filed prints were with those of a murderer held at one time by Scotland Yard. Even then, they weren't absolutely identical. Only, they cabled us the guy had been hung in 1913."

"We've sure got a book on him." Hastings told off the various traits on his fingers. "Always throws down matches still lit and chars the rug. Always pinches out the butts he smokes between his fingers. Always jots down the numbers of the safe combination on the wall—"

"Not always on the numbers," said Bailey, "but he did it this time."

"O.K. But he always wears sneakers with a waffle-pattern on their soles. Always picks expensive homes, where the women are liable to have plenty of jewelry. Always comes in and goes out by the window. Always drives an ice pick into their hearts." Hastings shook his head disgustedly. "And

with all that, we're still not able to nail him! I don't know what more we need."

"Plenty," said Bailey grimly. "We need an idea what he looks like, no matter how vague it is. Up to now, only the dead have seen him. He's a complete blank. You'd think he was a ghost!"

"It took more than a ghost to punch that ice pick home," commented his partner.

They had returned to the vicinity of the twin beds again. One had not been occupied, the other had. A cup that had contained some pale-brown liquid, but was now empty, stood on the nightstand between the two. "Where's the wife?" Bailey asked the cop at the door.

"At the hospital. We found her still asleep in the room when we got here. She must of slept straight through the night, with him dead on the floor."

Bailey frowned. "Some sound sleeper," he grunted. "Move number one is to have the lab take a crack at that cup standing there. If she was still 'asleep' when you got here, then who was it first found him?"

"Their driver."

"Well, here we go again, boys," Bailey said gloomily.

A natty-looking chauffeur was ushered in.

"Let's have it, Mac."

"I sleep in quarters over the garage. When I came over to the house at my usual time to get my orders for the day, Mr. Allen wasn't downstairs yet. I thought that was strange, because he always starts for town at that hour. I noticed Mrs. Allen had dropped her gold compact at the foot of the stairs, so I picked it up. I called up a couple of times, and after getting no answer, I went upstairs myself to find out what was the matter. When they still didn't answer my knock at their door, I looked in. Mrs. Allen was lying in a deep sleep in one of the beds, Mr. Allen was dead on the floor. I notified the police."

Bailey just asked him three questions. “Where were they last night?”

“Spearhead Inn, that place up the river.”

He turned to Hastings. “You take that. They may have been spotted from there.” Then he turned to the driver again. “Let’s see that compact.”

The chauffeur took it out of his pocket. It was gold, outlined in diamonds. Bailey flicked it open, studied it, snapped it shut again.

“What’s Mrs. Allen’s given name?”

“Arline.”

“What coloring is she?”

“Blonde, fair-skinned.”

“I’ll see that Mrs. Allen gets this back.” He pocketed it, thumbed the door.

Hastings looked surprised, as he saw the chauffeur go. “Did you get anything out of talking to him?”

“More than I put into it.” Bailey touched the pocket where he was carrying the gold-and-diamond compact.

The laboratory report on the contents of the cup that Bailey had found beside Mrs. Allen’s bed was waiting for him when he went back to Headquarters. It had held coffee, heavily dosed with a powerful sedative. Hastings came back with his own findings right after and immediately turned them over to Bailey.

“I found Mosconi, the manager at Spearhead Inn, very cooperative. He seems to be a decent sort, as those birds go. With his help, I got a little something. There were two men by themselves at a table in his place last night, same time the Allens were. Point one: he’d never seen them before, they were first-timers. Point two: no women with them, so they weren’t there for a good time. Outside of those two facts, they weren’t suspicious, minded their own business. I learned from the doorman they took a taxi back

to town. I've located the driver, and found out he took them to a flat at 212 Wrigley Terrace, in the Heights section. I have their descriptions, and two men on their tails. They're ready for pulling whenever you want them."

"Any minute now," said Bailey. "How'd you make out on Mrs. Allen's sound sleep?"

"Swell. I think it's finally going to get us the one thing we've needed so badly in all these ice-pick murders: someone who actually got a look at the Iceman in person."

"You mean Mrs. Allen was putting on an act, she wasn't really as sound asleep as she seemed?"

"Just the other way around, she was in a sounder sleep than she realized. Her husband gave her a sleeping powder."

"Then how could she have seen this Iceman?"

"Who said she was the one that saw him? This says there was another woman in the house at the time, right downstairs. And unless I'm very much mistaken *she* did." He was holding the gold-and-diamond compact. "Mrs. Allen's name is Arline and this is engraved *B to J*. Mrs. Allen is a blonde, fair-skinned, and this holds rachel powder, used by brunettes. Outside of all that, why should a husband give his wife sleeping powders anyway?"

"Sounds kind of low to me," grimaced Hastings.

"It may have been an emergency appointment. In any case, the fact remains that she was down there talking to him, or drinking with him, when he heard a noise upstairs and went up to see what it was. He never came down again."

"And you think she saw the Iceman, got a look at him without his knowing it?"

"She saw something that played hell with her formal goodbyes. Listen, when a woman leaves a house in such a hurry that she drops a gold-and-diamond compact worth anywhere up to a thousand dollars and never even misses it, or if she does, is too scared even to go back and pick it

up, there can be only one reason. She's seen or heard a murder committed, but can't afford to call for help or let herself be found there, for the sake of her reputation."

"Who is she?"

"I don't know, only that her first name begins with a J. But Martier's jewelry store probably does, and is going to tell me. It was bought there, it has the firm's hallmark engraved on it, and nine chances to one they delivered it to her for him. Thank God for women that powder their noses!"

She was going to be indignant about it, even after she'd seen the badge.

She was the brunette type, and the night she'd spent hadn't improved her looks any. She had horseshoes under her eyes from worry.

"Who sent you here? I don't know what you mean by coming here like this! What have I to do with the Homicide Squad?"

"An awful lot, from now on," Bailey told her drily.

"I demand that you get out of here!"

"Now listen, Miss Jane Davis, save your production numbers for your backers. I'm here on business, not to study rhetoric. Either you talk to me here, or you're coming down and talk to me at Headquarters, with a brigade of newspapermen sniffing around outside the door."

He hadn't known a face could get that white.

"Here, eh?" He closed the door after him. "Now, you were in Ben Allen's living-room about four this morn—"

"I don't know any Ben Allen," she whimpered.

"Your nose is shiny, better use this." He opened the compact and held it out to her. She couldn't get any whiter, so she just got limper. "So what's the use denying it? He didn't send these tokens around to perfect strangers—"

“Will you let me get a handkerchief, please? It’s just inside.” Her eyes were perfectly dry.

She went through an open doorway into an adjoining room. He tensed, buckled his knees a little, as though preparing to spring. She sobbed once, somewhere out of sight.

Suddenly he gave the spring, skidded through the doorway like a shot, flung himself across the room. The window hadn’t made any noise going up, or else it had been open all the while. She had one leg dangling outside the sill already, the other bent under her across the top of it, and one arm was curved around the raised sash over her head, supporting her in transit. She lived on the eighteenth floor.

He got her around the waist and dragged her back into the room so roughly the outer edge of the sill kicked off one of her boudoir mules and sent it hurtling down where she’d wanted to go herself.

He slammed the window down. She didn’t act up, go into any of the usual hysterics, just let him lead her passively back into the first room, holding her up by the waist. She was shuddering a little, that was all.

“I can’t go through it, I can’t face it. You don’t know what it means to a woman—to have the whole town talking about her, to have her picture splashed across every paper—”

“All right,” he said soothingly, “I’ll make a deal with you. Suppose we see to it that your name doesn’t enter into it, that the papers don’t find out a thing—”

She looked at him with dazed hopefulness.

“In return for that,” he went on, “you’ve got to come clean with us, do what you can to help us. Look, Miss

Davis. I’m Homicide Squad, see? I’m not interested in your personal life. My chief purpose is to get this man. As you’ve probably heard or read, he’s already murdered five other people, besides Allen, in a period of seventeen months. I’m not going to let anything stand in the way of putting the crusher on him. You can play it my way—tell us

everything you can to help us—and in return we'll shield you from notoriety to the best of our ability. Or you can play it your way—clam up about it. In which case, I'll take you downtown with me, you'll be grilled until we get it out of you anyway, and all the ink-devils will know who it is we're grilling and why."

"And you really will do all you can to keep my name out of it?"

"You'll be Miss X, the unknown witness. That is, if you really have anything helpful to tell us."

She took a deep breath before she made the plunge. "I—I was, I was there in Ben's house when it happened. . . . Oh, we were crazy, the two of us, to do such a thing—we must have been! It—it wasn't as bad as it may sound, but it was bad enough. We were sitting down there, with the lights low, having a couple of glasses of champagne, by way of farewell. You see, he—they were going South for the next two months, and he was so tied up he told me he wouldn't have a chance to say goodbye. He phoned me this from the Spearhead Inn, earlier that night. Well, I was mad about him, and I knew the servants were all away, except the chauffeur—and I said, 'I'm coming up to say goodbye' and he took me up on it; he was that kind, impulsive, liked anything risky, whether it was horses or a love affair. He bet me a thousand dollars I wouldn't have the nerve. Said if I wanted it, I'd have to come up and get it. And he gave her something to make her sleep, and let me in."

"All right, you were there," Bailey said a little impatiently, "I'm not particularly interested in that part of it. Tell me what you know about the murder angle."

"We were sitting there in the half light downstairs, without a sound in the whole house around us, whispering low—when suddenly we heard a single muffled step on the ceiling right over our heads. Not even a step, a little squeak, where there was a flaw in the flooring maybe.

“I said, ‘My God, your wife!’ He whispered, ‘It can’t be, she’s dead to the world. Wait a minute, I’ll sneak up and take a peek in.’ He tiptoed upstairs, and that was the last time I ever saw him alive. Well, I sat there waiting, and in a couple of minutes I heard a thud, as though somebody had fallen. I didn’t dream it was Ben himself—I thought he, was in some kind of a jam over her, found out he’d given her too much and she wasn’t breathing any more or something like that, and in trying to rouse her, she’d fallen off the bed.

“I tiptoed up myself, to see if I could help him. The light from the keyhole of their room made a little ghost-keyhole on the wall opposite. And everything was so *quiet* in there, I didn’t like it. If she was awake, I would have heard her talking to him. If she wasn’t, why didn’t he come back to me? It made me uneasy. Did you ever have a hunch something was wrong? Finally I bent down and did a thing I’d never done before. I put my eye against that keyhole and peeped through.”

Bailey edged forward alertly at this point; you could almost see his ears standing up, like a retriever’s.

“I saw Ben’s leg sticking out between the two beds, on the floor. I had presence of mind enough not to scream, luckily. Too stunned, I guess. I could see her—part of her, under the covers in one of the beds—and she seemed all right. And then suddenly a man, a stranger, someone who didn’t belong in there, got in front of the keyhole and stood there for a minute, with his back to me, lighting a cigarette. I was too paralyzed to move. He passed out of sight and the keyhole showed blank. I just crouched there petrified, afraid even the act of getting to my feet again would give me away. Then he came back in view again, just for a minute, and this time he was turned *toward* the keyhole.”

Bailey slapped his knee with a sound like a firecracker. “Then you saw his face!”

“No, I didn’t. He had a dark-blue silk handkerchief tied around it, from his nose down. All I could see was his eyes

and brows and forehead."

"Wait a minute, if he was smoking a cigarette, how could he have a handkerchief swathed around his face?"

"He was smoking *through* it. He'd cut a little round hole in it, where his mouth was, no bigger than a dime."

"Damn!" exhaled Bailey softly. "What else?"

"That's all. He moved on and I didn't see him any more. He must have been ready to go by that time. I heard a tiny little squeak from one of the window hinges in another minute or two that told me when he'd left. A long time afterwards, far off some place, I heard a car start up and drive away. I lost my head completely. All I knew was that if anyone came and found me there, I'd be finished for the rest of my life. I got out, and I don't remember how I got back to town, but I got back somehow."

"Well," said Bailey glumly, "I suppose half a loaf's better than no bread at all. All you really got of him, according to what you say, was a strip of skin three or four inches wide across the upper part of his face, taking in the eyes, brows, and forehead. Would you know those eyes, brows, and forehead if you saw them again?"

"Yes. But only if I saw them by themselves, like the first time, with a handkerchief under them cutting off the rest of the face."

He nodded. "We'll try to arrange it that way."

Hastings was waiting for him at Headquarters when he got back. "How'd the compact pay off?"

"In a pair of eyes, eyebrows, and a forehead. I'm ready to reel in our two suspects from the Spearhead Inn now."

He went out and took charge of pulling them in himself. He and the two men Hastings had left covering 212 Wrigley Terrace joined forces, went up, and crashed in without any warning. It was just an ordinary furnished flat. The two

were in bed, and too surprised to offer any resistance. Their names, they said frightenedly, were Cowan and Eckman.

"All right, get your things on and get over there by the door!" he ordered harshly. "You're coming out of here with us."

An exhaustive search of the place failed to reveal anything incriminating, not so much as a pair of sneakers with waffle-pattern soles, much less any of the missing jewelry or implements for resetting it. He had hardly expected, however, to find a complete layout around here, for it had been too easy to trace them back here from the Inn in the first place. As for alibi, they had none of any consequence to offer; they claimed they had both retired immediately after returning from the Inn. They had only one another's corroboration, which didn't give it much weight as far as Bailey was concerned. There certainly would have been ample time for either one, or both, to leave the place again and ride out to the Allen house in time for the murder, since they had left the Inn a considerable time before the Allens.

"If you went right to bed, what're you still doing in bed now?" he shot at them, digging down inside a lamp-base with his penknife.

"We're not used to that night-life stuff," one of them faltered. "We got up at our reg'lar hour, but we were all in, so we knocked off this afternoon and went back to bed again."

"You admit you were at the Inn, though?" he said, on the way back to Headquarters.

"Yes, but that's no crime. Two hard-working fellows are allowed to step out for a good time once in a blue moon, aren't they?"

"Good time? I've got witnesses to prove you didn't show any signs of having a good time. You were there for some other purpose."

“We can’t help it if we look solemn, can we? We got that way in our line of work, and we can’t shed it even on our night off.”

“What line of work are you in?”

“The undertaking business.”

Bailey took the two suspects back to the Allen house with him in one car, Hastings followed in another, one with drawn curtains, bringing the heavily veiled key-witness—or rather keyhole-witness—on whom they were pinning all their hopes. They were held in separate rooms under a police guard, while the two dicks went up ahead to the murder chamber to make their preparations for this new kind of line-up.

“Take a pencil and draw two guidelines on the wall to limit the keyhole’s range of perspective,” Bailey instructed Hastings. “So we’ll know just where to stand them, for her to get them in focus. I’ll give you your soundings from the other side.”

Hastings held a pencil to the wall, started to move it slowly along without tracing any mark. When it had traveled as far over as Bailey could follow it with his eye through the keyhole, he called through and Hastings stroked off an up-and-down boundary line. They repeated the process in the other direction and that gave them the keyhole’s field of vision.

Bailey sent out for a large dark handkerchief, wide enough to tie around a man’s face. When it had been obtained, the suspects were brought up and taken into the room, the door was closed, and without their knowledge, the witness was stationed on the other side of it, on a low stool.

Bailey went in to handle the suspects, Hastings stayed out there with her. They tried out Eckman, the shorter of the two, first. Bailey prepared the handkerchief, stepped up behind him, tied it around his face at cheekbone-level, then clapped his hat back on, making sure his hair was covered

but his eyes weren't overshadowed. Then he led him over between the two faint guide-lines on the wall.

"Just stand there like that—nothing's going to happen to you. Look down toward the baseboard of the wall." That was to get the inclination of his neck into play, if it was any help to her. She had seen the first man lighting a cigarette while his back was turned.

Bailey stepped back a moment, waited. "Now turn around, face the other way. Don't look at me, look straight ahead."

He waited some more. Finally there was a curt rap on the door. He went over, opened it narrowly, and conferred with Hastings through it.

"No. His eyes are too squinty, too many crow's-feet at their corners. Another thing, the hairline on his neck is different, she says. The other one's was tapered, ending in a W. This one is a straight razor-line across. And finally, he's a little too tall. The keyhole cut him off at the eyebrows, no forehead at all."

Bailey went back, fastened the handkerchief on the other one, Cowan, who was obviously nervous and whose hands were shaking at the strangeness of the performance. It took longer this time. Finally, when the wait had become almost unbearable, Hastings' signal came on the door and Bailey went over to get the verdict.

"Not positive this time. About sixty-forty, negative. She thinks the first brows were a little bushier and closer together."

"All right, keep her on tap out there till she's sure one way or the other."

A cop interrupted at this point, said in a low voice to Bailey: "There's a guy named Mosconi downstairs wants to see you—or Hastings, either one of you."

"That's the roadhouse proprietor, isn't it? Not now, we're busy. Tell him to go down to Headquarters and wait for us there."

“He says he just come from there, they told him to look you fellows up out here with what he has to tell you. He says it’s important.”

“Okay, shoot him along. But bring him in through that other door so he don’t get a look at Miss X.”

Mosconi didn’t look like a night club proprietor. In fact, it was hard to say what he did look like. A wealthy yachtsman out of flannels, maybe. He came in blowing his nose apologetically. “What brings me here is this, thoud I mide be of a little helb to you. After I had that talk with your partner today, something else come to me. There was another customer of mine, besides these two you got here, who was there last night sabe tibe the Allens were. He used to be a big-shot gambler down in Miami, and there’s no telling—”

“Kind of putting yourself out to be helpful to us, aren’t you?” interrupted Bailey drily.

“I want to preserve my resort’s good name,” protested Mosconi virtuously. “If the Allens were spotted from there, then all the more reason—” He sneezed explosively just then, hastily stepped farther over to get out of the draft of the terrace windows, raised his handkerchief to his face, covering himself nearly up to the eyes.

The door suddenly opened. Hastings was standing there, holding the shuddering form of Jane Davis against him with one arm around her waist. She stretched a trembling hand out, pointed it toward Mosconi. “*Him*!” she gasped. “He’s the one! Now I *am* sure! The same man I saw in here last night! When he blew his nose I—”

Mosconi seemed the calmest person in the room, in the stunned, throbbing silence that followed. He finished putting his handkerchief away, looked from the girl to Bailey. He was the first one to speak. “What is she talking about?” he asked with detached curiosity. “What does she mean?”

Bailey motioned unnoticeably to the uniformed cop who was in the room with them, and the latter shifted over before the terrace windows and drew his gun. Hastings likewise drew his, over by the door, thrusting the girl out of sight behind him. The two earlier suspects retreated into a corner, looking on blankly without knowing what it was all about. Bailey moved up until he was eye-to-eye with Mosconi. He alone hadn't drawn a gun. "She saw the upper part of the face of the man who murdered Ben Allen in this very room last night, and she has just positively identified you as that man!"

Mosconi paled, as anyone would have. But he spoke with forced calmness, his eyes never wavered on the detective's face. "You don't mean you're going to do anything on the strength of such a—?"

"Everything. You're coming down to Headquarters, and I'm booking you on suspicion of murder."

Mosconi didn't make any attempt to resist, or even draw back, as Bailey snapped a handcuff on him. All he said, with a peculiar faraway look, was: "You'll find, Detective Bailey, that you're making the biggest mistake of your career in doing this. And I'm afraid it'll be the last one you'll ever make, too."

"That's a risk I'll have to take," Bailey answered as he led him out with him.

"You don't look particularly worried." The name of Mosconi's mouthpiece was Livermore, and he was good. Not in the old-fashioned sense of the word, maybe, but in the sense of efficiency, cleverness.

"I'm not," snapped the prisoner. "Why should I be?"

"Well, after all—" Livermore gestured baffledly. "You're going to trial in another week, and it's not going to be a walk-away—even for me."

“Who said I was going to trial? Maybe you think I sent for you to talk over defense preparations! Well, if you’ve made any, you can throw them out the window. I told you from the beginning not to do a thing, just sit back and wait until I sent for you. And now I have.”

“But listen, Mosconi, I can’t go in there empty-handed at the last moment, start from scratch, and perform miracles —”

“You’re not going in there at all. Listen, I’ve been expecting this for months, for years, and I’ve been ready for it. I didn’t know it was coming up the exact day it did, maybe, but that doesn’t matter, I was ready for it whenever it did come up. I made my preparations way ahead. There’s not going to be any trial, you don’t have to worry your head about defending me. All you do is look up a man named Larry Trippler. I’ll tell you where you can reach him before you leave here today.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me anything more than that about it?” Mosconi smiled. “I don’t believe in giving anyone my full confidence, not even you, Livermore. That’s leaving myself too wide open, if you ask me. But just for the sake of argument, let’s take the case of this Iceman, whom I am accused of being. Didn’t it ever strike you as strange that a man could be so stupid as to do the same things over and over each time? All that made it easier for the police. But did it ever occur to you that maybe it wasn’t careless stupidity on his part, that maybe it was done purposely?”

“But what good would it do? What would he gain by it?”

Mosconi shrugged guilelessly. “Not being the Iceman myself, I really can’t say. It’s just a point to bear in mind. Now you go to this Larry Trippier—” He gestured vaguely. “Just go to him and buy yourself some cigars, and tell him ‘Mosconi’s trial opens tomorrow.’ That’s all.”

“Just go to him and buy myself some cigars and tell him your trial opens tomorrow?” queried the lawyer, mystified.

“Yeah. The cigars are on me. To celebrate my release.”

“But you haven’t been released yet!”

“I will be.”

Bailey felt good when he walked into Headquarters next day. The desk-sergeant and a cop lingering nearby gave him a peculiar stare as he went by. Bailey got a distinct impression they had been discussing him. He knocked, went into his lieutenant’s office. A few of the other men in the division were already there. The way their heads all turned slowly to look at him, you’d think he was a stranger who had stumbled into the place by mistake. The atmosphere was that of a court-martial.

“Bailey,” his lieutenant said finally, in a particularly caustic voice, “I want you to go to this address and look around.”

He handed him a slip of paper. His tone became even more caustic. “Just look around, that’s all. Then come back here—if you’ve got the nerve!”

“If I’ve got the nerve?” Bailey echoed, nonplussed. “What about Mosconi’s trial? Won’t I be wanted in the Criminal Court this morning?”

Acid dripped from every syllable of the lieutenant’s answer. “There’s not going to be any trial. It would save time and a lot of explanation if you’d go to this place I’m sending you and see things with your own eyes.”

Bailey spun around on his heel and walked out without another word.

It was another of those expensive-looking suburban villas, set in its own grounds. He went in and ran up the inner stairs. A division-man named Turner was coming down them. “You in charge here?” Bailey asked.

“That’s right.” There wasn’t much fellowship in the answer.

“Then what does he want me to come over and look around for?”

“Maybe to learn a thing or two.”

“Why, you—!” This time Bailey’s face went white. He regained control of himself with an effort, went on up the rest of the way.

“That double-door on your left,” the other man called after him with sarcastic helpfulness.

He flung it open, came to a dead stop on the threshold. His eyes dilated as they took in the details of the scene one by one. His mouth dropped slackly open, and drops of moisture came out under the roots of his hair.

A man lay dead across the bed, the slender handle of an ordinary ten-cent ice pick protruding directly above his heart. A wall-safe set into the far wall yawned open. On a small table directly under it he could make out, even from the doorway, an empty leather jewel-box, lid open and turned upside-down.

He took a dazed step forward into the room. His eye fell on something before him, and he quickly stooped—almost fell forward on his hands and knees, the movement was so awkward and abrupt. He picked up a match-stick, charred from end to end, from the middle of a round singed spot on the nap of the carpet, about the size of a silver dollar.

He straightened again, looked at the other detective, who had come up after him. “Keep looking,” he said, “there’s more to come.”

Bailey stooped again, deeper in the room, picked up a half-smoked cigarette. The end was pinched-out, flat as a chisel.

Turner, the other dick, pointed remorselessly. “There’s another one over there by the window. It was left there purposely for you to see. There’s the imprint of a sneaker with a waffle-pattern on its sole in the turf under the window. The plaster-cast made from it fits the sneaker-print found under the Allens’ window; same size, pattern worn-out in the same places, therefore the same shoe. The fingerprint department has already developed the pictures

taken in here. They check with the ones found in Ben Allen's bedroom, as well as in all the previous places. Which incidentally, as you know, never did check with Mosconi's own fingerprints."

Bailey let the two butts he had picked up roll limply out of his hand. "My God," he muttered hoarsely. "A carbon copy!"

"You and your Miss X!" the other dick sneered. "You've made monkeys out of the lot of us, made a laughingstock out of the whole division. Mosconi's going to slap a damage suit for false arrest against the Department. And when it comes out—you know the papers and the public when they think the police have bungled anything. You're washed-up, Bailey! You may as well chew your badge and eat it right now!"

"Shut up!" Bailey yelled, whirling on him with sudden fury. "Get out of here!"

The other dick, taken by surprise, fell back a step before the unexpected onslaught. "Take it easy," he growled. "You can't do this, I've been assigned to this—"

Bailey actually drew his gun halfway out, a thing he had never done before to one of his fellow-operatives. "Get out of this room, I tell you, or I'll use this on you! I want time to think, and I can't with you howling in my ears!" He gave him a push dead-center to the chest, slammed the door almost across his nose, turned the key, and stayed in there with the corpse.

A resentful snarl sounded from the other side. "We'll hear what the lieut has to say about this!" Bailey paid no attention, stood there motionless with the flats of his hands pressed against the back of his skull.

Simple, ordinary psychology said this couldn't be so. The law of averages, or the law of probabilities, or whatever you wanted to call it. It was too exact a duplication to be natural. Things didn't happen that closely in real life.

Therefore it was an artificial repetition, purposely planned to mislead them.

But believing that was one thing; proving it to others was another.

He picked up the cigarette stubs once more, studied them closely. He shook his head. Then the two or three charred matchsticks that lay about, in their halos of scorched carpet-fuzz. He shook his head again. He went slowly over to the safe and examined the denuded jewel-case. He shook his head some more. It was no use, it was hopeless.

He slammed the safe-lid back into its casing in baffled anger. The impact jarred it so that it clicked shut. He took a step away, then turned and went back to it again. After all, Turner was right; it wasn't his case, it was only fair to leave everything just the way he'd found it. He scanned the wall alongside it, to get the penciled numbers of the combination —

There weren't any.

The other dick was at the phone downstairs, complaining to the lieutenant, when he came careening down three steps at a time a minute later. "Better relieve him of duty, lieutenant. I think he's gone wacky. Not only drew on me, but locked himself in up there with the stiff—"

Bailey pulled the phone out of Turner's hands before he knew what had happened, and hung it up. "I just want a couple of things out of you, Teacher's Pet, and then you can go ahead with your snitching! Who's dead up there?"

"His name is Tony Driscoll," glowered the other dick.

"Any wife?"

"She was called out of town yesterday afternoon—her mother's ill or something."

"Then he was alone in the house when it happened? No witnesses as usual ?"

"No. But get this, Bailey. I don't have to give out with any information to you. You're not working on the case at all."

“Maybe I’m not,” Bailey replied, “but I’m still working on the case before. I was assigned to that one, and this is just a postscript to it. You can have this all to yourself, but when I finish up mine, this’ll go with it—there won’t be anything left for you to work on.”

He left, drove back to the city, went straight to the jail where Mosconi had been kept all these months awaiting trial, and interviewed the warden in his office. “I want to see a record of what visitors Mosconi has had—especially within the last few weeks. You keep such a record, don’t you?”

“Yes, sure, visitors have to sign before they’re admitted.”

He had scanned the roster but Mosconi’s lawyer’s name was the only one listed. He’d been to visit him as recently as three days before. And, it was noticeable, that was the only time he’d been near his client since the very beginning of his incarceration.

It was through the lawyer, then, that the contact had been made. Bailey had felt sure that must be the case even before he noted the lack of other visitors. No ordinary underworld contact would have been used to carry out a transaction like the one involved: *murder as an alibi for another murder.*

He was unable to locate Livermore at his office. That was only natural: the lawyer was at the Criminal Courts Building, up to his ears in the various legal moves required to free Mosconi. Bailey couldn’t tackle him there, be’ cause he was only working on supposition, he had no proof; he wanted to get him alone, and try a little bluff. But, he had to admit to himself dubiously, it’s a good detective that can outsmart a clever lawyer. He waited at Livermore’s apartment, just the same, to try his hand at it.

The lawyer didn’t return until well after dark. He was in good humor, apparently having succeeded in setting the wheels in motion that would release Mosconi. “To what do I

owe the honor of this visit?" he asked with cheerful contempt.

Bailey had rehearsed every sentence, every phrase, to make sure of getting just the effect he wanted. "To what do you suppose? When a man makes himself an accessory to murder by playing the part of go-between, between one murderer already in custody and a second one still at large, doesn't he lay himself wide open?"

A disconcerted look shadowed Livermore's face, much to Bailey's satisfaction. An instant later the lawyer was his usual imperturbable self again. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"But I do." Bailey gestured wearily. "What's the use of denying it, Mr. Livermore? What kind of fools do you take us for in the Police Department, anyway? Look, every place you've gone from the time you left Mosconi last Sunday, I've gone right behind you."

"You mean I've been tailed?" There was much less color in Livermore's face now.

"I don't mean anything else but that. You were watched when you contacted the party of the second part—"

Livermore's face was chalky now. He poured himself a drink from a decanter with a noticeably unsteady hand. But so far, Bailey hadn't got a single thing that he'd wanted out of him. He began to build up the effect. He took out a manacle and began to dangle it idly, as though he expected to use it in a few minutes.

A flicker of panic showed in the lawyer's eyes.

"And as I said in the beginning," Bailey went on, "by acting as go-between, you've turned yourself into an accessory. So I think it's your turn to come with me." He gave the handcuff an ominous little flip, started slowly to get to his feet.

Livermore's presence of mind crumbled away like aspirin in water as the dick took the first step toward him. "Now, wait a minute," he heaved frantically, "you're jumping at

entirely the wrong conclusion. I was no go-between, I carried no message. I simply stopped in there to buy some cigars—my going there had nothing to do with Mosconi—”

“He said it had a lot to do with Mosconi,” said Bailey grimly, mentally keeping his fingers crossed.

A six-year-old child shouldn’t have fallen into a crude verbal trap like that, but Bailey had the lawyer off balance now. “Who—Trippler? He’s a damn liar!” he yelled frightenedly.

So that was the name; Bailey was patting himself on the back. But there was one more thing he needed. “Do you really expect us to believe that? In the first place, just on the face of it, isn’t it a little out of the way for a busy man like you to buy your cigars there?”

Livermore flared, “Listen, if I feel like buying my cigars on Meridian Lane or anywhere else, that’s my own business! That’s no proof of anyth—”

The handcuff had abruptly vanished. “Thanks,” Bailey said derisively, “that’s all I wanted to know.” Before the stunned lawyer knew what was happening, he had Headquarters on the phone, paging his teammate Hastings.

“Listen, Haste, there’s a cigar shop on Meridian Lane. Get there fast and keep it covered until I get there. I don’t give a damn what the lieutenant has assigned you to! This is the payoff on the whole series of ice-pick murders, I tell you! If you don’t want to cash in on it with me, that’s up to you—”

Instead of hanging up, he yanked the telephone cord bodily out of the box. His eyes flicked to a mirror on the wall before him. “Don’t try that or you’ll get hurt!” he snapped. He spun around, drew, and fired all in one move. The mirror took the lawyer’s bullet, and shattered into spokes of a wheel. Their two shots were fired so simultaneously, there was practically only one report. Livermore’s gun nipped up out of his hand, he made a grab for his forearm, clutched it

tightly, bit his underlip, and leaned slowly forward above the desk.

Bailey went over, picked up the gun, and pocketed it along with his own. “Told you you’d get hurt,” he smiled grimly. “And whoever called you smart didn’t know what they were talking about! It was like taking candy from a baby!” He turned around and ran out without wasting any more time on him.

Hastings was just a shadow in a doorway, across the street from a dingy little cigar shop below the sidewalk level, where an old man could be seen working away laboriously kneading tobacco.

“Anyone go in or leave since you got here?” Bailey asked him, materializing like a second shadow along the wall.

“No. What do we want from there?”

“We want a guy named Trippler, description unknown, location highly uncertain. Take the back, I’ll handle it from this side. Can you get set in five minutes?”

“Four,” muttered Hastings.

“Start.”

Hastings sidled into the night. A moment later a highly indistinguishable blur crossed the street near the corner, vanished again in shadows on the other side, and then reappeared for an instant at the entrance of the house next door to the cigar shop and was finally swallowed up for good.

Bailey let two hundred and forty seconds tick off on his wrist, then struck out across the street in a straight line, clumped down the rickety basement steps, and into the place. The old man looked up, went ahead manipulating tobacco-fill without having to keep his eyes on his adept fingers.

Bailey lowered his voice confidentially. “I’d like to buy some real high-priced cigars.”

“Just a minute, I call the boss,” the old man said, equally confidential. He got up and slithered out through a doorless opening at the back covered by sacking.

Bailey drew his gun and pressed himself flat against the wall to one side of it. He wasn’t giving anyone a free look. There was a short wait. Then the sacking stirred slightly and Bailey raised his gun. The old man came through and Bailey covered him, motioning him silently over to one side. The sudden tension in the old man’s face, though, must have been read through the sacking. An ingot of yellow-red flame licked through the stuff, a gun exploded, and the front window of the shop dribbled away into nothingness. There was a sudden spat of hasty footfalls in flight along the basement passage beyond the sacking.

Bailey jumped in, scuffed the curtain aside, fired down the tunnel-like bore of gloom ahead. A second orange flash came back in answer, but the receding footsteps continued uninterrupted. A rear door grated open, there was a third shot, and then Hastings’ voice sounded through from the backyard. “All right, Bail, I’ve got him. Right into my arms!”

Bailey turned and jumped up the basement steps to the street, after the fugitive old cigar maker. He brought him back in a matter of moments, a double handful of cigars clutched to his chest as though they were the most precious things imaginable.

They were. One of them slit open and crumbled as a test, revealed three blue-white diamonds, taken out of their settings and bedded in the tobacco, that was meant to be sold only to those in the know. Bailey looked at Hastings, with handcuffed Larry Trippler standing there sullenly beside him. “No wonder we were never able to turn up any of that ice until now! It seems to have all gone up—or at least, out—in smokes. If we keep this shop open for a while, as a decoy, I bet we’ll round up the whole ring!”

The D.A. himself was present, at his own request, when Bailey made his report to the lieutenant.

“Mosconi, who was a roadhouse proprietor, and this Trippler, who was a former diamond-cutter from Antwerp before he went crooked, were partners. Murder, theft, and jewelryfencing. Mosconi spotted the victims at that resort of his he ran for a front. Trippler attended to the business of taking the stones out of their settings, and cutting them up when they were too large to be safely disposed of. Hastings and I found a complete layout of stone-cutting tools in the back of that Meridian Lane shop. The actual commission of the crimes they alternated between them, so they’d each have something on the other; there’d be no danger of a doublecross if one was nabbed and one stayed out.

“The main thing is, they had this long-standing arrangement between them. All those little details of the charred matches, the pinched-out cigarettes, the sneaker-prints, the ice picks, and so forth were purposely planted at the scene of each murder. The idea was, if something went wrong and one of them was ever caught, the other was to go out while his partner was in custody awaiting trial, and reproduce one of those murders, complete with all the characteristic clues. Result: automatic dismissal of the murder charges against the first guy, and immunity from then on.

“They knew that the evidence against them would never be more than purely circumstantial. The fingerprints didn’t belong to either one of them. They were etched on these.”

He took out a pair of rubber gloves, turned them over to his superior. “Found them at the Meridian Lane place, concealed in some plumbing. We also turned up the famous waffle-pattern sneakers, hidden under a floorboard. For actual evidence, over and above all this, we have some of the Tony Driscoll jewelry intact—there wasn’t time enough to remove it from its setting. That ought to convict Trippler of Tony Driscoll’s murder, and leave Mosconi where he was,

saddled with the blame for Ben Ahlen's. The credit for the rest they can split up between them any way they'd like."

The D.A. studied Bailey with unconcealed interest. "What was it first tipped you off that the duplicate murder was a fake, or rather that it had been committed by another person entirely, and therefore our reasons for holding Mosconi for the previous one were still valid?"

"That wasn't much, just a trifling thing," Bailey said. "Trippler happened to have an unusually good head for figures, Mosconi a terrible one."

"I don't get you."

"All those little details, the matches, the cigarettes, and the rest, were cooked up between them, premeditated, planted. But there was one touch that wasn't, that happened to be on the level. Mosconi was afraid of forgetting the numbers of the safe-combos each time, simple as they were; he jotted them down on the wall while he was getting them from the victims at gun-point. But because that wasn't part of the fake *modus operandi,* he wasn't aware of it himself, and forgot to warn Trippler to do likewise."

All the D.A. said to the lieutenant, as he got up to return to his own office and begin preparation of the case in which there were now two chief defendants instead of just one, was: "You've got a good man there. In case you ever happen not to need him, let me know."

AND SO TO DEATH

Ever had a nightmare—and dreamed you killed a man? And then did you ever wake up and find him dead? The gripping story of a man whose worst dreams came true . . .

CHAPTER I
THE FIRST HORROR

First all I could see was this beautiful girl's face; like a white, slightly luminous mask swimming detachedly against enfolding darkness. As if a little bluish spotlight of its own was trained on it from below.

It was so beautiful and so false, and I seemed to know it so well.

There was no danger yet; just this separate, shell-like face-mask standing out. But there was danger somewhere around; I knew that already, and I knew that I couldn't escape it.

I knew that everything I was about to do, I had to do; and yet I *didn't* want to do it. I wanted to turn and get out of wherever this was.

I even turned and tried to, but I couldn't any more. There had been only one door when I slipped in just now. It had been simple enough. Now when I turned, the place was nothing but doors—an octagon of doors, set frame to frame with no free wall-space between.

I tried one, another, a third. They were the wrong ones; I couldn't get out.

And by doing this, I had unleashed the latent menace that was lurking there around me all the time; I had brought on all the sooner the very thing I had tried to escape from. Though I didn't know what it was yet.

The flickering white mask slowly, before my horrified eyes, became malign, vindictive. It snarled: "There he is right behind you. Get him!" The eyes snapped like fuses, the teeth glistened in a grinning bite.

The light became more diffused: it was murky, bluish-green now, the kind of light there would be under water. And in it my doom slowly reared its head, with a terrible inevitability.

This was male.

First it—he—was just a black huddle, like solidified smoke, at the feet of this opalescent, revengeful mask. Then it slowly uncoiled, rose, lengthened and at the same time narrowed, until it loomed there before me upright.

It came toward me with cataleptic slowness. I wanted to turn and run, in the minute, the half minute that was all there was left now. I couldn't move, I couldn't lift a foot; I just wavered back and forth on a rigid base.

Why I wanted to get out, what It was going to do to me, wasn't clear. Only there was soul-shrivelling fear in it. And horror, more than the mind could contemplate.

The pace was beginning to accelerate now as it near its climax.

He came on, using up the small remaining distance between us. His outline was still indistinct, clotted, like a lumpy clay image. I could see the arms come up from the sides, and couldn't avoid their lobster-like conjunction.

I could feel the pressure of his hands upon my neck. He held it at the sides rather than in front, as if trying to break it rather than strangle me. The gouge of his thumbs, was excruciating, pressing into the tender slack of flesh right beside and under the jawbone.

I went down in a sort of spiral, around and around, following my head and neck around as he sought to wrench them out of true with my spinal column.

I clawed at the merciless hands, trying to pull them off. I pried one off at last, but it wrenched itself free of my restraint again, trailing a nail-scratch on my forearm just across the knob of the wristbone.

The hand clamped itself back where it had been, with the irresistibility of a suction-cup.

I beat at his arched body from underneath; then—as my resistance weakened—only pushed at it, at last only

grasped at it with the instinctive clutch of a drowning man. A button came off loose in my hand and I hung onto it with the senseless tenacity of the dying.

And then I was so long dying, my neck was so long breaking, he tired of the slower surer way. He spoke to the macabre mask. (I heard every word clearly: “Hand me that sharp-pointed bore lying over there, or this’ll go on all night.”

I raised mutely protesting hands, out and past him, and something was put into one of them. I could feel the short transverse handle. A thought flashed through my mind—and even one’s thoughts are so distinct in those things—“She’s put it into my hand instead of his!”

I fixed my hand on it more securely, poised it high, and drove it into him from in back. It seemed to go in effortlessly, like a skewer into butter. I could even feel myself withdraw it again, and it came out harder than it went in.

He went with it, or after it, and toppled back. After a moment, I drew near to him again, on hands and knees.

And now that it was too late his face became visible at last, as if a wanly flickering light were playing over it, and he was suddenly no formless mud-clotted monster but a man just like I was. Harmless, helpless, inoffensive.

The face looked reproachfully up at me, as if to say, “Why did you have to do that?”

I couldn’t stand that, and I leaned over him, tentatively feeling for the position of his heart. When I’d located it, I suddenly drove the metal implement in with ungovernable swiftness from straight overhead, and jumped back as I did so.

The mask, still present in the background, gave a horrid scream, and whisked away, like something drawn on wires.

I heard a door close and I quickly turned, to see which way she had gone, so that I might remember and find my own way out. But I was too late: she was gone by the time I turned, and all the doors looked alike again.

I went to them and tried them one by one. Each one was the wrong one, wouldn't open. Now I couldn't get out of here, I was trapped, shut in with what was lying there on the floor. It still held fear and menace, greater even than when it had attacked me.

For the dread and horror was now more imminent than ever, seemed about to burst and inundate me. Its source was what lay there on the floor. I had to hide it, I had to shut it away.

I threw open one of the many doors that had baffled me so repeatedly throughout. And behind it, in the sapphire pall that still shrouded the scene, I now saw a shallow closet.

I picked up what lay on the floor—and I could seem to do it easily; it had become light. I propped it up behind the closet door; there was not depth enough behind it to do anything else.

Then I closed the door upon it, and pressed it here and there with the flats of my hands, up and down the frame that bordered the mirror, as if to make it hold tighter. But danger still seemed to exude through it, like a vapor. I knew that wasn't enough; I must do more than that, or it would surely open again.

Then I looked down, and below the knob there was a keyhead sticking out. It was shaped a little like a three-leaf clover, and the inner rim of each of the three scooped-out "leaves" was fretted with scrollwork and tracery.

It was of some yellowish metal, either brass or iron gilded over. A key such as is no longer made or used.

I turned it in the keyhole and I drew it slowly out. I was surprised at how long a stem it had; it seemed to keep

coming forever. At last it ended in two odd little teeth, each one doubled back on itself, like the single arm of a swastika.

I pocketed it. Then the knob started turning from the inside; the door started to open, slowly but remorselessly. In another minute I was going to see something unspeakably awful on the other side of it. Revelation, the thing the whole long mental-film had been building to, was upon me.

And then I woke up.

CHAPTER II
THE KEY

I'd lost the pillow to the floor, and my head was halfway down after it, dangling partly over the side of the bed. My face was studded with oozing sweatdrops.

I propped myself upon one elbow and blew out my breath harrowedly. I mumbled, "Gee I'm glad that's over with!" and drew the back of my pajama sleeve across my forehead to dry it. I looked at the clock, and it was time to get up anyway; but even if it hadn't been, who would have risked going back to sleep after such a thing? I might have reformed and started in again, for all I knew.

I flung my legs out of the ravaged coverings, sat on the edge of the bed, picked up a sock and turned it inside out preparatory to shuffling it on.

Dreams were funny things. Where'd they oome from? Where'd they go?

A basinful of stinging cold water in the bathroom cleared away the last lingering vestige of it, and from this point on everything was on a different plane—normal, rational and reassuringly familiar. The friendly bite of the comb. The winding of the little stem of my wristwatch, the looping together of the two strap-ends around my—

They fell open and dangled down straight again, still unattached and stayed that way. I had to rivet my free hand to the little dial to keep it from sliding off my wrist.

I stared at the thing for minutes on end.

I had to let my cuff slide back in place and cover it at last. I couldn't stand there staring at it forever. That didn't answer anything. What should it tell me? It was a scratch, that was all.

Talk about your realistic dreams!

Well, I thought, I must have done that to myself, with my other hand, in the throes of it. That was why the detail entered into the dream-fabric.

It couldn't, naturally, be the other way around: because the other way around meant transference from the dream into the actuality of a red scratch across my wristbone.

I went ahead. The familiar plane, the rational everyday plane. The blue tie today. I threw up my collar, drew the tie-length through, folded it down again.

My hands stayed on it, holding it down flat on each side of my neck, as if afraid it would fly away. Part of my mind was getting ready to get frightened, fly off the handle, and the rest of my mind wouldn't let it, held it steady just like I held the collar.

But I hadn't had those bruises—those brownish-purple discolorations, faintly visible at the side of my neck, as from the pressure of cruel fingers—I hadn't had those last night when I undressed.

Well—I hadn't yet had the dream last night when I undressed either. Why look for spooks in this? The same explanation that covered the wrist-scratch still held good for this too. I must have done it to myself, seized my own throat in trying to ward off the attack passing through my mind just then.

I even stood there and tried to reconstruct the posture, to see if it was physically feasible. It was, but the result was almost grotesquely distorted. It resulted in crossing the arms over the chest and gripping the left side of the neck with the right hand, the right with the left.

I didn't know; maybe troubled sleepers did get into those positions. I wasn't as convinced as I would have like to be. One thing was certain: the marks had been made by two hands, not one.

But—more disturbing than their visibility—there was pain in them, soreness when I prodded them with my own

fingertips, stiffness when I turned my neck acutely. It seemed to weaken the theory of self-infliction. How was it I hadn't awakened myself, exerting that much pressure?

I forced myself back to the everyday plane again: buttoned the collar around the bruises, party but not entirely concealing them, knotted the tie, shrugged on vest and coat. I was about ready to go now.

The last thing I did was what I always did last of all, one of those ineradicable little habits. I reached into my pocket to make sure I had enough change available for my meal and transportation, without having to stop and change a bill on the way.

I brought up a palmful of it, and then I lost a good deal of it between my suddenly stiff outspread fingers. Only one or two pieces, stayed on, around the button. The large and central button.

I let them roll, not stooping to pick them up. I couldn't; my spine wouldn't have bent right then.

It was a strange button. I knew I was going to check, it with every article of clothing I had, but I already knew it wasn't from one of my own things.

Something about the shape, the color, told me; my fingers had never twisted it through a buttonhole, or they would have remembered it.

That may sound far-fetched; but buttons can become personalized to nearly as great an extent as neckties.

And when I closed my hand over it—as I did now—it took up as much room inside my folded palm, it had the same feel, as it had had a little while ago in *that thing.* Oh, I could remember clearly.

It was the button from the dream.

I threw open the closet door so fast and frightenedly it hit the wall and bounced. There wasn't anything hanging up in there that I didn't hold that button against—even where

there was no button missing, even where its size and type utterly precluded its having been attached.

It wasn't from anything of mine; it didn't belong anywhere.

This time I couldn't say: "I did it to myself in the throes of that thing." It came from somewhere. It had four center holes, with even a wisp or two of black tailor's thread still entwined in them. It was solid, not a phantom.

But rationality wouldn't give in. *No, no. I picked this up on the street, and I don't remember doing it.* That simply wasn't so; I'd never picked up a stray button in my life.

Or *the last tailor I sent this suit out to left it in the pocket from someone else's clothing by mistake.* But they always return dry-cleaned garments to me with the pocket-linings inside out; I'd noticed that a dozen times.

That was the best rationalization could do, and it was none too good. I said out loud, "I better get out of here. I need a cup of coffee. I've got the jitters."

I shrugged into my coat fast, threw open my room door, poised it to close it after me. And the last gesture of all, before leaving each morning, came to me instinctively: feeling to make sure I had my key and wouldn't be locked out when I returned that evening.

It came up across the pads of my fingers, but it was only visible at both ends. The middle part was bisected, obscured by something lying across it. My lips parted spasmodically, and refused to come together again.

It had a head—this topmost one—a little like a three-leaf clover, and the inner rim of each of the three "leaves" was fretted with scroll work and tracery. It had a stem disproportionately long for the size of its head, and it ended in two odd little teeth bent back on themselves, like half of a swastika.

It was of some yellowish composition, either brass or iron gilded over. A key such as is no longer made or used.

It lay lengthwise in the hollow of my hand, and I kept touching it repeatedly with the thumb of that same hand. That was the only part of me that moved for a long time, that foolish flexing thumb.

I didn't leave right then, for all my preparations. I went back into the room and closed the door after me on the inside, and staggered dazedly around for a moment or two.

Once I dropped down limply on the edge of the bed, then turned around and noticed what it was, and got hastily up again, more frightened than ever.

Another time, I remember, I thrust my face close to the mirror in the dresser, drew down my lower lid with one finger, started intently at the white of my eyeball. Even as I did it, I didn't know what it would tell me. It didn't tell me anything.

And still another time, I looked out of the window, as if to see whether the outside world was still there. It was. The houses across the way looked just as they'd looked last night. The lady on the third floor had her bedding airing over the windowsill, just like every morning. There was nothing the matter out there. It was in here, with me.

I decided I'd better go to work; maybe that would pull me out of this. I fled from the room almost as if it were haunted. It was too late to stop off at a breakfast-counter now. I didn't want any anyway. My stomach kept giving little quivers.

In the end I didn't go to work either. I couldn't, I wouldn't have been any good. I telephoned in that I was too ill to come—and it was no idle excuse.

I roamed around the rest of the day in the sunshine. Wherever the sunshine was the brightest, I sought and stayed in that place, and when it moved on I moved with it. I couldn't get it bright enough or strong enough.

And yet the sunshine didn't warm me. Where others mopped their brows and moved out of it, I stayed—and remained cold inside. And the shade was winning the battle

as the hours lengthened. The sun weakened and died; the shade deepened and spread. Night was coming on: the time of dreams, the enemy.

CHAPTER III
DEAD END

It went to Cliff's house late. The first A time I got there they were still at the table; I could see them through the front window. I walked around the block repeatedly, until Lil had gotten up from the table and taken all the dishes with her, and Cliff had moved to another chair and was sitting there alone.

I did all this so she wouldn't ask me to sit down at the table with them; I couldn't have stood it.

I rang the bell and she opened the door, dried her hands, and said heartily: "Hello, stranger. I was just saying to Cliff only tonight, it's about time you showed up around here."

I wanted to detach him from her, but first I had to sit through about ten minutes of her. She was my sister, but you don't tell women things like I wanted to tell him.

Finally she said, "I'll just finish up the dishes, and then I'll be back."

The minute the doorway was empty I whispered urgently, "Get your hat and take a walk with me outside. I want to tell you something—alone."

On our way out he called in to the kitchen, "Vince and I are going out to stretch our legs. We'll be back in a couple of minutes."

She called back immediately and warningly: "Now Cliff, only beer—if that's what you're going for."

It put the idea in his head, if nothing else, but I said: "No, I want to be able to tell you this clearly. It's going to sound hazy enough as it is; let's stay out in the open."

We strolled slowly along the sidewalk; he was on his feet a lot and it was no treat to him, I suppose, but he was a good-natured sort of fellow and didn't complain. He was a

detective. I probably would have gone to him about it anyway even if he hadn't been, but the fact that he was, of course, made it the inevitable thing to do.

He had to prompt me, because I didn't know where to begin. "So what's the grief, boy friend?"

"Cliff, last night I dreamed I killed a fellow. I don't know who he was or where it was supposed to be. His nail creased my wrist, his fingers bruised the sides of my neck, and a button came off him somewhere and got locked in my hand.

"And finally, after I'd done it, I locked the door of a closet I'd propped him up in, put the key away in my pocket. And when I woke up—Well, look."

We had stopped under a street light. I turned to face him. I drew back my cuff to show him. "Can you see it?" He said he could.

I dragged down my collar with both hands, first on one side, then on the other. "Can you see them? Can you see the faint purplish marks there? They're turning a little black now."

He said he could.

"And the button, the same shape and size and everything, was in my trousers-pocket along with my change. It's on the dresser back in my own room now; if you want to come over, you can see it for yourself.

"And last of all, the key turned up on me, next to my own key, in the pocket where I always keep it. I've got it right here; I'll show it to you. I've been carrying it around with me all day."

It took me a little while to get it out, my hand was shaking so. It had shaken like that all day, every time I brought it near the thing to feel if it was still on me.

He took it from me and examined it, curiously but noncommittally.

“That’s just the way it looked in—when I saw it when I was asleep,” I told him. “The same shape, the same color, the same design. It even weighs the same, it even—”

He lowered his head a trifle, looked at me intently from under his brows, when he heard how my voice sounded. “You’re all in pieces, aren’t you?” He put his hand on my shoulder for a minute to steady it. “Don’t take it that way, don’t let it get you.”

That didn’t help. Sympathy wasn’t what I wanted; I wanted explanation. “Cliff, you’ve got to help me. You don’t know what I’ve been through all day.” He weighed the key up and down. “Where’d you get this from, Vince? I mean, where’d you first get it from, before you dreamed about it?”

I grabbed his arm with both hands. “But don’t you understand what I’ve just been telling you? I didn’t have it before I dreamed about it. I never saw it before then. And then I wake up, and it turns real!”

“And that goes for the button too?”

I quirked my head.

“You’re in bad shape over this, aren’t you? Well what is it that’s really got you going? It’s not the key and button and scratch, is it? Are you afraid the dream really happened; is that it?”

By that I could see that he hadn’t understood until now, hadn’t really gotten me. Naturally it wasn’t just the tokens carried over from the dream that had the life frightened out of me. It was the implication behind them.

If it were just a key turned up in my pocket after I dreamed about it, why would I go to him? The hell with it. But if the key turned up real, then there was a mirrored closet door somewhere to go with it.

And if there was a closet to match it, then there was a body crammed inside it. Also real. Real dead. A body that had scratched me and tried to wring my neck before I killed it.

I tried to tell him that. I was too weak to shake him, but I went through the motions. “Don’t you understand? There’s a door somewhere in this city right at this very minute, that this key belongs to! There’s a man propped up dead behind it!

“And I don’t know where, nor who he is, nor how or why it happened; only that—that I must have been there, I must have done it—or why would it come to my mind like that in my sleep? Why?”

“You’re in a bad way.” He gave a short whistle through his clenched teeth. “You need a drink, Lil or no Lil! Come on; we’ll go some place and get this thing out of your system.” He clutched me peremptorily by the arm.

“But only coffee,” I said. “Let’s go where the lights are good and bright.” We went where there was so much gleam and so much dazzle even the flies walking around on the table cast long shadows.

“Now we’ll go at this my way,” he said, licking the beer-foam off his upper lip. “Tell me the dream over again.”

I told it.

“I can’t get anything out of that.” He shook his head. “Did you know this girl, or face, or whatever it was?”

I pressed the point of one finger down hard on the table. “No, now I don’t; but in the dream I did, and it made me broken-hearted to see her. Like she had double-crossed me or something.”

“Well, in the dream who was she, then?”

“I don’t know; I knew her then, but now I don’t.”

“Cripes!” he said, swallowing more beer fast. “I should have made this whisky with tabasco sauce! Well, was she some actress you’ve seen on the screen lately, maybe? Or some picture you’ve seen in a magazine? Or maybe even some passing face you glimpsed in a crowd? All those things could happen.”

“I don’t know. I seemed to know her better than that; it hurt me to see her, to have her hate me. But I can’t carry

her over into—now."

"And the man?"

"No, I couldn't seem to see his face through the whole thing. I only saw it at the very end, after it was already too late. And then when the door started to open again, it seemed as if I was going to find out something horrible—about him, I guess. But I woke up. . .

"Last of all, the place. You say nothing but doors all around you. Have you been in a place like that lately? Have you ever seen one? In a magazine illustration, in a story you read, in a movie?"

"No."

"Well then, let's get away from the dream. Let's leave it alone." He flung his hand back and forth relievedly, as if clearing the air. "It was starting to get me myself. Now what'd you do last night, before this whole thing came up?"

"Nothing. Just what I do every other night. I left work at the usual time, had my meal at the usual place—"

"Sure it wasn't a welsh rabbit?"

"A welsh rabbit is not responsible for that key. A locksmith is. Drop it on the table and hear it clash! Bite it between your teeth and chip them! And I didn't have it when I went to bed last night."

He leaned toward me. "Now listen, Vince. There's a very simple explanation for that key. There has to be. And whatever it is, it didn't come to you in a dream. Either you were walking along, you noticed that key, picked it up because of its peculiar—"

I semaphored both hands before my face. "No, I tried to sell myself that this morning; it won't work. I'd remember the key itself, even if I didn't remember the incident of finding it. It's a unique key, and I never saw it before."

"All right, it don't have to be that explanation. There's a dozen-and-one other ways it could have gotten into your

pocket without your knowledge. You might have hung the coat up under some shelf the key was lying on, and it dropped off and the open pocket caught it—”

“The pockets of my topcoat have flaps. What’d it do, make a U-turn to get in under them?”

“The flaps might have been left accidentally tucked in, from the last time your hands were in your pockets. Or it may have fallen out of someone else’s coat hung up next to yours in a cloakroom, and been lying there on the floor, and someone came along, thought it belonged in your coat, put it back in—”

“I shoved my hands in and out of those pockets a dozen times yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. Where was it then? It wasn’t in the pocket. But it was this morning. After I saw it clear as a photograph in my sleep during the night!”

Cliff rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a minute. “All right, have it your way. Let’s say that it wasn’t in your pocket last night. That still don’t prove that the dream itself was real.”

“No?” I shrilled. “It gives it a damn good foundation-in-fact as far as I’m concerned!”

“Listen, Vince, there’s no halfway business about these things. Either you dream a thing or it really happens. You’re twenty-six years old; you’re not a kid.

“Don’t worry; you’d know it and you’d remember it damn plainly afterward if you ever came to grips with a guy and he had you by the throat, like in this dream, and you rammed something into his back.

“I don’t take any stock in this stuff about people walking in their sleep and doing things without knowing it. They can walk a little ways off from their beds, maybe, but the minute anyone touches them or does something to stop them, they wake right up. They can’t be manhandled and go right on sleeping through it.”

I said, “I couldn’t have walked in my sleep, anyway. It was drizzling when I went to bed last night; the streets were

only starting to dry off when I first got up this morning. I don't own rubbers, and the soles of both my shoes were perfectly dry when I put them on."

"Don't try to get away from the main point at issue. Have you any recollection at all, no matter how faint, of being out of your room last night, of grappling with a guy, of ramming something into him?"

"No; all I have is a perfectly clear recollection of going to bed, dreaming I did all those things, and then waking up again."

"Then that's all there is to it. Then it didn't happen." And he repeated stubbornly: "You either dream 'em or you do 'm. No two ways about it."

I shook my head. "You haven't helped me a bit, not a dime's worth."

He was a little put out, maybe because he hadn't. "Naturally not, not if you expected me to arrest you for murdering a guy in a dream. The arrest would have to take place in a dream too, and the trial and all the rest of it. What do you think I am, a witch doctor?"

"I'm going to sleep in the living-room at your place tonight," I said to him. "I'm not going back to that room of mine till broad daylight. Don't say anything to Lil about it, will you, Cliff?"

"I should say not," he agreed. "D'you think I want her to take you for bugs? You'll get over this, Vince."

"First I'll get to the bottom of it, then I'll get over it," I answered sombrely.

CHAPTER IV
THE EIGHTH IMAGE

I slept about an hour's worth, and it was like any other night's sleep I'd had all my life—until the night before. No better and no worse. Cliff came in and he stood looking at me the next morning. I threw off the blanket they'd given me and sat up on the sofa.

"How'd it go?" he asked half-secretively. On account of Lil, I suppose.

I eyed him. "I didn't have any more dreams, if that's what you mean. But that has nothing to do with it. If I were convinced that was a dream, I would have gone home to my own room last night, even if I were going to have it over again twice as bad.

"But I'm still not convinced. Now are you going to help me or not?"

He rocked back and forth on his feet. "What d'you want me to do?"

How could I answer that? "You're a detective. You've got the key. The button's over in my room. You must have often had less than that to work with. Find out where they came from! Find out what they're doing on me!"

He had my best interests at heart maybe, but he thought the thing to do was bark at me. "Now listen, cut that stuff out, y'hear? I dowanna hear any more about that key. I've got it, and I'm keeping it, and you're not going to see it again. If you harp on this spooky stuff any more, I'll help you all right—in a way you won't appreciate. I'll haul you off to see a doctor."

The scratch on my wrist had formed a scab; it was ready to come off. I freed it with the edge of my nail, then I blew the little sliver of dried skin off. And I gave him a long look,

more eloquent than words. He got it, but he wouldn't give in.

Lil called in: "Come and get it, boys!" I left their house—and I was on my own, just like before I'd gone there. Me and my shadows.

I stopped in at a newspaper office, and I composed an ad and told them I wanted it inserted in the real estate section. I told them to keep running it daily until further notice.

It wasn't easy to word. It took me the better part of an hour, and about three dozen blank forms. This ad:

> I am interested in inspecting, for lease or purchase, a house with an octagonal mirror-paneled room or alcove. Location, size and all other details of secondary importance provided it has this one essential feature, desired for reasons of a sentimental nature. Communicate Box 37a, *World-Express*, giving exact details.

On the third day there were two replies waiting when I stopped in at the advertising office. One was about a house with a mirror-lined powder room on the second floor; only foursquare, but wouldn't that do?

The other told of an octagonal breakfast nook of glass bricks. . . .

There wasn't anything on the fourth day. On the fifth there was a windfall of about half a dozen waiting for me when I stopped in. • Five of them were from real estate agents, .offering their services; the sixth from an individual owner who was evidently anxious to get a white elephant off his hands, for he offered to have a mirror-paneled room built in for me at his own expense, if I agreed to take a long-term lease on the property.

They started tapering off after that. One or two more drifted in by the end of the week, but they obviously weren't what I was looking for. And after that the ad brought no further results; apparently the supply of mirrored compartments had "been exhausted.

The advertising office phoned to find out if I wanted to continue it. “No, kill it)” I said, disheartened.

Meanwhile Cliff must have spotted it and recognized it. He was a very thorough paper-reader, when he came home at nights. Or perhaps he just wanted to see how I was getting along. At any rate he showed up good and early the next day, which was a Sunday. He was evidently off, for he was wearing a pullover and slacks.

“Sit down,” I told him.

“No,” he said, with some embarrassment. “Matter of fact, Lil and I are going to take a ride out into the country for the day, and she packed a lunch for three. Cold beer, and . . .”

So that was it. “Listen, I’m all right,” I said dryly. “I don’t need any fresh-air jaunts, to exorcise the devils in me, if that’s what the strategy is.”

He was going to be diplomatic—Lil’s orders, I guess—and until you’ve seen a detective trying to be diplomatic, you haven’t lived. Something about the new second-hand Chev hat he’d just gotten in exchange for his old second-hand Chev. And just come down to the door a minute and say howdy to Lil; she was sitting in it.

So I did, and he brought my coat out after me and locked up the room, so I went with them.

The thing was a hoodoo from the beginning. He wasn’t much of a driver, but he wasn’t the kind that would take back-seat orders on the road from anyone either; he knew it all.

We never did reach where they’d originally intended going; he lost it on the way, and we finally compromised on a fly-incubating meadow, after a thousand miles of detouring.

Lil was a good sport about it. “It looks just like the other place, anyway,” she said. We did more slapping at our ankles than eating, and the beer was warm, and the box of

hard-boiled eggs had disappeared from the car at one of those ruts he'd hit.

And then, to complete the picture, a big bank of jet clouds piled themselves up the sky and let go all of a sudden, and we had to run for it.

The storm had come up so fast we couldn't even get back to the car before it broke, and the rest was a matter of sitting in sodden misery while Cliff groped his way down one streaming, rain-misted country road and up another, getting more thoroughly off our bearings all the time.

Lil's fortitude finally snapped short. "Stop at the first place you come to and let's get in out of it!" she screamed at Cliff. "I can't stand any more of this!" She hid her face against my chest.

"I can't even see through my windshield much less offside past the road," he grunted. He was driving with his forehead pressed against the glass.

I scoured a peephole on my side of the car and peered out. A sort of rustic arch sidled past in the watery welter. "There's a cut-off a little way ahead, around the next turn," I said. "If you take that, it'll lead us to a house with a big wide porch; we can get in under there."

They both spoke at once. He said, "How did you know that?" she said, "Were you ever up around these parts before?"

I couldn't answer his question. I said, "No" to hers, which was the truth.

Even after he'd followed the cut-off for some distance, there was no sign of a house. "Are you getting us more tangled up than we were already, Vince?" he asked in mild reproach.

"No, don't stop; keep going," I insisted. "You'll come to it —two big stone lanterns; turn the car left between 'em—"

I shut up again, as jerkily as I'd commenced, at the peculiar back-shoulder look he was giving me. I poked my

fingers through my hair a couple of times. “Gee, I don’t know how I knew that myself,” I mumbled half-audibly.

He became very quiet from then on; I think he kept hoping I’d be wrong, there wouldn’t be any such place.

But it was Lil who tapped him on the shoulder and said, “There they are, there they are! Turn, Cliff, like he told you!”

You could hardly make them out, even at that. Faint gray blurs against the obliterating pencil-strokes Of rain. You certainly couldn’t tell what they were.

He turned without a word and we glided between them. All I could see was his eyes, in the rear vision mirror, on me. I’d never seen eyes with such black, accusing pupils before; like buckshot they were.

A minute passed, and then a house with a wide, sheltering veranda materialized through the mist, phantom-like, and came to a dead halt beside us. I heard his brakes go on.

I wasn’t much aware of our dash through the curtain of water that separated us from the porch roof, Lil squealing between us, my coat hooded over her head.

Through it all I was conscious of the beer in my stomach; it had been warm when I drank it back at the meadow, but it had turned ice-cold now, as if it had been put into a refrigerator.

I had a queasy feeling, and the rain had chilled me—but deep inside where it hadn’t been able to wet me at all. And I knew those weren’t raindrops on my forehead; they were sweat turned cold.

We stamped around on the porch for a minute, the way soaked people do.

“I wish we could get in,” Lil mourned.

“The key’s under that window-box with the geraniums,” I said.

Cliff traced a finger under it, and brought it out. He put it in the keyhole, his hand shaking a little, and turned it, and the door went in. He held his neck very stiff, to keep from looking around at me. That beer had turned to a block of ice now.

I went in last, like someone toiling through the coils of a bad dream.

It was twilight-dim around us at first, the rainstorm outside had gloomed up the afternoon so. I saw Lil's hand go out to a china switch-mount sitting on the inside of the door-frame, on the left.

"Not that one; that's the one to the porch," I said. "The one that controls the hall is on the other side."

Cliff swept the door closed, revealing the switch; it had been hidden behind the door until now. He flicked it and a light went on a few yards before us, overhead. Lil tried out hers anyway, and the porch lit up; then blackened once more as she turned the switch off.

I saw them look at each other. Then she turned to me and said, "What is this, a rib? How do you know so much about this place anyway, Vince?" Poor Lil, she was in another world.

Cliff said gruffly, "Just a lucky guess on his part." He wanted to keep her out of it, out of that darkling world he and I were in.

The light was showing us a paneled hall, and stairs going up; dark polished wood, with a carved handrail, mahogany or something. Cliff said, pointing his call up the stairs: "Good afternoon. Anybody home?"

I said, "Don't do that," in a choked voice.

"He's cold," Lil said. "He's shaking."

But she could not know the origin of my strange chill.

She turned aside through a double doorway and lighted up a living room. We both looked in there after her, without

going in; we had other things on our mind than warmth and comfort.

There was an expensive parquet floor, but everything else was in a partial state of dismantlement. Dust covers made ghostly shapes of the chairs and sofa and a piano.

"Away for the summer," Lil said knowingly. "But funny they'd leave it unlocked like that, and with the electricity still connected. Your being a detective comes in handy, Cliff; we won't get in trouble walking in like this . . ."

There was a black onyx fireplace, and after running her hands exploringly around it, she gave a little bleat of satisfaction and touched something. "Electric."

It glowed red. She started to rub her arms and shake out her skirt before it, to dry herself off, and forgot us for the time being.

I glanced at Cliff, and then I backed away, out of the doorway. I turned and went up the staircase, silently but swiftly. I saw him make for the back of the hall, equally silent and swift. We were both furtive in our movements, somehow.

I found a bedroom, dismantled like downstairs. I left it by another door, and found myself in a two-entrance bath. I went out by the second entrance, and I was in another bedroom.

Through a doorway, left open, I could see the hallway outside. Through another doorway, likewise unobstructed, I could see—myself.

Poised, quivering with apprehension, arrested in mid-search, white face staring out from above a collar not nearly as white. I shifted, came closer—dying a little, wavering as I advanced.

Two of me. Three. Four, five, six, seven.

I was across the threshold now. And the door, brought around from its position flat against the outside wall and pulled in after me, flashed *the eighth image of myself* on its mirror-backed surface.

CHAPTER V
INQUISITION

I tottered there, and stumbled, and nearly went down—all nine of me. Cliff's footfall sounded behind me; and the eighth reflection was swept away, leaving only seven. His hand gripped me by the shoulder, supporting me.

I heard myself groan in infinite desolation, "This is the place; God above, this is the place!"

"Yeh," he bit out in an undertone.

"Have you got it?" I said.

He knew what I meant. He fumbled. He had it on a ring with his other keys. I wished he hadn't kept it; I wished he'd thrown it away.

The other keys slithered away, and there it was. Fancy scroll-work—a key such as is no longer used or made . . .

One glass was a door, the door we'd come in by. Four of the remaining seven were dummies, mirrors set into the naked wall-plaster. You could tell that because they had no keyholes. They were the ones that cut the corners of the quadrilateral. The real ones were the ones that paralleled the walls, one on each side.

He put the key into one, and it went in smoothly. Something went *cluck* behind the wood, and he pulled open the mirror door.

A ripple coursed down the lining of my stomach. There was nothing in there, only empty wooden paneling. That left two.

Lil's hail reached us. "What are you two up to, up there?" From that other world, so far away.

"Keep her downstairs a minute!" I breathed desperately.

He called down: "Hold it. Vince has taken off his pants to dry them."

She answered, “I’m hungry, I’m going to see if they left anything around to—” And her voice trailed off toward the kitchen at the back.

He was turning the key in the second door; and when he said, “Look!” I saw a black thing in the middle of the closet, and for a minute I thought—

It was a built-in safe, steel painted black but with the dial left its own color. It had been cut or burned into.

“That’s what he was crouched before, that—night, when he seemed just like a puddle on the floor,” I heard myself say. “And he must have had a blow-torch down there on the floor in front of him; that’s what made that bluish light. And made her face stand out in the reflection, like a mask—”

A sob popped like a bubble. in my throat. “And that one, that you haven’t opened yet, is the one I propped him up in.”

He straightened and turned, and started over toward it.

I turned to water, and there wasn’t anything like courage in the whole world; I didn’t know where other fellows got theirs. “No, don’t,” I pleaded, and caught ineffectively at his sleeve. “Wait just a minute longer; give me a chance to—”

“Cut that out,” he said remorselessly, and shook my hand off. He went ahead; he put the key in, and turned it . . .

He opened it between us. I mean, I was standing on the opposite side from him. He looked in slantwise first, when it was still just open a crack, and then he widened it around my way for me to see. I couldn’t until then.

That was his answer to my unspoken question, that widening of it like that for me to see. Nothing fell out on him; nothing was in there. Not any more.

He struck a match, and singed all up and down the perpendicular woodwork.

There was light behind us, but it wasn’t close enough.

When the match stopped traveling, you could see the faint, blurred, old discoloration behind it. Old blood, dark against the lighter wood.

There wasn’t very much of it; just about what would seep through a wound in a dead back, ooze through clothing, and be pressed out against the wood.

He singed the floor, but there wasn’t any down there; it hadn’t been able to worm its way down that far. You could see where it had ended in two little tracks, one longer than the other, squashed out by the blotter-like clothed back before they had gotten very far.

The closet and I, we stared at one another.

The match went out, the old blood went out with it.

“Someone that was hurt was in here,” he conceded grimly.

Someone that was dead, I amended with a silent shudder.

Lil dozed off right after the improvised snack she’d gotten up for us in the kitchen, tired out from the excitement of the storm and of getting lost. The two of us had to sit with her and go through the motions, while the knowledge we shared hung over us like a bloody ax, poised and waiting to crash.

He could hardly wait to tackle me. All through the sketchy meal he’d sat there drumming the fingers of his left hand on the table top, while he inattentively shoveled and spaded with his right.

My own rigid wrist and elbow shoved stuff through my teeth; I don’t know what it was. And then after it got in, it wouldn’t go down anyway; stuck in my craw.

“What’s the matter, Vince? You’re not very hungry,” Lil said one time.

He answered for me. “No, he isn’t!” He’d turned unfriendly.

We left her stretched out on the covered sofa in the living room, the electric fireplace on, both our coats spread over her for a pieced blanket.

As soon as her eyes were safely closed, he went out into the hall, beckoning me after him with an imperative hitch of his head without looking at me. I followed.

“Close the doors,” he whispered gutturally. “I don’t want her to hear this.”

I did. and then I followed him some more, back into the kitchen where we’d all three of us been until only a few minutes before. It was about the furthest you could get away from where she was. It was still warm and friendly from her having been in there.

He changed all that with a look. At me. A look that belonged in a police-station basement.

He lit a cigarette, and it jiggled with wrath between his lips. He didn’t offer me one. Policemen don’t, with their suspects. He shoved his hands deep in pockets, like he wanted to keep them down from flying at me.

“Let’s hear about another dream.”

His voice was flat, cold.

I eyed the floor. “You think I lied, don’t you?”

That was as far as I got. He had a temper. He came up close against me, sort of pinning me back against the wall. Not physically—his hands were still in pockets—but by the scathing glare he sent into me.

“You knew which cut-off to take that would get us here, from a dream, didn’t you?

“You knew about those stone lanterns at the entrance from a dream, didn’t you?

“You knew where the key to the front door was cached from a dream, didn’t you?

“You knew which was the porch switch and which the hall —from a dream, didn’t you?

“You know what I’d do to you, if you weren’t Lil’s brother? I’d push your lying face out through the back of your head!”

And the way his hands hitched up, he had a hard time to keep from doing it then and there.

I twisted and turned as if I was on a spit, the way I was being tortured.

He wasn't through.

"You came to me for help, didn't you! But you didn't have guts enough to come clean. To say, Cliff, I went out to such-and-such a place in the country last night and I killed a guy. Such-and-such a guy, for such-and-such a reason.

"No, you had to cook up a dream.

"I can look up to and respect a guy, no matter how rotten a crime he's committed, that'll own up to it, make a clean breast of it. And I can even understand and make allowances for a guy that'll deny it flatly, lie about it; that's only human nature.

"But a guy that'll come to someone, trading on the fact that he's married to his sister, making a fool out of him, like you did me—!

"He's lower than the lowest rat we ever brought in for knifing someone in an alley! 'Look, I found this key in my pocket when I got up this morning; how'd it get in there?' 'Look, I found this button—'

"Playing on my sympathies, huh? Getting me to think in terms of doctors and medical observation, huh?"

One hand came out of his pocket at last. He threw away his cigarette. "Some dream that was, all right! Well the dream's over and baby's awake now." His left came out of the pocket and soldered itself to my shoulder and stiff-armed me there in front of him.

"We're going to start in from scratch, right here in this place, you and me. I'm going to get the facts out of you, and whether they go any further than me or not, that's my business. But at least I'm going to have them!"

His right had knotted up; I could see him priming it. How could that get something out of me that I didn't have in me to give him?

"What were you doing out at this place the night it happened? What brought you here?"

I shook my head helplessly. "I never was here before. I never saw it until I came here today with you and Lil."

He shot a short uppercut into my jaw. It was probably partly pulled, but it smacked my head back into the wall. "Who was the guy you did it to? What was his name?"

"I'm in Hell already, you blundering fool, without this," I moaned.

He sent another one up at me; I swerved my head, and this time it just grazed me. My stubbornness—it must have seemed like that—inflamed his anger. "Are you gonna answer me, Vince? Are you gonna answer me?"

"I can't. You're asking me things I can't." A sob of misery wrenched from me. "Ask God—or whoever it is watches over us in the night when we're unconscious."

He kept swinging at me. "Who was the guy? Why'd you kill him? Why? Why? Why?"

Finally I wrenched myself free, retreated out of range. We stood there facing one another for an instant, puffing, glaring.

He closed in again. "You're not going to get away with this," he heaved. "I've handled close-mouthed guys before. I know how to. You're going to tell me, or I'm going to half kill you with my own hands—where you killed somebody else."

He meant it. I could see he meant it. The policeman's blood in him was up. He could put up with anything but what he took to be this senseless stubbornness in the face of glaring, inescapable facts.

I felt the edge of the table the three of us had peacefully eaten at so short a time before grazing the fleshy part of my back. I shifted around behind it, got it between us.

He swung up a rickety chair; it probably wouldn’t have done much more than stun me. I don’t think he wanted it to. He didn’t want to break my head. He just wanted to get the truth out of it.

And I—I wanted to get the truth into it.

He at least had someone he thought he could get the truth out of. I had no one to turn to. Only the inscrutable night that never repeats what it sees.

He poised the chair high overhead, and slung his lower jaw out of line with his upper.

I heard the door slap open. It was over beyond my shoulders. He could see it and I couldn’t, without turning. I saw him sort of freeze and hold it, and look over at it, not at me any more.

I looked too, and there was a man standing there eyeing the two of us, holding a drawn gun in his hand. Ready to use it.

CHAPTER VI
THERE WAS A MURDER

He spoke first, after a second that had been stretched like an elastic band to cover a full minute had snapped back in place. “What’re you two men doing in here?”

He moved one foot watchfully across the threshold.

Cliff let the chair down the slow, easy way, with a neat little tick of its four legs. His stomach was still going in and out a little; I could see it through his shirt.

“We came in out of the rain, that suit you?” he said with left-over truculence that had been boiled-up toward me originally and was only now simmering down.

“Identify yourselves—and hurry up about it!” The man’s other foot came in the room. So did the gun. So did the cement ridges around his eyes.

Cliff took a wallet out of his rear trousers pocket, shied it over at him so that it slithered along the floor and came up against his feet. “Help yourself,” he said contemptuously.

He turned, went over to the sink, and poured himself a glass of water to help cool off, without waiting to hear the verdict.

He came back wiping his chin on his shirtsleeve, holding out a hand peremptorily for the return of the credentials. The contents of the wallet had buried the gun muzzle-first in its holster, rubbed out the cement ridges around his owner’s eyes.

“Thanks, Dodge,” he said with noticeably increased deference. “Homicide Division, huh?”

Cliff remained unbending. “How about doing a little identifying yourself?”

“I’m a deputy attached to the sheriff’s office.” He silvered the mouth of his vest-pocket, looked-a little embarrassed.

“I’m detailed to keep an eye on this place. I was home having a little supper, and—uh—”

He glanced out into the hall behind him questioningly. “How’d you get in? I thought I had it all locked up safe and sound.”

“The key was bedded in a flower box on the porch,” Cliff said.

“It was!” He looked startled. “Must be a spare, then. I’ve had the original on me night and day for the past week. Funny, we never knew there was a second one ourselves—”

I swallowed at this point, but it didn’t ease my windpipe any.

“I was driving by just to see if everything was okay,” he went on, “and I saw a light peering out of the rear window here. Then when I got in, I heard the two of you—”

I saw his glance rest on the chair a moment. He didn’t even ask what we had been scrapping about. Cliff wouldn’t have answered it if he had, I could tell that by his expression. His attitude was plainly that it was something just between the two of us.

“I thought maybe ’boes had broken in or something,” the deputy added lamely, seeing he wasn’t getting any additional information.

Cliff said, “Why should this house be your particular concern?”

“There was a murder uncovered in it last week, you know.”

Something inside me seemed to go down for the third time.

“There was,” Cliff echoed tonelessly. There wasn’t even a question-mark affer it. “I’d like to hear about it.” He waited a while, and then he added, “All about it.”

He straddled the chair, legs to the back. He took out his pack of smokes again. Then when he’d helped himself, he

pitched it over at me, but without deigning to look at me.

Like you throw something to a dog. No, not like that. You like the dog, as a rule.

I don't know how he managed to get the message across; but in that simple, unspoken act I got the meaning he wanted me to, perfectly. Whatever there is between us, I'm seeing that it stays just between us—for the time being, anyway. So shut up and stay out of it. I'm not ready to give you away to anybody—yet.

"Give one to the man," he said in a stony-hard voice, again without looking at me.

"Much obliged; got my own." The deputy went over and rested one haunch on the edge of the table. That put me behind him, which maybe was just as well. He addressed himself entirely to Cliff.

He expanded, felt at home, you could see. This was shop talk with a big-time city dick, on a footing of equality. He haloed his own head with comfortable smoke. "This house belonged to a wealthy couple named Fleming—" Cliff's eyes flicked over at me, burned searchingly into my face for a second, whipped back.to the deputy again before he had time to notice.

How could I show him any reaction, guilty or otherwise? I'd never heard the name before myself. It didn't mean anything to me.

"The husband frequently goes away on these long business trips. He was away at the time this happened. In fact we haven't been able to reach him to notify him yet. The wife was a pretty little thing—"

"Was?" I heard Cliff breathe.

The deputy went ahead; he was telling this his way.

"—kind of flighty. In fact, some of the women around here say she wasn't

above flirting behind his back, but no one was ever able to prove anything.

“There was a young fellow whose company she was seen in a good deal, but that don’t have to mean anything. He was just as much a friend of the husband’s as of hers; three of them used to go around together. His name was Dan Ayers.”

This time it was my mind that soundlessly repeated, “Was?”

The deputy took time out, spat, scoured the linoleum with his sole. It wasn’t his kitchen floor, after all. It was nobody’s now. Some poor devil’s named Fleming that thought he was coming back to happiness.

“Bob Evans—he leaves the milk around here—he was tooling his truck in through the cut-off that leads to this place, just about daybreak that Wednesday morning, and in the shadowy light he sees a bundle of rags lying there in the moss and brakes just offside.

“Luckily Bob’s curious. Well sir, he stops, and it was little Mrs. Fleming, poor little Mrs. Fleming, all covered with dew and leaves and twigs—”

“Dead?” Cliff asked.

“Dying. She must have spent hours dragging herself flat along the ground toward the main road in the hope of attracting attention and getting help. She must have been too weak to cry out very loud; and even if she had, there wasn’t anybody around to hear her.

“She must have groaned her life away unheard, there in those thickets and brambles. She’d gotten nearly as far as the foot of one of those stone entrance lanterns they have where you turn in. She was unconscious when Bob found her.

“He rushed her to the hospital, let the rest of his deliveries go hang. Both legs broken, skull fracture, internal injuries; they said right away she didn’t have a chance, and they were right. She died early the next night.”

Breathing was so hard; I'd never known breathing to be so hard before. It had always seemed a simple thing that anyone could do—and here I had to work at it so desperately.

The noise attracted the deputy. He turned his head, then back to Cliff with the comfortable superiority of the professional over the layman. "Kinda gets him, doesn't it? This stuff's new to him I guess."

Cliff wasn't having any of me. How he hated me right then! "What was it?" he went on tautly, without even giving me a look.

"Well that's it; we didn't know what it was at first. We knew that a car did it to her, but we didn't get the hang of it at first, had it all wrong.

"We even found the car itself; it was abandoned there under the trees, off the main road a little way down beyond the cut-off. There were hairs and blood on the tires and fenders. And it was Dan Ayers' car.

"Well, practically simultaneous to that find, Waggoner, that's my chief, had come up here to the house to look around, and he'd found the safe busted and looted. It's in an eight-sided mirrored room they got on the floor above, I'll take you up and show you afterwards—"

"Cut it out!" Cliff snarled unexpectedly. Not at the deputy.

I put the whiskey-bottle back on the shelf where it had first caught my eye just now. This was like having your appendix taken out without ether.

"Why don't he go outside if this gets him?" the deputy said patronizingly.

"I want him in here with us; he should get used to this," Cliff said with vicious casualness.

"Well, that finding of the safe gave us a case, gave us the whole thing, entire and intact. Or so we thought. You know,

those cases that you don’t even have to build, that are there waiting for you—too good to be true?

“This was it; Ayers had caught on that Fleming left a good deal of money in the safe even when he was away on trips; had brought her back that night, and either fixed the door so that he could slip back inside again afterwards after pretending to leave, or else remained concealed in the house the whole time without her being aware of it.

“Some time later she came out of her room unexpectedly, caught him in the act of forcing her husband’s safe, and ran out of the house for her life—”

“Why didn’t she use the telephone?” Cliff asked unmovedly.

“We thought of that. It wasn’t a case of simply reporting an attempted robbery. She must have seen by the look on his face when she confronted him that he was going to kill her to shut her up. There wasn’t any time to stop at a phone.

“She ran out into the open and down the cut-off toward the main road, to try to save her own life. She got clear of the house, but he tore after her in his car, caught up with her before she made the halfway mark to the stone lanterns.

“She tried to swerve offside into the brush, he turned the car after her, and killed her with it, just before she could get in past the trees that would have blocked him.

“We found traces galore there that reconstructed that angle of it to a T. And they were all offside, off the car-path; it was no hit-and-run, it was no accident; it was a deliberate kill, with the car chassis for a weapon.

“He knocked her down, went over her, and then reversed and went over her a second time in backing out. He thought she was dead; she was next door to it, but she was only dying.”

I blotted the first tear before it got free of my lashes, but the second one dodged me, ran all the way down. Gee, life

was lovely! All I kept saying over and over was: *I don't know how to drive, I don't know how to drive.*

Cliff took out his cigarettes again and prodded into the warped pack. He threw it at me, and looked at me and smiled. "Have another smoke, kid," he said. "I've only got one left, but you can have it."

And I lit it and smiled too, through all the wet junk in my eyes.

"He rode the car a spell further down the main road away from there, and then he thought better of it, realized there must be traces all over it that would give him away even quicker than he could drive it, so he ran it off a second time, ditched it there out of sight where we found it, and lit out some less conspicuous way.

"I don't want to spend too much time on it. This is the case we *thought* we had, all Wednesday morning and up until about five that afternoon.

"We sent out a general alarm for Dan Ayers, broadcast his description, had the trains and roads and hauling-trucks out of here watched at the city end.

"And then at five that afternoon Mrs. Fleming regained consciousness for a short time—Waggoner had been waiting outside there the whole time to question her—and the first thing she whispered was, 'Is Dan all right? He didn't kill Dan, did he?' And then she talked.

"What she told us was enough to send us hotfooting back to the house. We pried open the various mirror panels we'd overlooked the first time and found Ayers' dead body behind one of them. He'd been stabbed in the back with some kind of an awl or bit.

"He'd been dead since the night before. She died about eight that next evening. There went our case."

Cliff didn't ask it for quite a while; maybe he hated to himself. Finally he did. "Did you get anything on the real

killer?”

“Practically everything but the guy himself. She was right in the alcove with the two of them when it happened. She got a pretty good look by torchlight, and she lasted long enough to give it to us. All the dope is over at my chief’s office.”

Cliff smacked his own knees, as if in reluctant decision. He got up. “Let’s go over there,” he said slowly. “Let’s go over and give it the once over.” He stopped and looked back at me from the doorway. “C’mon, Vince, you too. I’ll leave a note for Lil.”

He stood out there waiting, until I had to get up. My legs felt stiff.

“C’mon, Vince,” he repeated. “I know this is out of your line, but you better come anyway.”

“Haven’t you got any mercy at all?” I breathed, as I brushed past him with lowered head.

CHAPTER VII
WRONG WAY OUT

Cliff trod on my heel twice, going into the office from the deputy's car, short as the distance was. He was bringing up behind me. It might have been accidental; but I think without it I might have faltered and come to a dead halt. I think he thought so too.

Waggoner was a much younger-looking and trimmer man than I had expected. The four of us went into his inner office, at the back of the front room, and the three of them chewed the rag about it—the case—in general terms for a while.

Then he said "Yes," to Cliff's question, opened a drawer in one of the filing cabinets and got out a folder.

"We do have a pretty good general description of him, from her. Here's a transcription of my whole interview with her at the hospital. I had a stenographer take it down at her bedside."

From the folder he removed a typescript on onionskin.

"All that," I thought dismally.

The room had gotten very quiet. "Our reconstruction of the car assault on Mrs. Fleming was perfectly accurate, as was our motivation of the safe looting and its interruption.

"The only thing is, there's a switch of characters involved; that's where we went wrong. Instead of Mrs. Fleming being killed by Ayers, Mrs. Fleming *and* Ayers were killed by this third person.

"She saw the awl plunged into Ayers' back, fled from the house for her life, was pursued down the cut-off by the murderer in Ayers' car and crushed to death. The murderer then went back, completed his interrupted ransacking of the safe, and concealed Ayers' body.

“He also relocked the house, to gain as much time as possible . . .” His voice became an unintelligible drone. “And so on, and so on.”

He turned a page, then his tracing finger stopped. “Here’s what you want, Dodge. The killer was about twenty-five, and fairly skinny. His cheekbones stood out, cast shadows in the torchlight as it wavered on his face—”

I cupped my hand lengthwise to my cheek, the one turned toward the three of them, and sat there as if holding my face pensively. I was over by the night-blacked window and they were more in the center of the room, under the cone light Waggoner had turned on over his desk.

His tracing finger dropped a paragraph lower, stopped again. “He had light-brown hair. She even remembered that it was parted low on the left side—take a woman to notice a thing like that even at such a moment—and an unusually long forelock that kept falling in front of his face.”

My hand went up a little higher and brushed mine back. It only fell down again like it always did.

“His eyes were fixed and glassy, as if he was mentally unbalanced—”

I saw Cliff glance thoughtfully down at the floor, then up again.

“He had on a knitted sweater under his jacket, and she even took in that it had been darned and rewoven up at the neckline in a different color yarn—” Lil had made me one the Christmas before, and then I’d burned a big hole in it with a cigarette spark, and when I’d taken it back to her, she hadn’t been able to get the same color again. It had left a big star-like patch that hit you in the eye.

It was back at my room now. I looked out the window, and I didn’t see anything.

His voice went on: “It took us hours to get all this out of her. We could only get it in snatches, a little at a time, she was so

low. She went under without knowing Ayers had been killed along with her."

I heard the onionskin sheets crackle as he refolded them. No one said anything for awhile. Then Cliff asked, "They been buried yet?"

"Yeah, both. Temporarily, in her case; we haven't been able to contact the husband yet. I understand he's in South America."

"Got pictures of them?"

"Yeah, we got death photographs. Care to see them?"

I knew what was coming up. My blood turned to ice, and I tried to catch Cliff's eye, to warn him in silent desperation: Don't make me look, in front of them. I'll cave, I'll give myself away. I can't stand any more of it, I'm played out.

He said off-handedly, "Yeah, let's have a look."

Waggoner got them out of the same folder that had held the typescript. Blurredly, I could see the large, gray squares passing from hand to hand. I got that indirectly, by their reflections on the polished black window square.

I was staring with desperate intensity out into the night, head averted from them.

I missed seeing just how Cliff worked it, with my head turned away like that. I think he distracted their attention by becoming very animated and talkative all at once, while the pictures were still in his hands, so that Waggoner forgot to put them back where he'd taken them from. I lost track of them.

The next thing I knew the light had snapped out, they were filing out, and he was holding the inner office door for me, empty-handed. "Coming, Vince?"

We passed through the outside room to the street.

The deputy said, "I'll run you back there; it's on my own way home anyway." He got in under the wheel and Cliff got in next to him. I was just going to get in the back when Cliff's voice warded me off like a lazy whip.

“Run back a minute and see if I left my cigarettes in Mr. Waggoner’s office, Vince.”

Then he held Waggoner himself rooted to the spot there beside the car by a sudden burst of parting cordiality. “I want you to be sure and look me up anytime you’d down our way . . .”

His voice dwindled behind me and I was in the darkened inner office again, alone. I knew what I’d been sent back for. He didn’t have any cigarettes in here; he’d given me his last one back at the Fleming house. I found the still-warm cone, curbed its swaying, lit it. They were there on the table under my eyes; he’d left them out there for me purposely. v

The woman’s photograph was topmost. The cone threw a narrow pool of bright light. Her face seemed to come to life in it, held up in my hand. Sight came into the vacant eyes.

I seemed to hear her voice again: “There he is, right behind you!” And the man’s came to life in my other hand. That look he’d given me when I’d bent over him, already wounded to death, on the floor. “What did you have to do that for?”

The cone light jerked high up into the ceiling, and then three pairs of feet were ranged around me, there where I was, flat on the floor. I could hear a blur of awed male voices overhead.

“Out like a light.”

“What did it, you suppose, the pictures? Things like that get him, don’t they? I noticed that already over at the house, before, when I was telling you about the case.”

“He’s not well, he’s under treatment by a doctor right now; he gets these dizzy spells now and then, that’s all it is.” The last was Cliff’s. He squatted down by me on his haunches, raised my head, held a paper cup of water from the filter in the corner to my mouth.

His face and mine were only the cup's breadth away from one another.

"Yes," I sighed soundlessly.

"Shut up," he grunted without moving his lips.

I struggled up and he gave me an arm back to the car. "He'll be all right," he said, and he closed the rear car-door on me. It sounded a little bit like a cell grating.

Waggoner was left behind, standing on the sidewalk in front of his office, in a welter of so longs and much obligeds.

We didn't say anything in the car. We couldn't; the deputy was at the wheel. We changed to Cliff's car at the Fleming house, picked Lil up, and she was blazing sore.

She laced it into him halfway back to the city. "I think you've got one hell of a nerve, Cliff Dodge, leaving me alone like that in a house where I had no business to be in the first place, and going off to talk shop with a couple of corny Keystone cops."

Once, near the end, she said: "What's matter, Vince, don't you feel well?" She'd caught me holding my head, in the rear-vision mirror.

"The outing was a little bit too strenuous for him," Cliff said bitterly.

That brought on a couple of postscripts. "No wonder, the way you drive! Next time, try *not* to get to the place we're going, and maybe you'll make it!" I would have given all my hopes of heaven to be back in that blessed everyday world she was in—where you wrangled and you squabbled, but you didn't kill. I couldn't give that, because I didn't have any hopes of heaven left.

We stopped and he said, "I'll go up with Vince a minute."

I went up the stairs ahead of him. He closed the door after us. He spoke low, without fireworks. He said, "Lil's waiting downstairs, and I'm going to take her home before I do anything.

“I love Lil. It’s bad enough what this is going to do to her when she finds out; I’m going to see that she gets at least one good night’s sleep before she does.”

He went over to the door, ready to leave. “Run out; that’s about the best thing you can do. Meet your finish on the hoof, somewhere else, where your sister and I don’t have to see it happen.

“If you’re still here when I come back, I’m going to arrest you for the murder of Dan Ayers and Dorothy Fleming. I don’t have to ask you if you killed those two people. You fainted dead on the floor when you saw their photographs in death.”

He gave the knob a twist, as if he was choking the life out of his own career. “Take my advice and don’t be here when I get back. I’ll turn in my information at my own precinct house and they can pass it on to Waggoner; then I’ll hand over my own badge in the morning.”

I was pressed up against the wall, as if I was trying to get out of the room where there was no door, arms making swimming-strokes. “I’m frightened,” I said, in a still voice.

“Killers always are,” he answered. “—afterwards. I’ll be back in about half an hour.” He closed the door and went out.

I stayed there against the wall, listening to his steps grow fainter and fainter and finally fade away.

I didn’t move for about hah the time he’d given me. Then I put on the light over the washstand, and turned the warm water tap. I felt my jaw and it was a little bristly. I wasn’t really interested in that.

I opened the cabinet and took out my cream and blade and holder, from sheer reflex of habit. Then I saw I’d taken out too much, and I put back the cream and holder.

The warm water kept running down.

I was in such pain already I didn’t even feel the outer gash when I made it. The water kept carrying it away down the drain.

It would have been quicker at the throat, but I didn't have the guts. This was the old Roman way; slower but just as effective. I did it on the left one too, and then I threw the blade away. I wouldn't need it anymore to shave with.

. . . I was seeing black spots in front of my eyes when he tried to get in the door. I tried to keep very quiet, so he'd think I'd lammed and go away, but I couldn't stand up any more.

He heard the thump when I went down on my knees, and I heard him threaten through the door, "Open it or I'll shoot the lock away!"

It didn't matter now any more. He could come in if he wanted to; he was too late. I floundered over to the door knee-high and turned the key. Then I climbed up it to my feet again. "You could have saved yourself the trip back," I said weakly.

All he said, grimly, was: "I didn't think of that way out"; and then he ripped the ends off his shirt and tied them tight around the gashes, pulling with his teeth till the skin turned blue above them. Then he got me downstairs and into the car.

CHAPTER VIII
THE CANDLE FLAME

They didn't keep me at the hospital, just took stitches in the gashes, sent me home, and told me to stay in bed a day and take it easy. I hadn't even been able to do that effectively. These safety razor blades; no depth.

It was four when we got back to my room. Cliff stood over me while I got undressed, then thumbed the bed for me to get in.

"What about the arrest?" I asked. "Postponed?" I asked it just as a simple question, without any sarcasm, rebuke or even interest. I didn't have any left in me to give it.

"Canceled," he said. "I gave you your chance to run out, and you didn't take it. As a matter of fact I sent Lil home alone; I've been downstairs watching the street door the whole time.

"When a guy is willing to let the life ooze out his veins, there must be something to his story. You don't die to back up lies. You've convinced me of your good faith, if not your innocence.

"I don't know what the explanation is, but I don't think you really know what you did that night."

"I'm tired," I said, "I'm licked. I don't even want to talk about it any more."

"I think I better stick with you tonight." He took one of the pillows and furled it down inside a chair and hunched low in it.

"It's all right," I said spiritlessly. "I won't try it again. I still think it would have been the best way out . . ."

Our voices were low. We were both all in from the emotional stress we'd been through all night long. And in my case, there was the loss of blood.

In another minute one or both of us would have dozed off. In another minute it would have eluded us forever. For no combination of time and place and mood and train-of-thought is ever the same twice.

He yawned. He stretched out his legs to settle himself better; the chair had a low seat and he was long-legged. The shift brought them over a still-damp stain, from my attempt. There were traces of it in a straight line, from the washstand all the way over to the door. He eyed them.

"You sure picked a messy way," he observed drowsily.

"Gas is what occurs to most people first, I imagine," I said, equally drowsily. "It did to me, but this house has no gas. So there was no other way but the blade."

"Good thing it hasn't," he droned. "If more houses had no gas there'd be fewer—"

"Yeah, but if the bulb in your room burns out unexpectedly, it can be damn awkward. That happened to the fellow in the next room one night, I remember, and he had to use a candle—"

My eyes were closed already. Maybe his were too, for all I knew. My somnolent voice had one more phrase to unburden itself of before it, too, fell silent. "It was the same night I had the dream," I added inconsequentially.

"How do you know he had to use a candle? Were you in there at the time?"

His voice opened my eyes again, just as my last straggling remark had opened his. His head wasn't reared, but his face was turned toward me on the pillow.

"No, he rapped and stuck his head in my door a minute, and he was holding the candle. He wanted to know if my light had gone out too; I guess he wanted to see if the current had failed through the whole house, or it was just

the bulb in his room. You know how people are in rooming houses."

"Why'd he have to do that? Couldn't he tell by the hall?" Cliff's voice wasn't as sleepy as before.

"They turn the lights in the upper halls out at eleven-thirty, here, and I guess the hall was dark already."

His head had left the pillow now. "That's still no reason why he should bust in on you. I'd like to hear the rest of this."

"There isn't any rest. I've told you all there is to it."

"That's what you think! Watch what I get out of it. To begin with, who was he? Had you ever seen him before?"

"Oh, sure," I said. "We weren't strangers. His name was Burg. He'd been living in the room for a week or ten days before that. We'd said howdy passing each other on the stairs.

"We'd even stood and chatted down at the street door several times in the evening, when neither of us had anything to do."

"How is it you never mentioned this incident to me before, as many times as I've asked you to account for every single minute of that evening, before you fell asleep?"

"But this has nothing to do with what came up later. You've kept asking me if I was sure I didn't remember having the room at any time, and things like that. I didn't even step out into the hall, when he came to the door like that.

"I was in bed already, and I didn't even get out of bed to let him in. Now what more d'you want?"

"Oh, you were in bed already."

"I'd been in bed some time past, reading the paper like I do every night. I'd just gotten through and put out my own light a couple minutes before, when I heard this light knock —"

Cliff made an approving pass with his hand. “Tell it just like that. Step by step. Tell it like to a six-year-old kid.” He’d left the chair long ago and was standing over me. I wondered why this trifling thing, this less than an incident, should interest him so.

“I turned over, called out ‘Who is it?’ He answered in a low-pitched voice, ‘Burg, from next-door.’ ”

He wrinkled the skin under his eyes. “Low-pitched? Furtive? Cagey?”

I shrugged. “He didn’t want to wake up everyone else on the whole floor, I suppose.”

“Maybe it was that. Go on.”

“I can reach the door from my bed, you know. I stuck out my arm, flipped the key and opened the door. He was standing there in his suspenders, holding this lighted candle in front of him. So he asked if my room light was okay We tried it, and it was.”

“Then did he back right out again?”

“Well, not instantly. We put the light right out again, but he stayed on in the doorway a couple of minutes.”

“Why’d he have to stand in the doorway a couple of minutes once he’d found out your light was okay?”

“Well—uh—winding up the intrusion, signing off, whatever you’d want to call it.”

“In just what words?”

Gee, he was worse than a school teacher in the third grade. “You know how those things go. He said he was sorry he’d disturbed me; he wouldn’t have if he’d realized I was in bed. He said, ‘You’re tired, aren’t you? I can see you’re tired.’ ”

I looked up at Cliff’s face.

“With the light out.” It was a commentary, not a question.

The candle was shining into my face.

He said, ‘Yes, you’re tired. You’re very tired.’ And the funny part of it was I hadn’t been until then, but after he called it to my attention, I noticed he was right.”

“Kind of repetitious, wasn’t he?” Cliff drawled. “You’ve quoted him as saying it four times, already.”

I smiled tolerantly. “I guess he’s got kind of a one-track mind, used to mumbling to himself maybe.”

“All right, keep going.”

“There’s no further to go. He closed the door and went away, and I dropped right off to sleep.”

“Wait a minute; hold it right there. Are you sure that door closed after him? Did you see it close? Did you *hear* it? Or are you just tricking your senses into believing you did, because you figure that’s what must have happened next anyway?”

Was he a hound at getting you mixed up! “I wasn’t so alert any more,” I told him, “I was sort of relaxed.”

“Did it go like this?” He opened it slightly, eased it gently closed. The latch-tongue went *click* into the socket. “Did it go like this?” He opened it a second time, this time eased it back in place holding the knob fast so the latch-tongue couldn’t connect. Even so, the edge of the door itself gave a little thump as it met the frame.

He waited, said: “I can see by the trouble you’re having giving me a positive answer, that you didn’t hear either of those sounds.”

“But the door must’ve closed,” I protested. “What was he going to do, stay in here all night keeping watch at my bedside? The candle seemed to go out, so he must’ve gone out and left me.”

“The candle seemed to go out. How do you know it wasn’t your eyes that dropped closed and shut it out?”

I didn’t say anything.

“I want to ask you a few questions,” he said. “What sort of an effect did his voice have on you, especially when he kept saying, ‘You’re tired’ ?”

“Sort of peaceful. I liked it.”

He nodded at that. “Another thing: Where did he hold that candle, in respect to himself? Off to one side?”

“No; dead center in front of his own face, so that the flame was between his eyes, almost.”

He nodded again. “Did you stare at the flame pretty steadily?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t tear my eyes off it. You know how a flame in a dark room will get you.”

“And behind it—if he was holding it up like you say—you met his eyes.”

“I guess—I guess I must have. He kept it on a straight line between my eyes and his the whole time.”

He worked his cheek around, like he was chewing a sour apple. “Eyes were fixed and glassy as if he was mentally unbalanced,” I heard him mutter. “What?”

“I was just remembering something in that deathbed statement Mrs. Fleming made to Waggoner. One more thing: when you chatted with him downstairs at the street door like you say you did once or twice, what were the topics, can you remember?”

“Oh, a little bit of everything, you know how those things go. At first general things like the weather and baseball and politics. Then later more personal things—you know how you get talking about yourself when you’ve got an interested listener.”

Cliff said: “Mmm . . . Did you ever catch yourself doing something you didn’t want to do, while you were in his company?”

“No. Oh wait, yes. One night he had a box of mentholated coughdrops in his pocket. He kept .taking them out and offering them to me the whole time we were talking. Gosh, if there’s one thing I hate it’s mentholated cough drops. I’d

say no each time, and then I'd give in and take one anyway. Before I knew it, I'd finished the whole box."

Cliff eyed me gloomily. "Testing your will power . . ."

"You seem to make something out of this whole thing," I said helplessly. "What is it?"

"Never mind. I don't want to frighten you right now. You get some sleep, kid. You're weak after what you tried to do just now." I saw him pick up his hat.

"Where you going?" I asked. "I thought you said you were staying here tonight."

"I'm going back to the Fleming house—and to Waggoner's headquarters too, while I'm at it . . .

"And Vince," he added from the doorway, "don't give up yet. We'll find a way out somehow; don't take any more short cuts."

CHAPTER IX
KILL ME AGAIN

It was noon before I woke up; and even then he didn't show up for another two or three hours yet. I didn't dare leave my room, even for a cup of coffee; I was afraid if I did I'd miss him, and he'd think I'd changed my mind and lammed out after all.

He finally showed up around three, and found me worriedly coursing back and forth in my stocking feet, holding one bandaged wrist with the opposite hand. Stiffening was setting in, and they hurt plenty.

But I was fresh as a daisy compared to the shape Cliff was in. He had big black crescents under his eyes from not getting to bed all night, and the first thing he did was sprawl back in the easy chair and kick off his shoes. Then he blew a big breath of relaxation that fanned halfway across the room.

"Were you up there all this time?" I gasped.

"I've been back to town once, in between, to pick up something I needed and get a leave of absence."

He'd brought a large flat slab wrapped in brown paper. He picked it up now, undid it, turning partly away from me, scissored his arms, and then turned back again.

He was holding a large portrait-photograph in a leather frame against his chest for me to see. He didn't say anything; just watched me.

It took a minute for the identity to peer through the contradictory details, trifling as they were.

The well-groomed hair, neatly tapered above the ears instead of shaggily unkempt; the clean-shaven upper lip instead of a sloppy walrus-tusk mustache . . .

And, above all, a look of prosperity, radiating from the perfect fit of the custom-tailored suit-collar, the careful negligence of the expensive necktie, the expression of the face itself—instead of the habitual unbuttoned, tieless, slightly soiled shirt-collar, the hangdog look of middle age inevitably running to seed.

I said, “Hey, that’s Burg! The man that had the room next to me! Where’d you—”

“I didn’t have to ask you that; I already know it, from the landlord and one or two of the other roomers here I’ve shown it to.”

He reached under it with one hand and suddenly swung out a second panel, attached to the first. It was one of those double-easel arrangements that stand on dressers.

She stared back at me; and like a woman, she was different again. She’d been different on each of the three times. This was the third and last time I was to see her.

She had here neither the mask-like scowl of hate at bay I had seen by torchlight, nor yet the rigid ghost-grin of death. She was smiling, calm, alive, lovely-

I made a whimpering sound.

“Burg is Dorothy Fleming’s husband,” Cliff said. “Waggoner gave me this, from their house.”

He must have seen hope beginning to flicker in my eyes. He snuffed it out, with a rueful gnawing at his under lip, a slight shake of his head.

He closed the photofolder and threw it aside. “No,” he said, “no, there’s no out in it for you. Look, Vince. D’you want to know now what we’re up against, once and for all? You’ve got to sooner or later, and it isn’t going to be easy to take.”

“You’ve got bad news for me.”

“Pretty bad. But at least it’s better than this weird stuff that you’ve been shadow-boxing with ever since it

happened. It's rational, down-to-earth, something that the mind can grasp.

"You killed a man that Wednesday night. You may as well get used to the idea. There's no dodging out of it, no possibility of mistake, no shrugging off of responsibility.

"It isn't alone Mrs. Fleming's deathbed description, conclusive as that is; and she didn't make that up out of thin air, you know. Fingerprints that Waggoner's staff took from that mirror door behind which Ayers' body was thrust check with yours. I compared them privately while I was up there, from a drinking glass. I took out of this room here and had dusted over at our own lab."

I looked, and my glass was gone.

"You and nobody but you found your way into the Fleming house and punctured Dan Ayers' heart with an awl and secreted his body in a closet."

He saw my face blanch. "Now steady a minute. You didn't kill Dorothy Fleming. You would have, I guess, but she ran out of the house and down the cutoff for her life.

"You can't drive, and she was killed by somebody in a car. Somebody in Ayers' car, but not Ayers himself obviously, since you had killed him upstairs a minute before yourself.

"Now that proves, of course, that somebody *brought* you up there—and was waiting outside for you at a safe distance, a distance great enough to avoid implication, yet near enough to lend a hand when something went wrong and one of the victims seemed on the point of escaping."

That didn't help much. That halved my crime, but the half was still as great as the whole. After being told you'd committed one murder, where was the solace in being told you hadn't committed a dozen others?

I held my head. "But why didn't I *know* I was doing it?" I groaned.

“We can take care of that later,” Cliff said. “I can’t prove what I think it was, right now; and what good is an explanation without proof? There’s only one way to prove it: show it could have happened the first time by getting it to happen all over again a second time.”

I thought he was going crazy—or I was. “You mean, go back and commit the crime all over again—when they’re both already buried?”

“No, not quite-that. Don’t ask me to explain until afterward; if I do, you’ll get all tense, keyed up; you’re liable to jeopardize the whole thing without meaning to. I want you to keep cool; everything’ll depend on that.”

I wondered what he was going to ask me.

“It’s nearly four o’clock now,” he said. “We haven’t much time. A telegram addressed to Mrs. Fleming was finally received from her husband while I was up there; he’s arriving back from South America today.

“Waggoner took charge of it and showed it to me. He’s ordered her reburied in a private plot, and will probably get there in. time for the services.” I trailed him downstairs to his car, got in beside him limply. “Where we going?” I asked.

He didn’t start the car right away; gave me a half-rueful, half-apologetic look. “What place would you most hate to go to, of all places, right now?” That wasn’t hard. “That eight-sided mirrored alcove—where I did it.”

“I was afraid of that. I’m sorry, kid, but that’s the very place you’re going to have to go back to, and stay in alone tonight, if you ever want to get out from under the shadows again. Whaddye say, shall we make the try?”

He still didn’t start the car, gave me lots of time.

I only took four or five minutes. I slapped in my stomach, which made the sick feeling go up into my throat, and I said: “I’m ready.”

I'd been sitting on the floor, outside it, to rest, when I heard him come in. There were other people with him. The silence of the house, tomblike until then, was abruptly shattered by their entrance into the lower hall. I couldn't tell how many of them there were. They went into the living room, and their voices became less distinct.

I stood up and got ready, but I stayed out a while longer, to be able to breathe better. I knew I had time yet; he wouldn't come up right away.

The voices were subdued, as befitted a solemn post-funerary occasion. "Every once in a while, though, I could make out a snatch of something that was said.

Once I heard someone ask: "Don't you want to come over to our place tonight, Joel? You don't mean you're going to stay here alone in this empty house after—after such a thing?"

I strained my ears for the answer—a lot depended on it—and I got it. "I'm closer to her here than anywhere else." Presently they all came out into the hall again, on their way out, and I could hear goodnights being said. "Try not to think about it too much, Joel. Get some sleep."

The door closed. A car drove off outside, then a second one. No more voices after that. The tomblike silence almost returned.

But not quite. A solitary tread down there, returning from the front door, told that someone had remained. It went into the living room and I heard the clink of a decanter against a glass.

Then a frittering of piano notes struck at random, the way a person does who has found contentment, is eminently pleased with himself.

Then a light switch ticked and the tread came out, started unhurriedly up the stairs. It was time to get in.

I put one foot behind me, and followed it back. I drew concealment before me in the shape of a mirror panel, all

but the ultimate finger's breadth of gap, to be able to breathe and watch.

The oncoming tread had entered the bedroom adjacent to me, and a light went on in theie. I heard a slatted blind spin down. Then the sound of a valise being shifted out into a more accessible position, and the click of the key used to open it.

I could even glimpse the colored labels on the lid as it went up and over. South American hotels.

I saw bodiless hands reach down, take things out: striped pajamas and piles of folded linen, that had never seen South America. That had probably lain hidden on a shelf in some public checkroom in the city all this time.

My heart was going hard. The dried blood on the woodwork at my back, of someone I had killed, seemed to sear me where it touched. It was the blood of someone *I* had killed, not this man out there. No matter what happened now, tonight nothing could absolve me of that.

There was no possibility of transfer of blame. Cliff had told me so, and it was true.

A light went up right outside where I was, and an ice-white needle of it splintered in at me, lengthwise, from top to bottom, but not broad enough to focus anything it fell on —from the outside.

I could see a strip of his back by it. He had come in and was squatting down by the damaged safe, mirror-covering swung out of the way. He swung its useless lid in and out a couple of times. I heard him give an almost soundless chuckle, as if the vandalism amused him.

Then he took things out of his coat pockets and began putting them in. Oblong manila envelopes such as are used to contain currency and securities, lumpy tissue-wrapped shapes that might have been jewelry.

Then he gave the safe door an indifferent slap-to. As if whether it shut tight or not didn't matter: what it held was perfectly safe—for the present.

Then he stood, before turning to go out. This was the time. Now.

CHAPTER X
THE SPARK WENT OUT

I took the gun Cliff had given me, his gun, out of my pocket, and raised it to what they call the wishbone of the chest and held it there, pointed before me. Then I moved one foot out before me, and that took the door away, in a soundless sweep.

I was standing there like that when he turned finally. The mirror covering the safe-niche had been folded back until now, so he didn't see the reflection of my revelation.

The shock must have been almost galvanic. His throat made a sound like the creak of a rusty pulley. I thought he was going to fall down insensible for a minute. His body made a tortured cork-screw-twist all the way down to his feet, but he stayed up.

I had a lot to remember. Cliff had told me just what to say, and what not to say. I'd had to learn my lines by heart, and particularly the right timing of them.

That was even more important. He'd warned me I had a very limited time in which to say everything I was to say. I would be working against a deadline that might fall at any minute; but he didn't tell me what it was.

He'd warned me that we both—this man I was confronting and I—would be walking a tightrope, without benefit of balancing poles. Everything depended on which one of us made a false step first.

It was a lot to remember, staring at the man whom I had only known until now as Burg, a fellow rooming-house lodger; the man who held the key to the mystery that had suddenly clouded my existence.

And I had to remember each thing in the order it had been given me, in the proper sequence, or it was no good.

The first order was: Make him speak first. If it takes all night, wait until he speaks first.

He spoke finally. Somebody had to, and I didn't. "How'd *you* get here?" It was the croak of a frog in mud.

"You showed me the way, didn't you?" I could see the lump in his throat as he forced it down, to be able to articulate. "You're—You remember coming here?"

"You didn't think I would, did you?" His eyes rolled. "You—you couldn't have!"

The gun and I, we never moved. "Then how did I get back here again? You explain it."

I saw his eyes flick toward the entrance to the alcove. I shifted over a little, got it behind me, to seal him in. I felt with my foot and drew the door in behind me, not fast but leaving only a narrow gap.

"How long have you been in here like—like this?"

"Since shortly after dark. I got in while you were away at the funeral services."

"Who'd you bring with you?"

"Just this." I righted the gun, which had begun to incline a little at the bore.

He couldn't resist asking it; he wouldn't have been human if he hadn't asked it, in his present predicament. "Just how much do you remember?"

I gave him a wise smile, that implied everything without saying so. It was Cliff's smile, not mine; but formed by my lips.

"You remember the drive up?" He said it low, but he'd wavered on the wire, that tightrope Cliff had mentioned. "You couldn't have! You had the look, the typical look—"

"What look?"

He shut up; he'd regained his equilibrium.

"I was holding a thumb tack pressed into the palm of each hand the whole way."

“Then why did you do everything I—you were directed to, so passively?”

“I wanted to see what it was leading up to. I thought maybe there might be some good in it for me later, if anyone went to all that trouble.”

“You purposely feigned? I can’t believe it! You didn’t even draw back, exhibit a tremor, when I let you out of the car, put the knife in your hand, sent you on toward the house, told you how to get in and what to do? You mean you went, ahead and consciously—”

“Sure I went ahead and did it, because I figured you’d pay off heavy afterwards to keep me quiet. And if I’d tried to balk then, I probably would have gotten the knife myself, on the way back, for my trouble.”

“What happened, what went wrong inside?”

“I accidentally dropped the knife in the dark somewhere in the lower hall and couldn’t find it again. I went on up empty-handed, thinking I’d just frighten them out the back way and get a chance at the safe myself.

“But Ayers turned on me and got me down, he weighed more than I do, and he was going to kill *me*—to keep it from coming out that he and your wife were cheating, and had been caught in the act of breaking into your safe in the bargain.

“Only by mistake, she put the awl that he cried out for into my hand instead of his. I plunged it into him in self-defense.”

He nodded as if this cleared up something that had been bothering him. “Ah, that explains the change of weapon that had me mystified. Also how it was that she got out of the house like that and I had to go after her and—stop her myself.

“Luckily I was crouched behind the hood of Ayers’ car, peering at the open door, when she came running out. She couldn’t drive herself, so she didn’t try to get in but ran screaming on foot down the cut-off.

“I jumped in without her seeing me, tore after her, and caught up with her. If I hadn’t, the whole thing would have ended in a ghastly failure. I might have known you were under imperfect control.”

He’d fallen off long ago, gone hurtling down. But I still had a deadline to work against, things to say, without knowing why.

“Your control was perfect enough; don’t let that worry you. You haven’t lost your knack.”

“But you just said—”

“And you fell for it. I didn’t know what I was doing when you brought me up here and sent me in to do your dirty work for you that night.

“Haven’t you missed something from your late wife’s bedroom since you’ve been back? There was a double photofolder of you and her. The police took that.

“I happened to see both pictures in one of the papers. I recognized you as Burg. I’d also recognized my own description, by a darned sweater I wore that night, and had a vague recollection—like when you’ve been dreaming—of having been in such a house and taken part in such a scene.

“You’ve convicted yourself out of your own mouth to me, right now. I haven’t come back here to be paid off for my participation or take a cut in any hush money. Nothing you can give me from that safe can buy your life.

“You picked someone with weak willpower, maybe, but strong scruples. I was an honest man. You’ve made me commit murder. I can’t clear myself in the eyes of the law—ever.

“You’re going to pay for doing that to me. Now. *This* way.”

His face was working, his voice hoarse as he said:

“Wait; don’t do that. That won’t help you any. Alive, maybe I can do something for you. I’ll give you money, I’ll get you out of the country. No one needs to know.”

“My conscience’ll always know. I’ve got an honest man’s conscience in a murderer’s body, now. You should have let me alone. That was your mistake. Here you go, Fleming.”

He was almost incoherent, drooling at the mouth. “Wait—one minute more! Just sixty seconds.” He took out a thin gold pocket watch and snapped up its burnished lid. He held it face toward me, open that way.

I saw what he was trying to do. Cliff had warned me to be careful. I dropped my eyes to his feet, kept them stubbornly lowered, brow furrowed with resistance, while I held the gun on him. Something kept trying to pull them up.

A flash from the burnished metal of the inside of the watch-lid wavered erratically across my chest-front for an instant, like when kids tease you with sunlight thrown back, from a mirror.

“Look up,” he kept pleading. “Look up. Just one minute more. See—the hands are at six to. Look, just until they get to here.”

Something was the matter with the trigger of the gun; it must have jammed. I kept trying to close the finger that was hooked around it, and it resisted. Or else maybe it was the finger that wouldn’t obey my will.

I kept blinking more and more rapidly. The flash slithered across my shuttering eyes, slid off, came back again. They wanted so bad to look up into it; it prickled.

There was a slight snap, as if he had surreptitiously pulled out the stem-winder, to set the watch back. That did it.

I glanced up uncontrollably. He was holding the watch up, brow-high—like he had the candle that night—as if to give me a good, unobstructed look at its dial. It was in about the position doctors carry those little attached head-mirrors with which they examine throats.

I met his eyes right behind it, and all of a sudden my own couldn't get away any more, as if they'd hit glue.

A sort of delicious torpor turned me into wax; I didn't have any ideas of my own any more. I was open to anyone else's. My voice control lasted a moment longer than the rest of my functions. I heard it say, carrying a left-over message that no longer had any willpower behind it, "I'm going to shoot you."

"No," he said soothingly. "You're tired; you don't want to shoot anybody. You're tired. The gun's too heavy for you. Why do you want to hold that heavy thing?"

I heard a far-away thump as it hit the floor. As far away as if it had fallen right through to the basement. Gee, it felt good to be without it!

I felt lazy all over. The light was going out, but very gradually, like it was tired too. The whole world was tired.

Somebody, was crooning. "You're tired, you're tired—you dirty bum *now I've got you!"*

There was a white flash that seemed to explode inside my head, and it hurt like anything.

Something cold and wet pressed against my eyes when I tried to flicker them open. And when I had, instead of getting lighter as when you're slowly waking up, the world around me seemed to get darker and weigh against me crushingly, all over.

The pain increased, traveled from my head to my lungs. Knives seemed to slash into them, and I couldn't breathe.

I could feel my eyeballs starting out of their sockets with strangulation, and my head seemed about to burst. The pressure of the surrounding darkness seemed to come against me in undulating waves.

I realized that I was under water and was drowning. I could swim, but now I couldn't seem to. I tried to rise and something kept holding me down.

I doubled over, forced myself down against the surrounding resistance, groped blindly along my own legs. One seemed free and unencumbered; I could lift it quite, easily from the mucky bottom.

About the ankle of the other there was a triple constriction of tightly-coiled rope, like a hideous hempen gaiter. It was tangled hopelessly about a heavy iron cross-bar.

When I tried to raise this, one scimitarlike appendage came free, the other remained hopelessly hooked into the slime it had slashed into from above. It must have been some sort of a small but weighty anchor such as is used by launches and fishing craft.

I couldn’t release it. I couldn’t endure the bend of position against my inner suffocation. I spiraled upright again in death-fluid. My jaws kept going spasmodically, drinking in extinction.

A formless blur came down from somewhere, brushed lightly against me, shunted away again before I could grasp it, shot up out of reach. I couldn’t see it so much as sense it as a disturbance in the water.

There were only fireworks inside my skull now, not conscious thoughts any more. The blurred manifestation shot down again, closer this time. It seemed to hang there, flounderingly, upside down, beside me.

I felt a hand close around my ankle. Then a knife grazed my calf and withdrew. I could feel a tugging at the rope, as if it was being sliced at.

Self-preservation was the only spark left in my darkening brain. I clutched at the hovering form in the death-grip of the drowning. I felt myself shooting up through water, together with it, inextricably entangled.

I wouldn’t let go. Couldn’t. Something that felt like a small ridged rock crashed into my forehead. Even the spark of self-preservation went out.

CHAPTER XI
LAST ORDEAL

When I came to I was lying out on a little pier or stringpiece of some kind, and there were stars over me. I was in shorts and undershirt, wringing wet and shivering, and water kept flushing up out of my mouth.

Somebody kept kneading my sides in and cut, and somebody else kept flipping my arms up and down.

I coughed a lot, and one of them said: “There he is; he’s all right now.” He stood up and it was Cliff. He was in his underwear and all dripping too.

A minute later Waggoner stood up on the other side of me. He was equally sodden, but he’d left on everything but his coat and shoes. There hadn’t been any time by then, I guess.

He said, “Now get something around him and then the three of us better get back to the house fast and kill the first bottle we find.”

There was light coming from somewhere behind us, through some fir trees that bordered the little lake. It played up the little pier. By it, I could see my own outer clothes neatly piled at the very lip of it.

There was a paper on top of them, pressed down by one of my oxfords. Cliff picked it up and brought it over and read it to us.

I’m wanted for the murder of those two people at the Fleming house, they’re bound to get me sooner or later, and I have no chance. I see no other way but this.

Vincent Hardy

It was in my own handwriting; the light was strong enough for me to see that when he showed it to me. I was silent.

He looked at Waggoner and said, “Do we need this?”

Waggoner pursed his lips thoughtfully and said, “I think we’re better off without it. These coroner-inquest guys can be awfully dumb sometimes; it might sort of cloud their judgment.”

Cliff took a match from his dry coat and struck it and held it to the note until there wasn’t any to hold any more.

I was feeling better now, all but the shivering. I was sitting up. I looked back at the glow through the trees and said, “What’s that?”

“Fleming’s car,” Cliff answered. “He tried to take a curve too fast getting away from here, when we showed up on his tail, and he turned over and kindled.”

I grimaced. That was about all that could have still stirred horror in me after the past ten days: a cremation alive.

“I shot him first,” Cliff said quietly. “One of us did,” Waggoner corrected. “We all three fired after him. We’ll never know which one hit him. We don’t want to anyway. The machine telescoped and we couldn’t get him out. And then I had to give Dodge a hand going down after you; he’s no great shakes of a swimmer.”

“We had to hit him,” Cliff said. “It was the only way of breaking the hypnosis in time. You were drowning down there by your own act, and there was no time to chase him and force him at gun-point to release his control, or whatever it is they do.

“We only found out about the anchor after we’d located you.”

A figure was coming back toward us from the glow, which was dwindling down now. It was the deputy. He said, “Nothing left now; I wet it down all I could to keep it from kindling the trees.”

“Let’s get back to the house,” Cliff said. “The kid’s all goose pimples.”

We went back and I got very soused on my third of the bottle. I couldn’t even seem to do that properly. They let me

sleep it off there; the four of us spent the night right there where we were.

In the morning Cliff came in and had a talk with me before the other two were up. I knew where I was going to have to go with him in a little while, but I didn't mind so much any more.

I said, "Did that help any, what I did last night? Did it do any good?"

"Sure," he said. "It was the works; it was what I wanted and had to have. What d'you suppose I was doing around here all day yesterday, before he got back? Why d'you suppose I warned you to make him stay right there in the alcove with you and not let the conversation drift outside?

"I had it all wired up; we listened in on the whole thing. The three of us were down in the basement, taking it all down. We've got the whole thing down on record now. I'd emptied that gun I gave you, and I figured he'd be too smart to do anything to you right here in his own house.

"Only he got you out and into his car too quick, before we had a chance to stop him. We darned near lost you. We turned back after one false start toward the city, and a truckman told us he'd glimpsed a car in the distance tearing down the lake road That gave us the answer.

"We wouldn't have even been able to hold your suicide against him. You did all that yourself, you know, even to shackling your foot to that boat-anchor and dropping it over ahead of you. A person who is afraid of the jump into water but determined to go through with it might have taken such a precaution as that.

"I had a hunch it was hypnosis the minute you told me that candle incident. But how was I going to prove it? So much of that stuff is fake that most people don't want to believe in it.

“Now I’ve got two other police officers, beside myself, who saw—or rather heard—the thing happened all over again.

“You were in a state of hypnosis when you committed this crime; that’s the whole point. You were simply the weapon in the actual murderer’s hands. Your own mind wasn’t functioning; you had no mind.”

He stopped and looked at me. “Does that scare you?”

“Does it?” I must have looked sick.

“It would me too. I’d better begin at the beginning. Joel Fleming used to be a professional hypnotist in vaudeville years ago. I found enough scrapbooks, old theater programs, and whatnot in trunks here in this house to testify to that. Stage name, ‘Dr. Mephisto.’

“He undoubtedly possesses a gift of hypnotic control—over certain subjects. (With my wife Lil, for instance, I’m afraid he’d come a complete cropper—and wind up helping her dry dishes.)”

He was trying to cheer me up; I grinned appreciatively.

He went on, more seriously: “Well, he got out of vaudeville years ago while the getting out was still good, and he went into another line of business entirely, which doesn’t need to concern us here, and he made good dough.

“Then he made the mistake of marrying someone years younger than him, a hat-check girl he met at a nightclub.

“It wasn’t only that she married him simply for his money and to be able to quit handling people’s sweatbands at four bits a throw; she was already the sweetie of a convict named Dan Ayers, who was doing time just then for embezzlement.

“You get the idea, don’t you? Ayers got out, found a ready-made situation crying to be profited by—so he profited by it. He cultivated Fleming, got in solid with him; he didn’t have to get in solid with Dorothy, he was already.

“All right. Fleming did make these trips to South America, all but the last time. It’s obvious that he found out what was going on quite some time back, somewhere between the last real trip he made and the fake one just now.

“It’s equally obvious that he brooded and he planned revenge. It wasn’t just a case of marital disloyalty involved either: he found out they were planning to make off with all his available funds and securities the next time he was away, just strip him clean and goodbye.

“You notice he didn’t entrust her with the safe combination here in the house.

“That’s conjecture: the three principals are dead now and can’t give evidence. I’m not trying to defend Fleming, but I can see why he wanted Ayers dead—and wanted Dorothy dead too.

“But he picked a low, lousy way of getting it done. He wasn’t going to endanger himself. No, he started off for ‘South America’, dropped from sight, holed up in a rooming house in the city under the name of Burg.

“Then he picked an innocent kid, who had never done him any harm, who had just as much right as he had to life and the pursuit of happiness, to do his murdering for him.

“He tested you out, saw that you were a suitable subject, and—well, the rest we got over the dictaphone last night. To give him his due, he wasn’t deliberately trying to have you apprehended for the crime either. He would have been just as satisfied if you were never caught.

“But if they ever caught the man the clues pointed to, if they ever caught the killer, it would always be you, not him.

“True, he had to drive you up there, because you don’t drive. It was just as well he did, from his point of view. You lost the knife, only killed Ayers by a fluke in struggling with him, and Dorothy would have gotten away if he hadn’t been lurking outside to lend a hand himself.

“If she had lived to raise the alarm, you probably would have been nabbed then and there, before you could make a

getaway—which would have brought the investigation back to the rooming house too quickly to suit him. So he crushed her to death and whisked you back to immunity."

I'd been thinking hard through all of this. "But Cliff," I said, "how is it I remembered the whole murder scene so vividly the next morning? Especially their faces—"

"His control wasn't one hundred percent effective; I don't know if it ever is. The whole scene must have filtered dimly through to your conscious mind, and remained in your memory the next morning after you woke up—just the way a dream does.

And other particles, that remained imbedded in your subconscious at first, also came out later when they reproduced themselves in actuality: I mean your memory of the stone entrance lanterns, the cut-off, the spare door key, the hall light-switch, and so on.

"All that stuff is way over my head; I'm not qualified to pass expert judgment on it. I'd rather not even puzzle too hard about it; it scares me myself."

"Why did I seem to know her, when I didn't? Why was I so sort of hurt, heartbroken, at the sight of her face?"

"Those were Fleming's thoughts, not yours, filtering through your mind. She was his wife, about to desert him, helping another man to rob him."

I was sitting down on the edge of the bed, lacing my shoes. That reminded me of something else. "It was drizzling in town that night when I went to bed, and the streets were only starting to dry off when I woke up the next morning.

"Yet the soles of my shoes were perfectly dry. How could they be, if I followed him even across the sidewalk to where he had a car waiting."

"I remember you mentioned that to me once before, and it's puzzled me too. The only possible explanation I can

think of is this—and that's another thing we'll never know for sure, because that point didn't come up when he was giving himself away in the alcove last night.

"Can you remember whether you got your shoes off easily that night, when you were undressing in your own room; or as sometimes happens with nearly everyone, did the laces get snarled, so you couldn't undo the knot of one or both of them?"

I tried to remember. "I'm not sure, but I think a snag did form in the laces of one of them, so I pulled it off the way it was without opening it properly."

"And in the morning?"

"They both seemed all right."

"That's what it was, then. You couldn't undo the knot in time while you were hurriedly getting dressed under his direction. You followed him out and around to wherever the car was in your stocking feet, shoes probably shoved into the side pockets of your coat. He got the knot out for you at his leisure in the car, before starting.

"It wasn't raining up here that night, and by the time you got back to town again the sidewalks were already starting to dry off, so your shoes stayed dry."

"But wouldn't my socks have gotten wet?"

"They probably did, but they'd dry off again quicker than shoes."

I was ready now. Waggoner and his deputy went over ahead without waiting for us. I guess he figured I'd rather just go alone with Cliff, and he wanted to make it as easy as he could for me.

He said, "Bring the kid over whenever you're ready, Dodge."

Cliff and I started over by ourselves about half an hour later. I knew I'd have to go into a cell for a while, but that didn't worry me any more; the shadows had lifted.

When we got out in front of the office Cliff asked: “Are you scared, kid?”

I was a little, like when you’re going in to have a tooth yanked or a broken arm reset. You know it’s got to be done, and you’ll feel a lot better after it’s over. “Sort of,” I admitted, forcing a smile.

“You’ll be all right,” he promised, giving me a heartening grip on the shoulder. “I’ll be standing up right next to you. They probably won’t even send it all the way through to prosecution.”

We went in together.

ALL AT ONCE, NO ALICE

He stepped out of the warm sunlight into a dark, empty room; he groped in terror, and his hands met only the constricting black void. And no one would believe what he said—about the little girl who wasn't there . . .

CHAPTER I
THE NARROW ROOM

It was over so quickly I almost thought something had been left out, but I guess he'd been doing it long enough to know his business. The only way I could tell for sure it was over, was when I heard him say: "You may kiss the bride." But then, I'd never gone through it before.

We turned and pecked at each other, a little bashful because they were watching us.

He and the motherly-looking woman who had been a witness—I guess she was his housekeeper—stood there smiling benevolently, and also a little tiredly. The clock said one fifteen. Then he shook hands with the two of us and said, "Good luck to both of you," and she shook with us too and said, "I wish you a lot of happiness."

We shifted from the living room where it had taken place, out into the front hall, a little awkwardly. Then he held the screen door open and we moved from there out onto the porch.

On the porch step Alice nudged me and whispered, "You forgot something."

I didn't even know how much I was supposed to give him. I took out two singles and held them in one hand, then I took out a five and held that in the other. Then I went back toward him all flustered and said, "I—I guess you thought I was going to leave without remembering this."

I reached my hand down to his and brought it back empty. He kept right on smiling, as if this happened nearly every time too, the bridegroom forgetting like that. It was only after I turned away and rejoined her that I glanced down at my other hand and saw which it was I'd given him. It was the first. That was all right; five thousand of them couldn't have paid him for what he'd done for me, the way I felt about it.

We went down their front walk and got into the car. The lighted doorway outlined them both for a minute. They raised their arms and said, “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, and much obliged,” I called back. “Wait’ll they go in,” I said in an undertone to Alice, without starting the engine right away.

As soon as the doorway had blacked out, we turned and melted together on the front seat, and this time we made it a real kiss. “Any regrets?” T whispered to her very softly.

“It must have been awful before I was married to you,” she whispered back. “How did I ever stand it so long?”

I don’t think we said a word all the way in to Micluanopolis. We were both too happy. Just the wind and the stars and us. And a couple of cigarettes.

We got to the outskirts around two thirty, and by three were all the way in downtown. We shopped around for a block or two. “This looks like a nicc hotel,” I said finally. I parked outside and we went in.

I think the first hotel was called the Commander. I noticed that an. bellhops let us strictly alone; didn’t bustle out to bring in our bags or anything.

I said to the desk man, “We’d like one of your best rooms and bath.”

He gave me a sort of rueful smile, as if to say, “You should know better than that.”

“I only wish I had something to give you,” was the way he put it.

“All filled up?” I turned to her and murmured, “Well, we’ll have to try’ some place else.”

He overheard me. “Excuse me, but did you come in without making reservations ahead?”

“Yes, we just drove in now. Why?” He shook his head compassionately at my ignorance. “I’m afraid you’re going

to have a hard time finding a room in any of the hotels tonight."

"Why? They can't all be filled up."

"There's a three-day convention of the Knights of Balboa being held here. All the others started sending their overflow to us as far back as Monday evening, and our own last vacancy went yesterday noon."

The second one was called the Stuyvesant, I think. "There must be something, in a city this size," I said when we came out of there. "We'll keep looking until we find it."

I didn't bother noticing the names of the third and fourth. We couldn't turn around and go all the way back to our original point of departure—it would have been mid-morning before we reached it—and there was nothing that offered suitable accommodations between ; just filling stations, roadside lunchrooms and detached farmsteads.

Besides she was beginning to tire. She refused to admit it, but it was easy to tell. It worried me.

The fifth place was called the Royal.

It was already slightly less first-class than the previous ones had been; we were running out of them now. Nothing wrong with it, but just a little seedier and older.

I got the same answer at the desk, but this time I wouldn't take it. The way her face drooped when she heard it was enough to make me persist. I took the night clerk aside out of her hearing.

"Listen, you've got to do something for me, I don't care what it is," I whispered fiercely. "We've just driven all the way from Lake City and my wife's all in. I'm not going to drag her around to another place tonight"

Then as his face continued impassive, "If you can't accommodate both of us, find some way of putting her up at least. I'm willing to take my own chances, go out and sleep in the car or walk around the streets for the night."

“Wait a minute,” he said, hooking his chin, “I think I could work out something like that for you. I just thought of something. There’s a little bit of a dinky room on the top floor. Ordinarily it’s not used as a guest room at all, just as a sort of storeroom. You couldn’t possibly both use it, because there’s only a single-width cot in it; but if you don’t think your wife would object, I’d be glad to let her have it, and I think you might still be able to find a room for yourself at the Y. They don’t admit women, and most of these Knights have brought their wives with them.”

I took a look at her pretty, drawn face. “Anything, anything,” I said gratefully.

He still had his doubts. “You’d better take her up and let her see it first.” A colored boy came with us, with a passkey. On the way up I explained it to her. She gave me a rueful look, but I could see she was too tired even to object as much as she felt she should have. “Ah, that’s mean,” she murmured, “Our first night by ourselves.”

“It’s just for tonight. We’ll drive on right after breakfast. It’s important that you get some rest, hon. You can’t fool me, you can hardly keep your eyes open any more.”

She tucked her hand consolingly under my arm. “I don’t mind if you don’t. It’ll give me something to look forward to, seeing you in the morning.”

The bellboy led us along a quiet, green-carpeted hall, and around a turn, scanning numbers on the doors. He stopped three down from the turn, on the right-hand side, put his key in. “This is it here, sir.” The number was 1006.

The man at the desk hadn’t exaggerated. The room itself was little better than an alcove, long and narrow. I suppose two could have gotten into it; but it would have been a physical impossibility for two to sleep in it the way it was fitted up. It had a cot that was little wider than a shelf.

To give you an idea how narrow the room was, the window was narrower than average, and yet not more than a foot of wall-strip showed on either side of its frame. In

other words it took up nearly the width of one entire side of the room.

I suppose I could have sat up in the single armchair all night and slept, or tried to, that way; but as long as there was a chance of getting a horizontal bed at the Y, why not be sensible about it? She agreed with me in this.

"Think you can go this, just until the morning?" I asked her, and the longing way she was eyeing that miserable cot gave me the answer. She was so tired, anything would have looked good to her right then.

We went down again and I told him I'd take it. I had the bellboy take her bag out of the car and bring it in, and the desk clerk turned the register around for her to sign.

She poised the inked pen and flashed me a tender look just as she was about to sign. "First time I've used it," she breathed. I looked over her shoulder and watched her trace *Mrs. James Cannon* along the lined space. The last entry above hers was *A. Krumbake, and wife.* I noticed it because it was such a funny name.

The desk clerk had evidently decided by now that we were fairly desirable people. "I'm terribly sorry I couldn't do more for you," he said.

"It's just for this one night. By tomorrow morning, already, a lot of them'll be leaving."

I went up with her a second time, to see that she was made as comfortable as she could be under the circumstances. But then there was nothing definitely wrong with the room except its tininess, and the only real hardship was our temporary separation.

I tipped the boy for bringing up her bag, and then I tipped him a second time for going and digging up a nice, fluffy quilt for her at my request—not to spread over her but to spread on top of the mattress and soften it up a little. Those cots aren't as comfortable as regular beds by a

darned sight. But she was so tired I was hoping she wouldn't notice the difference.

Then after he'd thanked me for the double-header he'd gotten out of it, and left the room, I helped her off with her coat and hung it up for her, and even got down on my heels and undid the straps of her little sandals, so she wouldn't have to bend over and go after them herself. Then we kissed a couple of times and told each other all about it, and I backed out the door.

The last I saw of her that night she was sitting on the edge of that cot in there, her shoeless feet raised to it and partly tucked under her, like a little girl. She raised one hand, wriggled the fingers at me in goodnight as I reluctantly eased the door closed.

"Until tomorrow, sweetheart," she called gently, when there was a crack of opening left.

"Until tomorrow."

The night was as still around us as if it were holding its breath. The latch went *cluck,* and there we were on opposite sides of it.

The bellboy had taken the car down with him just now after he'd checked her in, and I had to wait out there a minute or two for him to bring it back up again at my ring. I stepped back to the turn in the hall while waiting, to look at the frosted glass transom over her door; and short as the time was, her light was already out. She must have just shrugged off her dress, fallen back flat, and pulled the coverings up over her.

Poor kid, I thought, with a commiserating shake of my head. The glass elevator panel flooded with light and I got in the car. The one bellhop doubled for liftman after twelve.

"I guess she'll be comfortable," he said.

"She was asleep already before I left the floor," I told him.

The desk man told me where the nearest branch of the Y was, and I took the car with me as the quickest way of

getting over there at that hour. I had no trouble at all getting a room, and not a bad one at that for six bits.

I didn't phone her before going up, to tell her I'd gotten something for myself, because I knew by the way I'd seen that light go out she was fast asleep already, and it would have been unnecessarily cruel to wake her again.

I woke up eight, and again I didn't phone her to find out how she was, because in the first place I was going right over there myself in a few more minutes, and in the second place I wanted her to get all the sleep she could before I got there.

I even took my time, showered and shaved up good, and drove over slowly, to make sure of not getting there any earlier than nine.

It was a beautiful day, with the sun as brand-new-looking as if it had never shone before, was just being broken in; and I even stopped off and bought a gardenia for her to wear on the shoulder of her dress. I thought: I'll check her out of that depressing dump. We'll drive to the swellest restaurant in town, and she'll sit having orange juice and toast while I sit looking at her face.

I braked in front of the Royal, got out, and went in, lighting up the whole lobby the way I was beaming.

A different man was at the desk now, on the day shift, but I knew the number of her room so I rode right up without stopping. I got out at the tenth, went down the hall the way he'd led us last night—still green-carpeted but a little less quiet now—and around the turn.

When I came to the third door down, on the right-hand side—the door that had 1006 on it—I stopped and listened a minute to see if I could tell whether she was up yet or not. If she wasn't up yet, I was going back downstairs again, hang around in the lobby, and give her another half hour of badly-needed sleep.

But she was up already. I could hear a sound in there as if she were brushing out her dress or coat with a stiff-bristled brush—*skish, skish, skish*—so I knocked, easy and loving, on the door with just three knuckles.

The *skish-skish-skish* broke off a minute, but then went right on again. But the door hadn't been tightly closed into the frame at all, and my knocking sent it drifting inward an inch or two. A whiff of turpentine or something like that nearly threw me over, but without stopping to distinguish what it was or wonder what it was coming from there, I pushed the door the rest of the way in and walked in.

Then I pulled up short. I saw I had the wrong room.

There wasn't anything in it—no furniture, that is. Just bare floorboards, walls and ceiling. Even the light fixture had been taken down, and two black wires stuck out of a hole, like insect feelers, where it had been.

A man in spotted white overalls and peaked cap was standing on a step-ladder slapping a paint brush up and down the walls. *Skish-skish-splop!*

I grunted, "Guess I've got the wrong number," and backed out.

"Guess you must have, bud," he agreed, equally laconic, without even turning his head to see who I was.

I looked up at the door from the outside. Number 1006. Rut that was the number they'd given her, sure it was. I looked in a second time. Long and narrow, like an alcove. Not more than a foot of wall space on either side of the window frame.

Sure, this was the room, all right. They must have found out they had something better available after all, and changed her after I left last night. I said, "Where'd they put the lady that was in here, you got any idea?"

Skish-skish-skish.

"I dunno, bud, you'll have to find out at the desk. It was empty when I come here to work at seven."

Skish-skish-splop!

I went downstairs to the desk again, and I said, “Excuse me. What room have you got Mrs. Cannon in now?” He looked up some chart or other they use, behind the scenes, then he came back and said, “We have no Mrs. Cannon here.”

CHAPTER II
ALICE WHERE ART THOU?

I pulled my face back. Then I thrust it forward again. “What’s the matter with you?” I said curtly “I came here with her myself last night. Better take another look.”

He did. A longer one. Then he came back and said, “I’m sorry, there’s no Mrs. Cannon registered here.”

I knew there was nothing to get excited about; it would probably be straightened out in a minute or two; but it was a pain in the neck. I was very patient. After all, this was the first morning of my honeymoon. “Your night man was on duty at the time. It was about three-thirty this morning. He gave her 1006.”

He looked that up too. “That’s not in use,” he said. “That’s down for redecorating. It’s been empty for the past—”

“I don’t care what it is. I tell you they checked my wife in there at three this morning, I went up with her myself! Will you quit arguing and find out what room she’s in, for me? I don’t want to stand here talking to you all day; I want to be with her.”

“But I’m telling you, mister, the occupancy chart shows no one by that name.”

“Then look in the register if you don’t believe me. I watched her sign it myself.”

People were standing around the lobby looking at me now, but I didn’t care.

“It would be on the chart,” he insisted. “It would have been transferred—” He ran the pad of his finger up the register page from bottom to top. Too fast, I couldn’t help noticing: without a hitch, as if there were nothing to impede it. Then he went back a page and ran it up that, in the same streamlined way.

“Give it to me,” I said impatiently.

“I’ll find it for you in a minute.” I flung it around my way.

A. Krumbake, and unfe, stared at me. And then under that just a blank space all the way down to the bottom of the page. No more check-ins.

I could feel the pores of my face sort of closing up. That was what it felt like, anyway. Maybe it was just the process of getting pale. “She signed right under that name. It’s been rubbed out.”

“Oh no it hasn’t,” he told me firmly. “No one tampers with the register like that. People may leave, but their names stay on it.”

Dazedly, I traced the ball of my finger back and forth across the white paper under that name *Krmnbake.* Smooth and unrubbed, its semi-glossy finish unimpaired by erasure. I held the page up toward the light and tried to squint through it, to see whether it showed thinner there, either from rubbing or some other means of eradication. It was all of the same even opacity.

I spoke in a lower voice now; I wasn’t being impatient any more. “There’s something wrong. Something wrong about this. I can’t understand it. I saw her write it. I saw her sign it with my own eyes. I’ve known it was the right hotel all along, but even if I wasn’t sure, this other name, this name above, would prove it to me. Krumbake. I remember it from last night. Maybe they changed her without notifying you down here.”

“That wouldn’t be possible; it’s through me, down here, that all changes are made. It isn’t that I don’t know what room she’s in; it’s that there’s absolutely no record of any such person ever having been at the hotel, so you see you must he mis—”

“Call the manager for me,” I said hoarsely.

I stood there waiting by the onyx-topped desk until he came. I stood there very straight, very impassive, not touching the edge of the counter with my hands in any way, about an inch clear of it.

People were bustling back and forth, casually, normally, cheerily, behind me; plinking their keys down on the onyx; saying, “Any mail for me?”; saying, “I’ll be in the coffee shop if I’m called.” And something was already trying to make me feel a little cut off from them, a little set apart. As if a shadowy finger had drawn a ring around me where I stood, and mystic vapors were already beginning to rise from it, walling me off from my fellowmen.

I wouldn’t let the feeling take hold of me—yet—but it was already there, trying to. I’d give an imperceptible shake of my head every once in a while and say to myself, “Things like this don’t happen, in broad daylight. It’s just some kind of misunderstanding; it’ll be cleared up presently.”

The entrance, the lobby, had seemed so bright when I first came in, but I’d been mistaken. There were shadows lengthening in the far corners that only I could see. The gardenia I had for her was wilting.

The manager was no help at all. Me tried to be, listened attentively, but then the most he could do was have the clerk repeat what he’d already done for me, look on the chart and look in the register. After all, details like that were in the hands of the staff. I simply got the same thing as before, only relayed through him now instead of direct from the desk man. “No, there hasn’t been any Mrs. Cannon here at any time.”

“Your night man will tell you,” I finally said in despair, “He’ll tell you I brought her here. Get hold of him, ask him. He’ll remember us.”

“I’ll call him down; he rooms right here in the house,” he said. But then with his hand on the phone he stopped to ask again, “Are you quite sure it was this hotel, Mr. Cannon? He

was on duty until six this morning, and I hate to wake him up unless you—”

“Bring him down,” I said. “This is more important to me than his sleep. It’s got to be cleared up.” I wasn’t frightened yet, out-and-out scared; just baffled, highly worried, and with a peculiar lost feeling.

He came down inside of five minutes. I knew him right away, the minute he stepped out of the car, in spite of the fact that other passengers had come down with him. I was so sure he’d be able to straighten it out that I took a step toward him without waiting for him to join us. If they noticed that, which was a point in favor of my credibility—my knowing him at sight like that—they gave no sign.

I said, “You remember me, don’t you? You remember checking my wife into 1006 at three this morning, and telling me I’d have to go elsewhere.”

“No,” he said with polite regret. “I’m afraid I don’t recall having seen you before.”

I could feel my face go white as if a soundless bombshell of flour or talcum had just burst all over it. I put one foot behind me and set the heel down and stayed that way.

The manager asked him, “Well, did the gentleman stop at the desk perhaps, just to inquire, and then go elsewhere? Do you remember him at all, Stevens?”

“No, I never saw him before until now. It must have been some other hotel.”

“But look at me; look at my face,” I tried to say. But I guess I didn’t put any voice into it, it was just lip-motion, because he didn’t seem to hear.

The manager shrugged amiably, as if to say, “Well that’s all there is to it, as far as we’re concerned.”

I was breathing hard, fighting for self-control. “No. No, you can’t close this matter. I dem—I ask you to give me one

more chance to prove to you that I—that I—Call the night porter, the night bellboy that carried up her bag for her."

They were giving one another looks by now, as if I were some sort of crank.

"Listen, I'm in the full possession of my faculties, I'm not drunk, I wouldn't come in here like this if I weren't positive —"

The manager was going to try to pacify me and ease me out. "But don't you see you must be mistaken, old man? There's absolutely no record of it. We're very strict about those things. If any of my men checked a guest in without entering it on the chart of available rooms, and in the register, I'd fire him on the spot. Was it the Palace? Was it the Commander, maybe? Try to think now, you'll get it." And with each soothing syllable, he led me a step nearer the entrance.

I looked up suddenly, saw that the desk had already receded a considerable distance behind us, and balked. "No, don't do this. This is no way to—Will you get that night-to-morning bellhop? Will you do that one more thing for me?"

He sighed, as if I were trying his patience sorely. "He's probably home sleeping. Just a minute; I'll find out." It turned out he wasn't. They were so overcrowded and undermanned at the moment that instead of being at home he was sleeping right down in the basement, to save time coming and going. He came up in a couple of minutes, still buttoning the collar of his uniform. I knew him right away. He didn't look straight at me at first, but at the manager.

"Do you remember seeing this gentleman come here with a lady, at three this morning? Do you remember carrying her bag up to 1006 for her?" Then lie did look straight at me—and didn't seem to know me. "No sir, Mr. DeGrasse."

The shock wasn't as great as the first time; it couldn't have been, twice in succession.

“Don’t you remember that quilt you got for her, to spread over the mattress, and I gave you a second quarter for bringing it? You must remember that—dark blue, with little white flowers all over it—”

“No sir, boss.”

“But I know your face! I remember that scar just over your eyebrow. And—part your lips a little—that gold cap in front that shows every time you grin.”

“No sir, gen’m’n.”

My voice was curling up and dying inside my throat. “Then when you took me down alone with you, the last time, you even said, ‘I guess she’ll be comfortable’—” I squeezed his upper arm pleadingly. “Don’t you remember? Don’t you remember?”

“No sir.” This time he said it so low you could hardly hear it, as if his training wouldn’t let him contradict me too emphatically, but on the other hand he felt obliged to stick to the facts.

I grabbed at the hem of my coat, bunched it up to emphasize the pattern and the color of the material. “Don’t you know me by this?” Then I let my fingers trail helplessly down the line of my jaw. “Don’t you know my face?”

He didn’t answer any more, just shook his head each time.

“What’re you doing this for?

What’re you trying to do to me? All of you?” The invisible fumes from that necromancer’s ring, that seemed to cut me off from all the world, came swirling up thicker and thicker about me. My voice was strident with a strange new kind of fear, a fear I hadn’t known since I was ten.

“You’ve got me rocky now! You’ve got me down! Cut it out, I say!”

They were starting to draw back little by little away from me, prudently widen the tight knot they had formed around

me. I turned from one to the other, from bellhop to night clerk, night clerk to day clerk, day clerk to manager, and each one as I turned to him retreated slightly.

There was a pause, while I fought against this other, lesser kind of death that was creeping over me—this death called *strangeness,* this snapping of all the customary little threads of cause and effect that are our moorings at other times. Slowly they all drew back from me step by step, until I was left there alone, cut off.

Then the tension exploded. My voice blasted the quiet of the lobby. “I want my wife!” I yelled shatteringly. “Tell me what’s become of her. What’ve you done with her? I came in here with her last night; you can’t tell me I didn’t . . .”

They circled, maneuvered around me. I heard the manager say in a harried undertone, “I knew this was going to happen. I could have told you he was going to end up like this. George! Archer! Get him out of here fast!”

My arms were suddenly seized from behind and held. I threshed against the constriction, so violently both my legs dung up clear of the floor at one time, dropped back again, but I couldn’t break it. There must have been two of them behind me.

The manager had come in close again, now that I was safely pinioned, no doubt hoping that his nearness would succeed in soft-pedalling the disturbance. “Now will you leave here quietly, or do you want us to call the police and turn you over to them?”

“You’d better call them anyway, Mr. DeGrasse,” the day clerk put in. “I’ve run into this mental type before. He’ll only come back in again the minute your back’s turned.”

“No, I’d rather not, unless he forces me to. It’s bad for the hotel. Look at the crowd collecting down here on the main floor already. Tchk! Tchk!”

He tried to reason with me. “Now listen, give me a break, will you? You don’t look like the kind of a man who—Won’t

you please go quietly? If I have you turned loose outside, will you go away and promise not to come in here again?”

“Ali-i-i-i-icc!” I sent it baying harrowingly down the long vista of lobby, lounges, foyers. I’d been gathering it in me the last few seconds while he was speaking to me. I put my heart and soul into it. It should have shaken down the big old-fashioned chandeliers by the vibration it caused alone. My voice broke under the strain. A woman onlooker somewhere in the background bleated at the very intensity of it.

The manager hit himself between the eyes in consternation. “Oh, this is fierce! Hurry up, call an officer quick, get him out of here.”

“See, what did I tell you?” the clerk said knowingly.

I got another chestful of air in, tore loose with it. “Somebody help me! You people standing around looking, isn’t there one of you will help me? I brought my wife here last night; now she’s gone and they’re trying to tell me I never—”

A brown hand suddenly sealed my mouth, was as quickly withdrawn again at the manager’s panic-stricken admonition. “George! Archer! Don’t lay a hand on him. No rough stuff. Make us liable for damages afterwards, y’know.”

Then I heard him and the desk man both give a deep breath of relief. “At last!” And I knew a cop must have come in behind me.

CHAPTER III
THE MAN IS MAD

The grip on my arms behind my back changed, became single instead of double, one arm instead of two. But I didn't fight against it.

Suddenly I was very passive, unresistant. Because suddenly I had a dread of arrest, confinement. I wanted to preserve my freedom of movement more than all else, to try to find her again. If they threw me in a cell, or put me in a straitjacket, how could I look for her, how could I ever hope to get at the bottom of this mystery?

The police would never believe me. If the very people who had seen her denied her existence, how could I expect those who hadn't to believe in it?

Docile, I let him lead me out to the sidewalk in front of the hotel. The manager came out after us, mopping his forehead, and the desk clerk, and a few of the bolder among the guests who had been watching.

They held a three-cornered consultation in which I took no part. I even let the manager's version of what the trouble was about pass unchallenged. Not that he distorted what had actually happened just now, but he made it seem as if I were mistaken about having brought her there last night.

Finally the harness cop asked, "Well, do you want to press charges against him for creating a disturbance in your lobby?"

The manager held his hands palms out, horrified. "I should say not. We're having our biggest rush of the year right now; I can't take time off to run down there and go through all that tommyrot. Just see that he doesn't come in again and create any more scenes."

“I’ll see to that all right,” the cop promised truculently.

They went inside again, the manager and the clerk and the gallery that had watched us from the front steps. Inside to the hotel that had swallowed her alive.

The cop read me a lecture, to which I listened in stony silence. Then he gave me a shove that sent me floundering; said, “Keep moving now, hear me?” I pointed, and said, “That’s my car standing there. May I get in it?” lie checked first to make sure it was, then he opened the door, said, “Yeah, get in it and get out of here.”

He’d made no slightest attempt to find out what was behind the whole thing, whether there was some truth to my story or not, or whether it was drink, drugs or mental aberration. But then he was only a harness cop. That’s why I hadn’t wanted to tangle with him.

This strangeness that had risen up around me was nothing to be fought by an ordinary patrolman. I was going to them—the police—but I was going of my own free will and in my own way, not to be dragged in by the scruff of the neck and then put under observation for the next twenty-four hours.

Ten minutes or so later I got in front of the first precinct house I came upon, and went in, and said to the desk sergeant, “I want to talk to the lieutenant in charge.”

He stared at me coldly.

“What about?”

“About my wife.”

I didn’t talk to him alone. Three of his men were present. They were just shapes in the background as far as I was concerned, sitting there very quietly, listening.

I told it simply, hoping against hope I could get them to believe me, feeling somehow I couldn’t even before I had started.

“I’m Jimmy Cannon, I’m twenty-five years old, and I’m from Lake City. Last evening after dark my girl and I—her name was Alice Brown—we left there in my car, and at 1.15 this morning we were married by a justice of the peace.

“I think his name was Hulskanip—anyway it’s a white house with morning glories all over the porch, about fifty miles this side of Lake City.”

“We got in here at three, and they gave her a little room at the Royal Hotel. They couldn’t put me up, but they put her up alone. The number was 1006. I know that as well as I know I’m sitting here. This morning when I went over there, they were painting the room and I haven’t been able to find a trace of her since.

“I saw her sign the register, but her name isn’t on it any more. The night clerk says he never saw her. The bellboy says he never saw her. Now they’ve got me so I’m scared and shaky, like a little kid is of the dark. I want you men to help me. Won’t you men help me?”

“We’ll help you”—said the lieutenant in charge. Slowly, awfully slowly; I didn’t like that slowness.—“if we’re able to.” And I knew what he meant, if we find any evidence that your story is true.

He turned his head toward one of the three shadowy listeners in the background, at random. The one nearest him. Then lie changed his mind, shifted his gaze further along, to the one in the middle. “Ainslie, suppose you take a whack at this. Go over to this hotel and see what you can find out. Take him with you.”

So, as he stood up, I separated him from the blurred background for the first time. I was disappointed. He was just another man like me, maybe five years older, maybe an inch or two shorter. He could feel cold and hungry, and tired, just as I could, lie could believe a lie, just as I could. He couldn’t see around corners or through walls, or into hearts, any more than I could. What good was he going to be?

He looked as if he'd seen every rotten thing there was in the world. He looked as if he'd once expected to see other things beside that, but didn't any more. He said, "Yes sir," and you couldn't tell whether he was bored or interested, or liked the detail or resented it, or gave a rap.

On the way over I said, "You've got to find out what became of her. You've got to make them—"

"I'll do what I can." He couldn't seem to get any emotion into his voice. After all, from his point of view, why should he?

"You'll do what you can!" I gasped. "Didn't you ever have a wife?"

He gave me a look, but you couldn't tell what was in it.

We went straight back to the Royal.

He was very business-like, did a streamlined, competent job. Didn't waste a question or a motion, but didn't leave out a single relevant thing either.

I took back what I'd been worried about at first; he was good.

But he wasn't good enough for this, whatever it was.

It went like this: "Let me see your register." He took out a glass, went over the place I pointed out to him where she had signed. Evidently couldn't find any marks of erasure any more than I had with my naked eye.

Then we went up to the room, 1006. The painter was working on the wood trim by now, had all four walls and the ceiling done. It was such a small cubbyhole it wasn't even a half-day's work. He said, "Where was the furniture when you came in here to work this morning? Still in the room, or had the room been cleared?"

"Still in the room; I cleared it myself. There wasn't much; a chair, a scatter-rug, a cot."

"Was the cot made or unmade?"

"Made up."

“Was the window opened or closed when you came in?”

“Closed tight.”

“Was the air in the room noticeably stale, as if it had been closed up that way all night, or not noticeably so, as if it had only been closed up shortly before?”

“Turrible, like it hadn’t been aired for a week. And believe me, when I notice a place is stuffy, you can bet it’s stuffy all right.”

“Were there any marks on the walls or floor or anywhere around the room that didn’t belong there?”

I knew he meant blood, and gnawed the lining of my cheek fearfully.

“Nothing except plain grime, that needed painting over bad.”

We visited the housekeeper next. She took us to the linen room and showed us. “If there’re any dark blue quilts in use in this house, it’s the first I know about it. The bellboy *could* have come in here at that hour—but all he would have gotten are maroon ones. And here’s my supply list, every quilt accounted for. So it didn’t come from here.”

We visited the baggage room next. “Look around and see if there’s anything in here that resembles that bag of your wife’s.” I did, and there wasn’t. Wherever she had gone, whatever had become of her, her bag had gone with her.

About fifty minutes after we’d first gone in, we were back in my car outside the hotel again. He’d done a good, thorough job; and if I was willing to admit that, it must have been.

We sat there without moving a couple of minutes, me under the wheel. He kept looking at me steadily, sizing me up. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. I threw my head back and started to look up the face of the building, story by story. I counted as my eyes rose, and when they’d come to the tenth floor I stopped them there, swung them around the corner of the building to the third window from the end, stopped them there for good. It was a skinnier window than

the others. So small, so high up, to hold so much mystery. “Alice,” I whispered up to it, and it didn’t answer, didn’t hear.

His voice brought my gaze down from there again. “The burden of the proof has now fallen on you. It’s up to you to give me some evidence that she actually went in there. That she actually was with you. That she actually *was.* I wasn’t able to find a single person in that building who actually saw her.”

I just looked at him, the kind of a look you get from someone right after you stick a knife in his heart. Finally I said with quiet bitterness, “So now I have to prove I had a wife.”

The instant, remorseless way he answered that was brutal in itself “Yes, you do. Can you?”

I pushed my hat off, raked my fingers through my hair, with one and the same gesture. “Could you, if someone asked you in the middle of the street? Could you?”

He peeled out a wallet, flipped it open. A tiny snapshot of a woman’s head and shoulders danced in front of my eyes for a split second. He folded it and put it away again. He briefly touched a gold band on his finger, token of that old custom that is starting to revive again, of husbands wearing marriage rings as well as wives.

“And a dozen other ways. You could call Tremont 4102. Or you could call the marriage clerk at the City Hall—”

“But we were just beginning,” I said bleakly. “I have no pictures. She was wearing the only ring we had. The certificate was to be mailed to us at Lake City in a few days. You could call this justice of the peace, Hulskamp, out near U. S. 9; he’ll tell you—”

“Okay, Cannon, I’ll do that. We’ll go back to headquarters. I’ll tell the lieutenant what I’ve gotten so far, and I’ll do it from there.”

Now at last it would be over, now at last it would straightened out. He left me sitting in the room outside the lieutenant's office, while he was in there reporting to him. He seemed to take a long time, so I knew he must be doing more than just reporting; they must be talking it over.

Finally Ainslie looked out at me, but only to say, "What was the name of that justice you say married you, again?"

"Hulskamp."

He closed the door again. I had another long wait. Finally it opened a second time, he hitched his head at me to come in. The atmosphere when I got in there, was one of hard, brittle curiosity, without any feeling to it. As when you look at somebody afflicted in a way you never heard of before, and wonder how he got that way.

I got that distinctly. Even from Ainslie, and it was fairly oozing from his lieutenant and the other men in the room. They looked and looked and looked at me.

The lieutenant did the talking. "You say a Justice Hulskamp married you. You still say that?"

"A white house sitting off the road, this side of Lake City, just before you get to U. S. 9—"

"Well, there is a Justice Hulskamp, and he does live out there. We just had him on the phone. He says he never married anyone named James Cannon to anyone named Alice Brown, last night or any other night. He hasn't married anyone who looks like you, recently, to anyone who looks as you say she did. He didn't marry anyone at all at any time last night—"

He was going off some place while he talked to me, and his voice was going away after him. Ainslie filled a paper cup with water at the cooler in the corner, strewed it deftly across my face, once each way, as if I were some kind of a potted plant, and one of the other guys picked me up from the floor and put me back on the chair again.

The lieutenant's voice came back again stronger, as if he hadn't gone away after all. "Who were her people in Lake

City?”

“She had none; she was an orphan.”

“Well, where did she work there?”

“At the house of a family named Beresford, at 20 New Hampshire Avenue. She was in service there, a maid; she lived with them—”

“Give me long distance. Give me

Lake City. This is Michianopolis Police headquarters. I want to talk to a party named Beresford, 20 New Hampshire Avenue.”

The ring came back fast. “We’re holding a man here who claims he married a maid working for you. A girl by the name of Alice Brown.”

He’d hung up before I even knew it was over. “There’s no maid employed there. They don’t know anything about any Alice Brown, never heard of her.”

CHAPTER IV
LOOK BACKWARD NOW

I stayed on the chair this time. I just didn't hear so clearly for a while, everything sort of fuzzy.

. . . Hallucinations . . . And he's in a semi-hysterical condition right now. Notice how jerky his reflexes are?" Someone was chopping the edge of his hand at my kneecaps. "Seems harmless. Let him go. It'll probably wear off. I'll give him a sedative." Someone snapped a bag shut, left the room.

The lieutenant's voice was as flat as it was deadly, and it brooked no argument. "You never had a wife, Cannon!"

I could see only Ainslie's face in the welter before me. "You have, though, haven't you?" I said, so low none of the others could catch it.

The lieutenant was still talking to me. "Now get out of here before we change our minds and call an ambulance to take you away. And don't go back into any more hotels raising a row." I hung around outside; I wouldn't go away. Where was there to go? One of the others came out, looked at me fleetingly in passing, said with humorous tolerance, "You better get out of here before the lieutenant catches you," and went on about his business.

I waited until I saw Ainslie come out. Then I went up to him. "I've got to talk to you; you've got to listen to me—"

"Why? The matter's closed. You heard the lieutenant."

He went back to some sort of a locker room. I went after him.

"You're not supposed to come back here. Now look, Cannon, I'm telling you for your own good, you're looking for trouble if you keep this up."

“Don’t turn me down,” I said hoarsely, tugging away at the seam of his sleeve. “Can’t you see the state I’m in? I’m like someone in a dark room, crying for a match. I’m like someone drowning, crying for a helping hand. I can’t make it alone any more.” There wasn’t anyone in the place but just the two of us. My pawing grip slipped down his sleeve to the hem of his coat, and I was looking up at him from my knees. What did I care? There was no such thing as pride or dignity any more. I would have crawled Hat along the floor on my belly, just to get a word of relief out of anyone.

“Forget you’re a detective, and I’m a case. I’m appealing to you as one human being to another. I’m appealing to you as one husband to another. Don’t turn your back on me like that, don’t pull my hands away from your coat. I don’t ask you to do anything for me any more; you don’t have to lift a finger. Just say, ‘Yes, you had a wife, Cannon.’ Just give me that one glimmer of light in the dark. Say it even if you don’t mean it, even if you don’t believe it, say it anyway. Oh, say it, will you—”

He drew the back of his hand slowly across his mouth, either in disgust at my abasement or in a sudden access of pity. Maybe a little of both.

His voice was hoarse, as if he were sore at the spot I was putting him in.

“Give me anything,” he said, shaking me a little and jogging me to my feet, “the slightest thing, to show that she ever existed, to show that there ever was such a person outside of your own mind, and I’ll be with you to the bitter end. Give me a pin that she used to fasten her dress with. Give me a grain of powder, a stray hair ; but prove that it was hers. But I can’t do it unless you do.”

“And I have nothing to show you. Not a pin, not a grain of powder.”

I took a few dragging steps toward the locker room door. “You’re doing something to me that I wouldn’t do to a dog,” I mumbled. “What you’re doing to.me is worse than if you were to kill me. You’re locking me up in shadows for the rest of my life. You’re taking my mind away from me. You’re condemning me slowly but surely to madness, to being without a mind. It won’t happen right away, but sooner or later, in six months or in a year—Well. I guess that’s that.”

I fumbled my way out of the locker room and down the passageway outside, guiding myself with one arm along the wall, and past the sergeant’s desk and down the steps, and then I was out in the street.

I left my car there where it was. What did I want with it? I started to walk, without knowing where I was going. I walked a long time, and a good long distance.

Then all of a sudden I noticed a lighted drug store—it was dark by now—across the way. I must have passed others before now, but this was the first one I noticed.

I crossed over and looked in the open doorway. It had telephone booths; I could see them at the back, to one side. I moved on a few steps, stopped, and felt in my pockets. I found a quill toothpick, and I dug the point of it good and hard down the back of my finger, ripped the skin open. Then I threw it away. I wrapped a handkerchief around the finger, and I turned around and went inside.

I said to the clerk, “Give me some iodine. My cat just scratched me and I don’t want to take any chances.” lie said, “Want me to put it on for you?”

I said, “No, gimme the whole bottle. I’ll take it home; we’re out of it.”

I paid him for it and moved over to one side and started to thumb through one of the directories in the rack. Just as he went back inside the prescription room, I found my number. I went into the end booth and pulled the slide closed. I took off my hat and hung it over the phone mouthpiece, sort of making myself at home.

Then I sat down and started to undo the paper he'd just wrapped around the bottle. When I had it off, I pulled the knot of my tie out a little further to give myself lots of room. Then I took the stopper out of the bottle and tilted my head back and braced myself.

Something that felt like a baseball bat came chopping down on the arm I was bringing up, and nearly broke it in two, and the iodine sprayed all over the side of the booth. Ainslie was standing there in the half-opened slide.

He said, "Come on outta there!" and gave me a pull by the collar of my coat that did it for me. He didn't say anything more until we were out on the sidewalk in front of the place. Then he stopped and looked me over from head to foot as if I was some kind of a microbe. He said, "Well, it was worth coming all this way after you, at that!"

My car was standing there; I must have left the keys in it and he must have tailed me in that. He thumbed it, and I went over and climbed in and sat there limply. He stayed outside, with one foot on the running board.

I said, "I can't live with shadows, Ainslie. I'm frightened, too frightened to go on. You don't know what the nights'll be like from now on. And the days won't be much better. I'd rather go now, fast. Show her to me on a slab at the morgue and I won't whimper. Show her to me all cut up in small pieces and I won't bat an eyelash. But don't say she never was."

"I guessed what was coming from the minute I saw you jab yourself with that toothpick." He watched sardonically while I slowly unwound the handkerchief, that had stayed around my finger all this time. The scratch had hardly bled at all. Just a single hairline of red was on the handkerchief. We both looked at that.

The more of the handkerchief came open. We both looked at the initials in the corner. *A. B.* We both, most likely,

smelled the faint sweetness that still came from it at the same time. Very faint, for it was such a small handkerchief.

We both looked at each other, and both our minds made the same discovery at the same time. I was the one who spoke it aloud. “It’s hers,” I said grimly; “the wife that didn’t exist.”

“This is a fine time to come out with it,” he said quietly. “Move over, I’ll drive.” That was his way of saying, “I’m in.”

I said, “I remember now. I got a cinder in my eye, during the drive in, and she lent me her handkerchief to take it out with; I didn’t have one of my own on me. I guess I forgot to give it back to her. And this—is it.” I looked at him rebukingly. “What a difference a few square inches of linen can make. Without it, I was a madman with it. I’m a rational being who enlists your cooperation. I could have picked it up in any five-and-ten.”

“No. You didn’t turn it up when it would have done you the most good, back at the station house. You only turned it up several minutes after you were already supposed to have gulped a bottle of iodine. I could tell by your face you’d forgotten about it until then yourself. I think that does make a difference. To me it does, anyway.” He meshed gears.

“And what’re you going to do about it?”

“Since we don’t believe in the supernatural, our only possible premise is that there’s been some human agency at work.”

I noticed the direction he was taking. “Aren’t you going back to the Royal?”

“There’s no use bothering with the hotel. D’you see what I mean?”

“No, I don’t,” T said bluntly. “That was where she disappeared.”

“The focus for this wholesale case of astigmatism is elsewhere, outside the hotel. It’s true we could try to break them down, there at the hotel. But what about the justice, what about the Beresford house in Lake City? I think it’ll be

simpler to try to find out the reason rather than the mechanics of the disappearance.

"And the reason lies elsewhere. Because you brought her to the hotel from the justice's. And to the justice's from Lake City. The hotel was the last stage. Find out why the justice denies he married you, and we don't have to find out why the hotel staff denies having seen her. Find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there, and we don't have to find out why the justice denies he married you.

"Find out, maybe, something else, and we don't have to find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there. The time element keeps moving backward through the whole thing. Now talk to me. How long did you know her? How well? How much did you know about her?"

"Not long. Not well. Practically nothing. And yet all I wanted, I needed to. It was one of those story-book things. I met her a week ago last night. She was sitting on a bench in the park, as if she were lonely, didn't have a friend in the world. I don't make a habit of accosting girls on park benches, but she looked so dejected it got to me.

"Well, that's how we met. I walked her home afterwards to where she said she lived. But when we got there—holy smoke, it was a mansion ! I got nervous, said: 'Gee, this is a pretty swell place for a guy like me to be bringing anyone home to, just a clerk in a store.' "She laughed and said, 'I'm only the maid. Disappointed?' I said, 'No, I would have been disappointed if you'd been anybody else, because then you wouldn't be in my class.' She seemed relieved after I said that. She said. 'Gee, I've waited so long to find someone who'd like me for myself.'

"Well, to make a long story short, we made an appointment to meet at that same bench the next night. I waited there for two hours and she never showed up. Luckily I went back there the next night again—and there

she was. She explained she hadn't been able to get out the night before; the people where she worked were having company or something.

"When I took her home that night I asked her name, which I didn't know yet, and that seemed to scare her. She got sort of flustered, and I saw her look at her handbag. It had the initials *A.B.* on it; I'd already noticed that the first night I met her. She said, 'Alice Brown.'

"By the third time we met we were already nuts about each other. I asked her whether she'd take a chance and marry me. She said, 'Is it possible someone wants to marry little Alice Brown, who hasn't a friend in the world?' I said yes, and that was all there was to it.

"Only, when I left her that night, she seemed kind of scared. First I thought she was scared I'd change my mind, back out, but it wasn't that. She said, 'Jimmy, let's hurry up and do it, don't let's put off. Let's do it while—while we have the chance'; and she hung onto my sleeve tight with both hands.

"So the next day I asked for a week off, which I had coming to me from last summer anyway, and I waited for her with the car on the corner three blocks away from the house where she was in service. She came running as if the devil were behind her, but I thought that was because she didn't want to keep me waiting. She just had that one little overnight bag with her.

"She jumped in, and her face looked kind of white, and she said, 'Hurry, Jimmy, hurry!' And away we went. And until we were outside of Lake City, she kept looking back every once in a while, as if she were afraid someone was coming after us."

Ainslie didn't say much after all that rigamarole I'd given him. Just five words, after we'd driven on for about ten minutes or so. "She was afraid of something." And then in

another ten minutes, “And whatever it was, it’s what’s caught up with her now.”

We stopped at the filling station where Alice and I had stopped for gas the night before. I looked over the attendants, said: “There’s the one serviced us.” Ainslie called him over, played a pocket light on my face.

“Do you remember servicing this man last night? This man, and a girl with him?”

“Nope, not me. Maybe one of the oth—”

Neither of us could see his hands at the moment; they were out of range below the car door. I said, “He’s got a white scar across the back of his right hand. I saw it last night when he was wiping the windshield.”

Ainslie said, “Hold it up.”

He did, and there was a white cicatrice across it, where stitches had been taken or something. Ainslie said, “Now whaddye say?”

It didn’t shake him in the least. “I still say no. Maybe he saw me at one time or another, but I’ve never seen him, to my knowledge, with or without a girl.” He wailed a minute, then added: “Why should I deny it, if it was so?”

“We’ll be back, in a day or in a week or in a month,” Ainslie let him know grimly, “but we’ll be back—to find that out.”

We drove on. “Those four square inches of linen handkerchief will be wearing pretty thin, if this keeps up,” I muttered dejectedly after a while.

“Don’t let that worry you,” he said, looking straight ahead. “Once I’m sold, I don’t unsell easily.”

We crossed U. S. 9 a half-hour later. A little white house came skimming along out of the darkness. “This is where I was married to a ghost,” I said He braked, twisted the grip of the door latch. My hand shot down, stopped his arm.

“Wait; before you go in, listen to this. It may help out that handkerchief. There’ll be a round mirror in the hall, to the left of the door, with antlers over it for a hatrack. In their

parlor, where he read the service, there'll be an upright piano, with brass candle holders sticking out of the front of it, above the keyboard. It's got a scarf on it that ends in a lot of little plush balls. And on the music rack, the top selection is a copy of *Kiss Me Again.* And on the wall there's a painting of a lot of fruit rolling out of a basket. And this housekeeper, he calls her Dora."

"That's enough," he said in that toneless voice of his. "I told you I was with you anyway, didn't I?" He got out and went over and rang the bell. I went with him, of course.

They must have been asleep; they didn't answer right away. Then the housekeeper opened the door and looked out at us. Before we could say anything, we heard the justice call down the stairs, "Who is it, Dora?" Ainslie asked if we could come in and talk to him, and straightened his necktie in the round mirror to the left of the door, with antlers over it.

Hulskamp came down in a bathrobe, and Ainslie said: "You married this man to a girl named Alice Brown last night." It wasn't a question.

The justice said, "No. I've already been asked that once, over the phone, and I said I hadn't. T've never seen this young man before." He even put on his glasses to look at me better.

Ainslie didn't argue the matter, almost seemed to take him at his word. "I won't ask you to let me see your records," he said drily, "because they'll undoubtedly—bear out your word." He strolled as far as the parlor entrance, glanced in idly. I peered over his shoulder. There was an upright piano with brass candle sconces. A copy of *Kiss Me Again* was topmost on its rack. A painting of fruit rolling out of a basket daubed the wall.

"They certainly will!" snapped the justice resentfully.

The housekeeper put her oar in. "I'm a witness at all the marriages the justice performs, and I'm sure the young man's mistaken. I don't ever recall—"

CHAPTER V
JOURNEY'S END

Ainslie steadied me with one hand clasping my arm, and led me out without another word. We got in the car again. Their door closed, somewhat forcefully.

I pounded the rim of the wheel helplessly with my fist. I said, "What is it? Some sort of wholesale conspiracy? But *why?* She's not important; I'm not important."

He threw in the clutch, the little white house ebbed away in the nightdarkness behind us.

"It's some sort of a conspiracy, all right," he said. "We've got to get the reason for it. That's the quickest, shortest way to clear it up. To take any of the weaker links, the bellboy at the hotel or that filling station attendant, and break them down, would not only take days, but in the end would only get us some anonymous individual who'd either threatened them or paid them to forget having seen your wife, and we wouldn't be much further than before. If we can get the reason behind it all, the source, we don't have to bother with any of these small fry. That's why we're heading back to Lake City instead of just concentrating on that hotel in Michianopolis."

We made Lake City by one a.m. and I showed him the way to New Hampshire Avenue. Number 20 was a massive corner house, and we glided up to it from the back, along the side street; braked across the way from the service entrance I'd always brought her back to. Not a light was showing anywhere.

"Don't get out yet," he said. "When you brought her home nights, you brought her to this back door, right?"

"Yes."

“Tell me, did you ever actually see her open it and go in, or did you just leave her here by it and walk off without waiting to see where she went?”

I felt myself get a little frightened again. This was something that hadn’t occurred to me until now. “I didn’t once actually see the door open and her go inside, now that I come to think of it. She seemed to—to want me to walk off without waiting. She didn’t say so, but I could tell. I thought maybe it was because she didn’t want her employers to catch on she was going around with anyone. I’d walk off, down that way—”

I pointed to the corner behind us, on the next avenue over. “Then when I got there, I’d look back from there each time. As anyone would. Each time I did, she wasn’t there any more. I thought she’d gone in, but—it’s funny, f never saw her go in.”

He nodded gloomily. “Just about what I thought. For all you know, she didn’t even belong ‘n that house, never went in there at all. A quick little dash, while your back was turned, would have taken her around the corner of the house and out of sight. And the city would have swallowed her up.”

“But why?” I said helplessly.

He didn’t answer that. We hadn’t had a good look at the front of the house yet. As I have said, we had approached from the rear, along the side street. He got out of the car now, and I followed suit. We walked down the few remaining yards to the corner, and turned and looked all up and down the front of it.

It was an expensive limestone building; it spelt real dough, even looking at it in the dark as we were. There was a light showing from the front, through one of the tall ground-floor windows—but a very dim one, almost like a night light. It didn’t send any shine outside; just peered wanly around the sides of the blind that had been drawn on the inside.

Something moved close up against the door-facing, stirred a little. If it hadn't been white limestone, it wouldn't have even been noticeable at all. We both saw it at once; I caught instinctively at Ainslie's arm, and a cold knife of dull fear went through me—though why I couldn't tell.

"Crepe on the front door," he whispered. "Somebody's dead in there. Whether she did go in here or didn't, just the same I think we'd better have a look at the inside of this place."

I took a step in the direction of the front door. He recalled me with a curt gesture. "And by that I don't mean march up the front steps, ring the doorbell, and flash my badge in their eyes."

"Then how?"

Brakes ground somewhere along the side street behind us. We turned our heads and a lacquered sedan-truck had drawn up directly before the service door of 20 New Hampshire Avenue. "Just in time," Ainslie said. "This is how."

We started back toward it. The driver and a helper had gotten down, were unloading batches of camp chairs and stacking them up against the side of the truck, preparatory to taking them in.

"For the services tomorrow, I suppose," Ainslie grunted. He said to the driver: "Who is it that died, bud?"

"Mean to say you ain't heard? It's in alia papers."

"We're from out of town."

"Alma Beresford, the heiress. Richest gal in twenty-four states. She was an orphum, too. Pretty soft for her guardian; not another soul to get the cush but him."

"What was it?" For the first time since I'd known him, you couldn' have called Ainslie's voice toneless; it was sort of springy like a rubber band that's pulled too tight.

"Heart attack, I think." The truckman snapped his fingers. "Like that. Shows you that rich or poor, when you

gotta go, you gotta go."

Ainslie asked only one more question. "Why you bringing these setups at an hour like this? They're not going to hold the services in the middle of the night, are they?"

"Nah, but first thing in the morning; so early there wouldn't be a chance to get 'em over here unless we delivered 'em ahead of time." He was suddenly staring fascinatedly down at the silvery lining of Ainslie's hand.

Ainslie's voice was toneless again. "Tell you what you fellows are going to do. You're going to save yourselves the trouble of hauling all those camp chairs inside, and you're going to get paid for it in the bargain. Lend us those work aprons y'got on."

He slipped them something apiece; I couldn't see whether it was two dollars or five. "Gimme your delivery ticket; I'll get it receipted for you. You two get back in the truck and lie low."

We both doffed our hats and coats, put them in our own car, rolled our shirtsleeves, put on the work aprons, and rang the service bell. There was a short wait and then a wire-sheathed bulb over the entry glimmered pallidly as an indication someone was coming.

The door opened and a gaunt-faced sandy-haired man looked out at us. It was hard to tell just how old he was.

He looked like a butler, but he was dressed in a business suit, so he must have occupied some other position in the household.

"Camp chairs from the Thebes Funerary Chapel," Ainslie said, reading from the delivery ticket.

"Follow me and I'll show you where they're to go," he said in a hushed voice. "Be as quiet as you can. We've only just succeeded in getting Mr.

Hastings to lie down and try to rest a little." The guardian, I supposed. In which case this anemic-looking customer would be the guardian's Man Friday.

We each grabbed up a double armful of the camp chairs and went in after him. They were corded together in batches of half a dozen. We could have cleared up the whole consignment at once—they were lightweight—but Ainslie gave me the eye not to; I guess he wanted to have an excuse to prolong our presence as much as possible.

You went down a short delivery passageway, then up a few steps into a brightly lighted kitchen. We hadn't been able to see it from the street.

A hatchet-faced woman in maid's livery was sitting by a table crying away under one eye-shading hand, a teacup and a tumbler of gin before her.

Judging by the redness of her nose, she'd been at it for hours. "My baby," she'd mew every once in a while.

We followed him out at the other side, through a pantry, a gloomy-looking dining room, and finally into a huge cavernous front room, eerily suffused with flickering candlelight that did no more than heighten the shadows in its far comers. It was this wavering pallor that we must have seen from outside, around the front of the house.

An open coffin rested on a flower massed bier at the upper end of the place, a lighted taper glimmering at each corner of it. A violet velvet pall had been spread over the top of it, concealing what lay within.

But a tiny peaked outline, that could have been made by an uptilted nose, was visible in the plush at one extremity of its length. That knife of dread gave an excruciating little twist in me, and again I didn't know why—or refused to admit I did. It was as if I instinctively sensed the nearness of something—or someone—familiar.

The rest of the room, before this monument to mortality, had been left clear, its original furniture moved aside or taken out. The man who had admitted us gave us our instructions in a sepulchral voice.

“Arrange them in four rows, here in front of the bier. Leave an aisle through them. And be sure and leave enough space up ahead for the divine who will deliver the oration.” Then he retreated to the door and stood watching us for a moment, moiling his hands together with a sickening sort of obsequious gesture.

Ainslie produced a knife from the pocket of his borrowed apron, began severing the cording that bound the frames of the camp chairs together. I opened them one at a time as he freed them and began setting them up in quadruple rows, being as slow about it as I could.

There was a slight sound and the factotum had tiptoed back toward the kitchen for a moment, perhaps for a sip of the comfort gin. Ainslie raised his head, caught my eye, speared his thumb at the bier imperatively. I was the nearer of us to it at the moment. I knew what he meant: look and see who it was.

I went cold all over, but I put down the camp chair I was fiddling with and edged over toward it on arched feet. The taper-flames bent down flat as I approached them, and sort of hissed Sweat needled out under the roots of my hair. I went around by the head, where that tiny little peak was, reached out, and gingerly took hold of the corners of the velvet pall, which fell loosely over the two sides of the coffin without quite meeting the headboard.

Just as my wrists flexed to tip it back, Ainslie coughed warningly. There was a whispered returning tread from beyond the doorway. I let go, took a quick side-jump back toward where I’d been. It didn’t carry me all the way back by any means, the room was such a big barn of a place, but it carried me sufficiently far away from the bier to look innocuous.

I glanced around and the secretary fellow had come back again, was standing there with his eyes fixed on me. I pretended to be measuring off the distance for the pulpit with my foot.

“You men are rather slow about it,” he said, thin lipped.

“You want ’em just so, don’t you?” Ainslie answered. He went out to get the second batch. I pretended one of the stools had jammed and I was having trouble getting it open, as an excuse to linger behind. The secretary was on his guard. He lingered too.

The dick took care of that. He waited until he was halfway back with his load of camp chairs, then dropped them all over the pantry floor with a clatter, to draw the watchdog off.

It worked. He gave a huff of annoyance, turned and went in to bawl Ainslie out for the noise he had made. The minute the doorway cleared, I gave a cat-like spring back toward the velvet mound. This time I made it. I flung the pall back—

Then I let go of it, and the lighted candles started spinning around my head, faster and faster, until they made a comet-like track of fire. The still face staring up at me from the coffin was Alice’s. Last night a bride. Tonight a corpse.

CHAPTER VI
BURY ME NOT—

I felt my knees hit something, and I was swaying back and forth on them there beside the bier. I could hear somebody coming back toward the room, but whether it was Ainslie or the other guy, I didn't know and didn't care. Then an arm went around me and steadied me to my feet once more, so I knew it was Ainslie.

"It's her," I said brokenly. "Alice. I can't understand it; she must—have—been this rich girl, Alma Beresford, all the time—"

He let go of me, took a quick step over to the coffin, flung the pall even further back than I had. He dipped his head, as if he was staring nearsightedly. Then he turned and I never felt my shoulder grabbed so hard before, or since. His fingers felt like steel claws that went in, and met in the middle. For a minute I didn't know whether he was attacking me or not; and I was too dazed to care.

He was pointing at the coffin. "Look at that!" he demanded. I didn't know what he meant. He shook me brutally, either to get me to understand or because he was so excited himself. "*Site's not dead.* Watch her chest cavern."

I fixed my eyes on it. You could tell only by watching the line where the white satin of her burial gown met the violet quilting of the coffin lining. The white was faintly, but unmistakably and rhythmically rising and falling. The tides of life were still there.

"They've got her either drugged or in a coma—"

He broke off short, let go of me as if my shoulder were red hot and burned his fingers. His hand flashed down and up again, and he'd drawn and sighted over my shoulder.

“Put it down or I’ll let you have it right where you are!” he said.

Something thudded to the carpet. I turned and the secretary was standing there in the doorway, palms out, a fallen revolver lying at his feet.

“Go over and get that, Cannon,” Ainslie ordered. “This looks like the finale now. Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

There was an arched opening behind him, leading out to the front entrance hall, I suppose, and the stairway to the upper floors. We’d come in from the rear, remember. Velvet drapes had been drawn closed over that arch, sealing it up, the whole time we’d been in there.

He must have come in through there. I bent down before the motionless secretary, and with my fingers an inch away from the fallen gun at his feet, I heard the impact of a head blow and Ainslie gave the peculiar guttural groan of someone going down into unconsciousness.

The secretary’s foot snaked out and sped the gun skidding far across to the other side of the room. Then he dropped on my curved back like a dead weight and I went down flat under him, pushing my face into the parquet flooring. The floor had been left bare in the room.

He kept aiming blows at the side of my head from above, but he had only his fists to work with at the moment, and even the ones that landed weren’t as effective as whatever it was that had been used on Ainslie. I reached upward and over, caught the secretary by the shoulders of his coat, tugged and at the same time jerked my body out from under him in the opposite direction; and he came flying up in a backward somersault and landed sprawling a few feet away. He was a lightweight anyway.

I got up and looked. Ainslie lay inert, face down on the floor to one side of the coffin, something gleaming wet down the part of his hair. There was a handsome but

vicious-looking gray-haired man in a brocaded dressing gown standing behind him holding a gun on me, trying to cow me with it.

"Get him, Mr. Hastings," panted the one I'd just flung off.

It would have taken more than a gun to hold me, after what I'd been through. I charged at him, around Ainslie's form. He evidently didn't want to fire, didn't want the noise of a shot to be heard there in the house. Instead, he reversed his gun, swung the butt high up over his shoulder; and my own head-first charge undid me. I couldn't swerve or brake in time, plunged right in under it. A hissing, spark-shedding skyrocket seemed to tear through the top of my head, and I went down into nothingness as Ainslie had.

. . . For an hour after I recovered consciousness I was in complete darkness. Such utter darkness that I couldn't be sure the blow hadn't affected my optic nerve, temporarily put my eyesight out of commission.

I was in a sitting position, on something cold—stone flooring probably—with my hands lashed behind me, around something equally cold and sweating moisture, most likely a water pipe. My feet were tied too, and there was a gag over my mouth. My head blazed with pain.

After what seemed like an age, a smoky gray light began to dilute the blackness; so at least my eyesight wasn't impaired. As the light strengthened it showed me first a barred grate high up on the wall through which the dawn was peering in. Next, a dingy basement around me, presumably that of the same New Hampshire Avenue house we had entered several hours ago.

And finally, if that was any consolation to me, Ainslie sitting facing me from across the way, in about the same fix I was. Hands and feet secured, sitting before another pipe, mouth also gagged. A dark skein down one side of his forehead, long since dried, marked the effect of the blow he had received. His eyes were open and fixed on me, so he'd probably recovered consciousness some time before I had.

We just stared at each other, unable to communicate. We could turn our heads. He shook his from side to side deprecatingly. I knew what lie meant: “Fine spot we ended up in, didn’t we?” I nodded, meaning, “You said it.”

But we were enjoying perfect comfort and peace of mind, compared to what was to follow. It came within about half an hour at the most. Sounds of activity began to penetrate to where we were. First a desultory moving about sounded over our heads, as if someone were looking things over to make sure everything was in order. Then something heavy was set down: it might have been a table, a desk—or a pulpit.

This cellar compartment we were in seemed to be directly under that large front room where the coffin was and where the obsequies were to be held. I remember now there had been no carpeting on it last night when we were in there. Originally a ballroom, maybe.

A dawning horror began to percolate through me. I looked at Ainslie and tried to make him understand what I was thinking. I didn’t need to, he was thinking the same thing. I could tell by the look in his eyes.

She’d been alive when we’d last seen her, last night. Early this same morning, rather. What were they going to do—go ahead with it anyway?

A car door clashed faintly, somewhere off in the distance outside. It must have been at the main entrance of this very house we were in, for within a moment or two new footsteps sounded overhead, picking their way along, as down an aisle under guidance. Then something scraped slightly, like the leg rests of a camp chair straining under the weight of a body.

It repeated itself eight or ten times after that. The impact of a car door outside in the open, then the sedate footsteps over us—some the flat dull ones of men, some the sharp

brittle ones of women—then the slight shift and click of the camp chairs. I didn't have to be told its meaning; probably Ainslie didn't either. The mourners were arriving for the services.

It was probably unintentional, our having been placed directly below like this; but it was the most diabolic torture that could ever have been devised.

Was she dead yet, or wasn't she? But she had to be before—

They couldn't be that low. Maybe the drug she'd been under last night was timed to take fatal effect between then and now. But suppose it hadn't?

The two of us were writhing there like maimed snakes. Ainslie kept trying to bring his knees up and meet them with his chin, and at first I couldn't understand what his idea was. It was to snag the gag in the cleft between his two tightly pressed knees and pull it down, or at least dislodge it sufficiently to get some sound out. I immediately began trying the same thing myself.

Meanwhile an ominous silence had descended above us. No more car door thuds, no more footsteps mincing down the aisle to their seats. The services were being held—And for someone whom Ainslie and I had ever reason to believe was still alive!

The lower half of my face was all numb by now from hitting my bony up-ended knees so many times. And still I couldn't work it. Neither could he. The rounded structure of the kneecaps kept them from getting it close enough to our lips to act as pincers. If only one of us could have made it. If we could hear them that clearly down here, they would have been able to hear us yell up there. And they couldn't all be in on the plot, all those mourners, friends of the family or whoever they were. They must all be innocent dupes: all but the guardian and his secretary.

Bad as the preliminaries had been, they were as nothing compared to the concluding stages that we now had to

endure listening to. There was a sudden concerted mass shifting and scraping above, as if everyone had risen to his feet at one time.

Then a slow, single-file shuffling started in, going in one direction, returning in another. The mourners were filing around the coffin one by one for a last look at the departed. The departed who was still of the living.

After the last of them had gone out, and while the incessant cracking of car doors was still under way outside, marking the forming of the funeral cortege, there was a quick, business-like converging of not more than two pairs of feet on one certain place—where the coffin was. A hurried shifting about for a moment or two, then a sharp hammering on wood penetrated to where we were, and nearly drove me crazy; they were fastening down the lid.

After a slight pause that might have been employed in reopening the closed room doors, more feet came in, all male, and moving toward that one certain place where the first two had preceded them. These must be the pallbearers, four or six of them. There was a brief scraping and jockeying about while they lifted the casket to their shoulders, and then the slow, measured tread with which they carried it outside to the waiting hearse. Then silence.

I let my head fall inertly downward as far over as I could bend it, so Ainslie wouldn’t see the tears running out of my eyes. Tears of horror and helplessness and rage.

Motion attracted me and I looked blur redly’ up again. He was shaking his head steadily back and forth.

“Don’t give up, keep trying,” he meant to say. “It’s not too late yet.”

But we never got those gags out, to the end; and we never freed our hands and ankles of those bonds, the way they so easily do in stories. Whoever had tied us up had made a good job of it. About five or ten minutes after the

hearse had left, a door opened surreptitiously somewhere close at hand; and a stealthy, frightened tread began to descend toward us, evidently along some steps that were back of me.

Ainslie could see who it was—he was facing that way—but I couldn't until the hatchet-faced maid we had seen crying in the kitchen the night before suddenly sidled out between us. She kept looking back in the direction from which she'd just come, as if scared of her life. She had an ordinary kitchen bread knife in her hand. She wasn't in livery now, but black-hatted, coated and gloved, as if she had started out for the cemetery with the rest and then slipped back unnoticed.

She went for Ainslie's bonds first, cackling terrifiedly the whole time she was sawing away at them. "Oh, if they ever find out I did this, I don't know what they'll do to me! I didn't even know you were down here until I happened to overhear Mr. Hastings whisper to his secretary just now before they left, 'Leave the other two where they are, we can attend to them when we come back.' Which one of you is her Jimmy? She confided in me; I knew about it; I helped her slip in and out of the house that whole week. I took her place under the bedcovers, so that when he'd look in he'd think she was asleep in her room.

"They had no right to do this to you and your friend, Jimmy, even though you were the cause of her death. The excitement was too much for her, she'd been so carefully brought up. She got this heart attack and died. She was already unconscious when they brought her back—from wherever it was you ran off with her to.

"I don't know why I'm helping you. You're a reckless, bad, fortune-hunting scoundrel; Mr. Hastings says so. The marriage wouldn't have been legal anyway; she didn't use her right name. It cost him all kinds of money to hush everyone up about it and destroy the documents, so it

wouldn’t be found out and you wouldn’t have a chance to blackmail her later.

“You killed my baby! But still he should have turned you over to the police, not kept you tied up all ni—”

At this point she finally got through, and Ainslie’s gag flew out of his mouth like one of those feathered darts kids shoot through a blow-tube. “I *am* the police!” he panted. “And your ‘baby’ has been murdered, or will be within the next few minutes, by Hastings himself, not this boy here! She was still alive in that coffin at two o’clock this morning. You didn’t know that, did you?”

She gave a scream like the noon whistle of a factory. He kept her from fainting, or at any rate falling in a heap, by pinning her to the wall, took the knife away from her. He freed me in one-tenth of the time it had taken her to rid him of his own bonds. “No,” she was groaning hollowly through her hands, “her own family doctor, a lifelong friend of her father and mother, examined her after she was gone, made out the death certificate. He’s an honest man, lie wouldn’t do that—”

“He’s old, I take it. Did he see her face?” Ainslie interrupted.

A look of almost stupid consternation froze on her own face. “No. I was at the bedside with him; it was covered. But only a moment before she’d been lying there in full view. The doctor and I both saw her from the door. Then Mr. Hastings had a fainting spell in the other room, and we ran to help him. When the doctor came in again to proceed with his examination, Mr. Chivers had covered her face—to spare Mr. Hastings’ feelings.

“Dr. Meade just examined her body. Mr. Hastings pleaded with him not to remove the covering, said he couldn’t bear it. And my pet was still wearing the little wrist watch her mother gave her before she died—”

“They substituted another body for hers, that’s all; I don’t care how many wrist watches it had on it,” Ainslie told her brutally. “Stole that of a young girl approximately her own age who had just died from heart failure or some other natural cause, most likely from one of the hospital morgues, and put it over on the doddering old family doctor and you both.

“If you look, you’ll probably find something in the papers about a vanished corpse. The main thing is to stop that burial; I’m not positive enough on it to take a chance. It may be she in the coffin after all, and not the substitute. Where was the interment to be?”

“In the family plot, at Cypress Hills Cemetery.” The maid shuddered.

“Come on, Cannon; got your circulation back yet?” He was at the top of the stairs already. “Get the local police and tell them to meet us out there,” he barked at the half-hysterical woman, “unless you’re in this stink as deep as they are, yourself!”

Which was just a spur to get a move into her. You could tell by the horrified daze she was in she hadn’t realized until now what was going on right under her nose.

Ainslie’s badge was all that got us into the cemetery, which was private. The casket had already been lowered out of sight. They were throwing the first shovelfuls of earth over it as we burst through the little ring of sedate, bowing mourners—two wildeyed tousled maniacs who sent them screaming and scattering in all directions.

The last thing I saw was Ainslie snatching an implement from one of the cemetery workers and jumping down bodily into the opening, feet first. I didn’t see anything more after that, because everything had gone red as far as I was concerned.

The face of that silver-haired devil, her guardian Hastings, had focused in on my inflamed eyes.

A squad of Lake City police, arriving only minutes after us, were all that saved his life. It took three of them to pull me off him, and they told me later three of his ribs were already fractured by that time.

Ainslie's voice was what brought me to, more than anything else. "It's all right, Cannon," he was yelling over and over from somewhere behind me, "it's alright. It's not her. It's the substitute."

I stumbled over to the lip of the grave between two of the cops and took a look down. It was the face of a stranger that was peering up at me through the shattered coffin lid. I turned away, and they made the mistake of letting go of me.

I went at the secretary this time; Hastings was still stretched out more dead than alive. "What've you done with her? Where've you got her?"

"That ain't the way to make him answer," Ainslie said, and for the second and last time throughout the whole affair his voice wasn't toneless. *"This* is!

Wham! We had to take about six steps forward to catch up with the secretary where he was now.

Ainslie's method was all right at that. The secretary talked—fast . . .

Alice was safe; but she wouldn't have been, much longer. After the mourners had had a last look at her in the coffin, Hastings and the secretary had locked her up for safe keeping—stupefied, of course—and substituted the other body for burial.

And Alice's turn was to come later, when, under cover of night, she was to be spirited away to a hunting lodge in the hills—the lodge that had belonged to her father. There she could have been murdered at leisure, without benefit of death certificate, buried without benefit of mourners.

When we'd flashed back to the New Hampshire Avenue house in a police car, and unlocked the door of the little den

where she'd been secreted; and when the police physician who accompanied us brought her out of the opiate they'd kept her under—whose arms were the first to go around her, whose face was the first she saw looking down at her?

Whose do you think?

"Jimmy"—She sighed a little, after we took time off from the clinches—"he showed up late that night with Chivers, in that dinky little room you left me in in Michianopolis.

"They must have been right behind us all the way, paying all those people lavishly to say they'd never seen me, effacing my very existence so you couldn't make trouble for them later.

"But he fooled me, pretended he wasn't angry, said he didn't mind if I married and left him. And I was so sleepy and off guard I believed him. Then he handed me a glass of salty-tasting water to drink, and said, 'Come on down to the car. Jimmy's down there waiting for you; we've got him with us.' I staggered down there between them and got in, and that's all I remember."

Then she remembered something else and looked at me with fright in her eyes. "Jimmy, you didn't mind marrying little Alice Brown, but I don't suppose Alma Beresford would stand a show with you—?"

"You don't-suppose right," I told her gruffly, "because I'm marrying Alice Brown all over again—even if we've gotta take time off to change her name legally first. And this time there won't be any burning of the records.

"And this ugly-looking bloke standing up here, name of Ainslie, is going to be best man at our second wedding. Know why? Because he was the only one in the whole world believed there really was a you."

MEET ME BY THE MANNEQUIN

All the way up on the bus I kept wondering if she'd be glad to see me or not. I hadn't told her I was coming. For that matter, I hadn't told them at the other end I was leaving—not until after I'd gone. Just a note left behind in my room: Dear Mom and Pop: I can't stand it here any more. I'm not going back to high school when it opens, I'm going to the city. I want to begin to really live. Please don't worry about me, I'll be all right. I'll look up Jean and stay with her. Love—Francine. And that's what I was on my way to do right now.

My sister Jean hadn't been much older than I was when she left, just under eighteen. She hadn't told us much in her letters, but the little she'd said had made it sound wonderful to me. She told us she had a job, but she'd never said what it was. She must have been making a lot of money at it. I don't think there'd been a letter in the three years she was gone that hadn't had at least a twenty and sometimes as high as a fifty-dollar bill in it. But when I'd suggested running up to see her during my school vacation the summer before, she hadn't seemed to want me to come. It was so hot, she'd said, and I wouldn't like it. And when I insisted, she finally said she wasn't going to be there herself, she was going away. But then six months afterwards, in one of her later letters, she forgot she'd said that and mentioned something about being stuck in the city through the whole summer.

I wondered vaguely why she hadn't wanted her kid sister to visit her. I supposed she'd thought I wasn't old enough yet, or they needed me at home, or she felt I ought to finish high school first, and let it go at that. Older sisters aren't always so easy to figure out.

I had her address, the one we wrote her to, but it was just Greek to me. I wasn't worried about finding it though. I'd ask my way when I got there, and that'd be all there was to it.

The bus got in quite late and I was tired. I was hungry, too, and I only had twenty-two cents left, after paying my bus fare and buying a sandwich and coffee at noon. But of course I was going straight to Jean, so what difference did that make?

I climbed down and looked around the terminal. Wonderland was already beginning. I had a single bag with me, not much bigger than a telephone directory. I hadn't brought much, mostly because I didn't have much to bring. Who wanted country stuff when you were going to start life in the city, anyway?

I chose one of the many exits at random, and came out on an avenue that was sheer magic. It stretched as far as the eye could reach, and the buildings were tall along it, and neon signs all colors of the rainbow flashed against the night sky. I'd reached the Promised Land, all right.

I was so enthralled that I decided to put off asking my way to Jean's for a little while and do a little roaming around first. There was plenty of time, it was still early.

I'd walked along for about five or ten blocks, bag in hand, when I first saw the mannequin. It was in a lighted show window on the Avenue—Chalif-Bleekman's—where there were a row of them with sort of tea-colored faces and gold and silver wigs. It was the one on the end. The others all

looked ritzy, but the one on the end had a sort of friendly smile on her face. Her expression seemed to say: “Hi, little girl. Welcome to the city. If you ever need a friend, or get in a jam, come around and tell me all about it.”

I don’t know how to explain what I mean. It sounds sort of crazy, I know. You have to be pretty young, and you have to be pretty imaginative—like everyone said I was back home—to get it. If you’re hardboiled or cynical, you won’t get it at all. It’s like some people carry around a rabbit’s foot, and others have a lucky coin with a hole in it. It’s like some people believe in a lucky star, and others in a patron saint. This mannequin became my patron saint at sight. Oh, I knew it was just a wax figure that couldn’t talk or hear or think. I wasn’t that dumb. But that didn’t alter the case any. Everyone has to have a little fantasy in their life. And I was lonely and didn’t know anybody and it was my first night in the city. That was why, I guess.

Anyway, I stood there day-dreaming in front of it, and telling it all my hopes and fears and ambitions. Not out loud, of course. And it looked back with that understanding smile, as if it was trying to say: “Sure, I know. Don’t worry, everything’ll turn out all right. And if it doesn’t, you know where to find me, I’ll always be here, night and day.” It was like a pact made between us, that first night, that was never to be broken afterwards.

Finally I had to move on. It was getting late, and I had to get up to Jean’s. I put the pads of my fingers against the glass in a sort of parting gesture, and went on my way. The others all looked ritzy with their noses in the air, but mine had that same friendly, sympathetic smile to the end.

I saw a policeman rolling traffic stanchions out of the middle of the street, and I went over to him to ask my way. It’s always safest to ask a policeman when you’re in a strange city. I knew that much.

He scratched the back of his head when I handed him the scrap of paper that had Jean’s address penciled on it. Then

he looked me over, up and down, standing there in my country clothes with my little bag in my hand.

Instead of telling me where it was, he said: “Are you sure you want to go there?”

“Certainly,” I said in surprise. “I’m—I’m supposed to.”

He mumbled something under his breath that sounded like: “Ah, it’s a shame—but what can a cop on traffic duty do about it?”

“Thank you,” I said when he’d finished telling me which directions to take.

He shook his head as if he felt sorry for me. “Don’t thank me,” he sighed. “Sure and it’s no favor I’m doing you.”

I looked back and saw him still watching me and shaking his head. He seemed to have recognized the address, but I couldn’t understand why he should feel so bad about my going there.

Even the twenties and fifties she’d sent home hadn’t prepared me for the looks of it when I finally reached it. Why, she must be making money hand-over-fist to be able to afford living in such a place! I almost thought for a minute I’d made a mistake. I went over to the doorman to verify the number. Yes, it was the right one. I asked him which floor Jean Everton lived on.

He acted as though he’d never heard the name before. He went inside to consult a second uniformed man in the hall. Instead of waiting where I was, I went in after him. I was certain she lived here. She wouldn’t have given this address in her letters if she hadn’t. I was just in time to hear the second hailman saying under his breath: “Edwards, that’s who it is. She sometimes gets mail here under the other name. I remember she left orders with me about that once.” Then he looked at me and dropped his voice even lower, but I could still make out what he was

saying. “Must be a new girl they’re taking on. Better not let her go up the front way; they won’t like it, they’re open already.”

The first one stepped back to me and whispered in a peculiar confidential undertone, as though it were a secret. “It’s the penthouse you want. But you’re not supposed to go in through the front like this; you’d get in Dutch if they ever caught you trying it, and so would we if we let you. You girls are supposed to use the back way. I’ll show you where it is.”

He took me outside and around to the side of the building, and through a delivery passage to a service elevator run by a grinning colored man. “Take her up to The Place,” he said to him mysteriously.

“Up there?” the operator asked with a strange look.

“Up there.” The doorman nodded secretively.

On the way up he turned to me and asked: “You ever been up there befo’, miss?”

I said: “No, I never have.”

He didn’t answer, just said, “Um-um,” and I caught him shaking his head a little, the same way the cop had.

He stopped the car finally and opened the door onto a little vestibule. There was only one other door, a strong-looking thing with a little peephole in the middle of it. I went unhesitatingly over to it and pushed a bell.

The kind-faced operator behind me seemed to close his car door almost reluctantly, as though he hated to leave me up there. The last I saw of him he was still shaking his head dolefully.

None of this really registered on me at the time. I was too excited at the prospect of seeing Jean. Besides, the city was such a whole new world to me that the way people acted was bound to seem strange at first, until I got used to it. That was all it was, I told myself.

The peephole opened and an eye peered out at me. A single eye, blue, and hard as agate. A little whiff of sachet seeped out through the hole.

A woman’s voice said harshly: “Yes?”

I said: “Is Jean in there?”

The eye slid around in a half-turn, away from the opening. “Somebody to see Jean.”

Chains clicked against steel and the door swung grudgingly open. I edged in timidly, bag in hand.

There were three women in there, but Jean wasn’t one of them. It looked like some kind of a dressing-room. There was a mirror-strip along the wall, and a long table and chairs under it. They all looked at me. They were beautifully dressed, lovely to look at. But there was something hard and forbidding about them, I don’t know quite what. There was a confused hum coming from somewhere nearby—like the drone of a lot of voices. Every once in a while it rose sharply to a crescendo, as though something exciting had just happened, then it would die down again to a breathless, waiting hush. Then start over.

“Where is she?” I asked uncertainly.

The answer was an ungracious snarl. “She’s out in front, where d’ya suppose? You didn’t expect to find her back here, did ya? We’re open already.” She snapped cigarette ashes at me with her thumbnail. “If you were sent here to work, you better get into your duds fast. You’re an hour late.”

I just stared stupidly.

She jackknifed her finger at my bag. “Brought your own clothes, didn’t you? Well, whaddaya waiting for?” She gave me a shove that nearly overturned the nearest chair, and me with it.

“Gord!” she said to the others. “She’s gonna be a credit to the place! Jean musta had a lapse of memory when she picked her out.”

“Them dumb ones make the best come-ons,” one of the others snapped back. “Didn’t you ever know that? And since when does Jean do the picking anyway? She takes whoever Rosetti wishes on her, and likes it!”

There was a sudden peremptory slamming on the inside door, the one across the way from where I had come in, and they froze to silence. A man's voice called through: "Come on, you tramps in there, get going! Three of the tables need pepping up."

They jumped like trained seals through paper hoops, jostling each other in their eagerness to be the first out. The blur of noise rose sharply with the opening of the door. A phrase came through it. "Twenty-one—red!" And then someone said, "Whee!" A minute later the door had closed again and I was alone.

A human being can be in a situation in which she never was before and her instincts will tell her what her experience cannot. That happened to me now. They'd just called me dumb, and I was dumb. I didn't know the first thing about this place. I'd never been in one like it before. And yet I knew instinctively I didn't like it here. I wanted to get out without even waiting to see Jean. Something told me to. Something told me not to stay a minute longer.

It wasn't those three girls so much. Their bark was worse than their bite. It was something about the sound of that voice that had come through the door just now. There had been something evil in it. It was the sort of voice you hear in secret places, where secret things are done that never see the light of day. I remembered now the way the cop and the elevator operator had both shaken their heads. They'd known. They'd known something about this place.

There was no one in there with me at the moment, no one to stop me. All I had to do was take the chains off that door, slip out the way I'd come in, ring for the rear elevator. Then I remembered I only had twenty-two cents. But even that wasn't enough to keep me here. I could telephone Jean from outside and ask her to come out and meet me.

I had my hand out to the first chain, trying to get it out of its socket without making any noise, when I heard my name called in a frightened whisper behind me.

“Francie!”

Jean was standing in the opposite doorway. She came in quickly and locked the door behind her. There was something sick and choked in her voice. “They told me there was somebody back here asking for me—but you’re the last person I expected to see!”

She had diamonds on her wrists and at her throat, and flowers in her hair, and champagne on her breath. She was old. Goldenhaired and beautiful, and yet somehow old and tired-looking. Not like when she’d left home.

Her voice was a hiss of terror, like air whistling out of a punctured tire. “What got into you to do this? Why did you come here of all places? This is the last place on earth you should have come!”

“Why? I only wanted to see you.”

She evidently didn’t have time to explain. “Quick! Has anyone seen you?”

“Only those three girls—”

“I can shut them up. They work under me. Come on, get out of here fast!”

“But Jean. I came here to stay with you, to live with you.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying! Stop arguing, someone may come in here any minute. I want you to take the next bus and go back home. I’d take you down and put you on it myself, only I can’t leave here right now—”

“But Jean, I have only twenty-two cents.”

She bent over, fumbled frantically with the side of her stocking, thrust a crumpled bill into my hand. It wasn’t a twenty, it wasn’t even a fifty this time. It was a hundred-dollar bill. I’d never seen one before. I didn’t want the money. I wanted to stay. Not here in this place, but in the city. Now that she was with me, I wasn’t frightened any more.

But she was pushing me toward the door through which I'd come in. She wouldn't listen to my protests. We never got to it. A muted buzzer sounded somewhere over our heads. It wasn't any louder than the sound a trapped fly makes in a bottle, but it made us both jump. And at the same instant the knob on the inner door that Jean had locked behind her began to rotate viciously. That same voice as before, the one that had sent cold chills through me, rasped angrily: "Jean, what're you doing in there? What's this door locked for? I need you out here—fast."

"Rosetti," she whispered sickly. "If he ever sees you—" Her grasp on my wrist was ice-cold.

She pulled me toward the side of the room so suddenly that I nearly went off-balance. There was a sort of built-in wardrobe occupying the entire side, with sliding doors that sheathed into one another. She clawed two of them apart, thrust me in against a welter of gold and tinsel dresses, then drew them together again. There was room enough to stand upright. Her panting, parting instructions came through the hair-breadth crack that remained.

"Stay in there until the coast is clear, then get out of here as fast as you can! If anyone should slide the doors open to take anything out, don't lose your head—shift with the doors and you'll be all right! Don't wait for me to come back, I mayn't be able to—"

I heard the sound she made unlocking the door, heard him bawling her out. "Take it easy, Rosetti. I had a run in my stocking," I heard her say placatingly.

I put my eye to the crack and got a look at him—or at least, a vertical strip of his face. He looked just like his voice had sounded.

"We're taking Masters into the argument room. Do a number and do it noisy, hear me? All ta-ra."

"Now?" she gasped, "with a place full of people?"

"That's what you're here for. Do your Western number." He gave one of the wardrobe doors I was behind a fling. I

quailed, but managed to shift noiselessly behind it, out of the light that slipped in. I saw Jean's be-diamonded arm come plunging into the opening, take down a two-gallon cowboy hat from the shelf. Then she looped a lariat around her wrist, went over to a drawer, and took out a pistol.

Her face was very pale under the rouge. So was his, but for a different reason—not fear but malice.

She poised in the open doorway a minute. He signaled some musicians and they started an introduction. She gave her lariat a preliminary twirl, screeched "Yippee!" and shot the pistol into the air. Then she moved out of sight.

He closed the door after her, but stayed inside. He crossed swiftly to the outer door, the one that led to the service elevator, opened it, and let in a laundryman and his assistant, carrying an immense basket full of wash between them.

"Leave it here," he said. "Be ready for you in about ten minutes."

They went out again and he closed the door after them. Then he turned around and went out the other way. I saw his hand starting to grope into his coat as he pulled the door shut after him, as if he was taking out something. I heard somebody who must have been standing right outside waiting for him ask: "All set, boss?"

"All set," he answered, and then the door closed.

I waited a minute to make sure he wouldn't come back, and then edged out of the closet. Outside, in the distance, you could hear Jean's gun shots go off every once in a while. I opened the peephole on the outside door and looked through. The laundrymen were leaning back against the wall out there in the service passageway, waiting to take away the wash. I was wondering whether I should risk it and let myself out while they were there—whether they'd stop me—when without any warning the door behind me was flung open and a drunk came wavering in. He pulled

the door shut behind him and leaned against it for a moment, as if trying to regain sufficient strength to go on.

He was a man in his early fifties, very handsome, with silvery hair. His collar and dress-tie were a little askew, the way a drunk's usually are. He'd had a flower in his buttonhole, but all the petals had fallen off, just the stem was left.

I was too frightened to move for a minute, just stood there staring stupidly at him. He didn't see me—he didn't seem to see anything. He forced himself away from the door that he had used to support him, came on toward where I was. I edged out of the way. Even then he didn't seem to be aware of me. His eyes had a fixed, glassy look and he walked in a funny trailing way, as though his feet were too heavy to lift.

He was holding a bunched handkerchief to his chest, over the seam of his shirt, and he kept giving a dry little cough. It seemed impossible that he hadn't seen me, but his eyes gave no sign, so I scuttled back behind the sliding wardrobe doors where I'd come from, and narrowed them once more to a crack, watching him fearfully through the slit.

His knees were starting to dip under him, but he kept on with painful, stubborn slowness toward that outer door, moving like a deepsea diver under many fathoms of water. It didn't look as though he'd ever get there. He never did.

Suddenly Rosetti's voice sounded behind him. He had come in with two other men. One of them closed the door behind him, locked it this time, and sealed it with his shoulder-blades in an indolent lounge.

"Trying to find your way out?" Rosetti purred. "This is the way out."

Flame slashed from his hand, a thunderclap exploded in the room, and the drunk was suddenly flat and still.

The man holding up the door chuckled, "No wonder he couldn't make it, all the lead he was carrying with him. I bet he gained twenty pounds in the last five minutes."

Rosetti opened the outside door, hitched his head. “Hey! The wash is ready!”

The laundrymen came in, picked up the big basket between them and dumped its contents all over the floor. A lot of towels and sheets and things came spilling out. They opened one of the sheets to its full width and rolled the “drunk” into the middle of it. Then they took his legs and forced them over until they touched his head, doubling him in two. Then they tied the four corners of the sheet together, into a big lumpy bundle. They put some of the laundry back into the basket, thrust the big bundle in the middle, and wedged some more down on top of it. When they got all through it didn’t look much fuller than before, maybe a little plumper in the middle, that was all.

Rosetti looked it over. Then I heard him say, “There’s a little starting to come through over on the side here. Jam a couple more towels in to soak it up. And don’t forget the bricks when you get to the end of your route.”

Then he sat contentedly back on the edge of the girls’ dressingtable, swinging one leg back and forth. He took out a little stick of sandpaper and meticulously rubbed it back and forth over one nail, and blew on it.

“D’ya think anyone saw him come in?” one of the others asked.

Rosetti went to work on a second nail. “Sure, everybody saw him come in. And nobody saw him go out again, for sure. And it still don’t mean a thing. Because nobody saw this part of it, what happened to him in between. I’ll be the first one to go down to headquarters to answer their questions—before they even have time to call me. That’s the kind of a public-spirited citizen I am!”

The three of them laughed.

Someone tried the doorknob from the outside just then and the one blocking it called out cheerfully: “Have to wait a few minutes, girls. We’re holding a stag party in here.”

The laundrymen were ready to go now, with their enormous burden suspended between them, shoulder to shoulder. One of Rosetti's two men accommodatingly opened the outside door for them. "Heavy wash tonight," one of them gasped as they staggered out.

"Sure," was the grinning answer, "we're dirty people up here. Didn't you know that?"

They closed the back door after them and put up all the chains. I was fighting to stay on my feet—at least, until they got out and went back where they'd come from. My head was swimming and my eyes were blurred; I was all weak at the knees; and I was afraid I wasn't going to be able to hold out and they'd hear me go down. I knew what was doing it, and it wasn't lack of air. The city hadn't taken long to teach me things. I knew I'd just seen a man killed before my very eyes.

I kept swaying from side to side like a pendulum, and each time braking my fall by clutching at one of the dresses hanging behind me. They were opening the door now—in another minute they'd be gone. But I keeled over first.

Maybe the noise from outside covered it, I don't know. They must have been clapping for Jean's number about then. I went down sideways into the narrow little trough I was standing in, and a lot of soft things came piling down on top of me, and everything went dark.

It seemed only a minute later that the sliding doors split open and light shone in on me once more. Jean was bending over me, helping me up. She had a street coat on now. She looked haggard. "I'm going to take you out with me," she whispered. "Lean on me.

The humming noise from outside had stopped now; there was a stony silence. She touched some cologne-water to my temple and it stung unexpectedly. I felt it and there was a

welt there. “What happened?” I asked dazedly. “Did I do that when I fell?”

“No, I had to do that, with a slipper-heel, when you started to come to—with those three she-rats in here big as life. You’ll never know what I’ve been through for the past half-hour or so! Luckily, I had a hunch something was wrong, and came back here just before the rest did. I couldn’t get you out unconscious the way you were, and any minute I was afraid you’d come to and give yourself away. Every time one of them wanted something from back here, I’d jump and get it for her—they must have thought I was crazy. When I saw you starting to stir, I had to hit you, to keep you quiet until they got out of here. I told them I saw a bug on the closet-floor.

“Come on, the girls have gone home and the place has closed up for the night. The men are in the office counting up the take. Hurry up, before they miss me.”

We staggered over to the back door together, and she started loosening the chains.

“I’m all right now,” I said weakly. “I guess it was too stuffy in there.”

We were out in the service passage now. She looked at me as if she didn’t believe me. “What’d you see?” she asked sharply. “Are you sure it wasn’t anything you saw while you were in there?”

Somehow I couldn’t bring myself to talk about it, even to her. “Nothing,” I said.

Riding down in the back elevator she turned aside, fumbled some more with her stocking, brought out another hundred dollar bill. “Jimmy,” she said, handing it to the operator, “you never saw this girl come here tonight.”

“What girl?” he asked, when he was able to get his breath back.

“That’s it exactly,” she nodded, satisfied.

She took me somewhere to get some coffee to brace me up. Mostly, I guess, she tried to talk me into going back

home. But nothing she could say had any effect on me. You know how it is when you're eighteen.

"No," I said. "I'm staying. If I can't stay with you, then I'll stay on my own."

She sighed. "I was like that once, too. That's why I wish you'd listen to me and go home. I don't want what happened to me to happen to you."

"What happened to you?"

She didn't answer.

"What was that place up there?" I asked curiously.

"Forget you were ever up there. Stay if you must, but promise me one thing—that you'll never go near there again. I'll find a furnished room for you and come around to see you whenever I can. And Francie"—her hand covered mine in desperate appeal for a moment—"if you did see something you shouldn't have up there tonight, don't ever open your mouth about it, don't ever mention it to a living soul—for both our sakes, yours and mine as well. Try to forget about it, that's the best way. I've seen things too, from time to time, that I've had to forget about."

"Why don't you leave there, Jean?"

"I can't." She gave a wry smile. "I'm a little tired, and a whole lot disillusioned, but I still—want to go on living for a while."

I just sucked in my breath and looked at her when I heard that.

Late as it was, we went looking for a room then and there. I had to stay some place, and although she didn't say so, it was obvious that Jean lived right up there in that penthouse, as a sort of permanent resident-manager to look after Rosetti's interests.

We took a cab to save time on our quest, and passed Chalif-Bleekman's on our way. I looked out and thought,

“There’s my mascot.” The lights in the shop window had gone out long ago, but you could still make out the mannequins, like ghosts in the dim shine of the streetlights. I asked her about the store.

“I used to work there when I first came here,” she told me. “I’ll take you in with me tomorrow; maybe I can get you a job there.”

She found a room without much trouble. It was too late at night to be very choosy, and I was too dead-tired to care. Anything would have looked good to me by then.

The last thing she said was: “Now if you did see something, erase it from your mind. Always remember, there’s nothing you and I can do about it. We’re up against something that’s too big for us.”

To the end I couldn’t bring myself to admit it to her. “No, I didn’t see anything,” I reiterated.

She knew I was lying, and I knew she knew. I heard her light step go down the stairs, and the taxi that had waited for her below drove off. Afterwards I found another hundred-dollar bill, the second one she’d given me that night, under the soap dish on the washstand.

It was only when I was half undressed that I realized I’d left the little bag with my few things in it in the back room of that place where she worked.

I was too tired to be as frightened as I should have been.

Her face paled when I first told her about it the next day. “It must have been found by now! There’s a maid up there that’s a stooge for Rosetti. Did anything in it have your name on it? Was there anything to show whom it belonged to?”

I tried to remember. “I don’t think so—” Then my own face blanched. “Wait a minute. There was a snapshot of me

in the flap under the lid, but without any name or anything on it—”

She’d got her second wind by now. “It’s all right, keep cool. It’s still not fatal. Here’s our only out. If Rosetti asks me, I’ll say some stray or other I used to know on one of my jobs showed up with a hard-luck story and tried to put the touch on me. She’d been put out of her room and she left her things with me. I slipped her something to get rid of her. As long as they don’t think you were right there when —”

I knew what she meant. When the laundry was carried out.

“—you’re safe enough,” she concluded.

She was as good as her word, and got me a job at Chalif-Bleekman’s modeling negligees. Then she left me. “I won’t be able to see you very often, after this once,” she warned me. “Rosetti doesn’t take chances with any of us, and he has eyes and ears all over town. I might be followed when I least expect it, and bring them down on you.”

“If you want me in a hurry,” was the last thing I said, “you can always meet me by the mannequin.” I explained about the window mascot of mine. “I’ll make it a point to stop there a minute on my way in and out.”

That was the last I saw of her for some time, but I could understand her reasons for staying away, so I wasn’t particularly worried. Meanwhile, I started to get the hang of the city a little better and lose some of my greenness.

They were nice to me at the place I worked, and the job was easy, after you once got over being self-conscious about walking up and down the aisles in nothing but lace and ribbons.

I made several girl friends, who worked there with me, and I also got myself a boy friend—my first. His name was Eddie Dent. He was a salesman in an auto showroom, and it looked like I’d hit the jackpot the very first time. But more about him later.

Although I grew wiser, I didn't forget my mascot. Even Eddie couldn't take her place. They'd put a new outfit on her long ago, since the night I'd first seen her, but I still stopped before her on my way in and out each day and told her all about how things were coming, and she still smiled in that same protective, encouraging way. She made blue days bright, and bright days brighter.

I was beginning to forget that nightmare scene I'd witnessed the first night of my arrival, and in a little while more it would have faded away like something that had never happened. Then suddenly it all came back with a crash. A succession of crashes, each one worse than the one before.

I'd bought a newspaper back to my room with me after work, and when I opened it a face seemed to leap up from its pages and strike at me. Handsome, with silvery-white hair. The laundry basket must have come apart. They'd picked him up out of the river.

Well-known Sportsman, Missing Two Weeks, Pound Dead, the caption said. And underneath, my eyes ran through the welter of fine print, taking in a phrase here, a phrase there. ". . . Masters was known to have made many enemies in the course of his long career . . . his only son committed suicide less than a month ago after incurring heavy gambling losses . . . Police are trying to reconstruct his movements . . . Among those who came forward to aid them was Leo Rosetti, through whose cooperation they have been able to establish that one of the last places visited by Masters before he met his death was a small private party given by Rosetti at his own home. He was definitely absolved of all connection with the crime, however. Rosetti's first inkling of what had become of his friend of long standing was when he reported him missing after repeated attempts to communicate with him for the past two weeks had failed.

They didn't guess. They didn't know. But I did. Jean and I both did.

I didn’t sleep so well that night.

I put it up to the mannequin on my way in to work next morning. “How can I go on keeping quiet about it? Shouldn’t I tell them?”

And her rueful smile seemed to suggest: “What about Jean? It means her life if you do.”

That was the first crash.

When I clocked out that night there was a man standing there by my mascot—waiting for one of the other girls in the store, I guess. It meant I had to stand right next to him for a moment or two, while I was exchanging my usual silent confidences with her, but he didn’t even seem aware of me.

I had a funny feeling, on my way home, that I was being followed, but each time I looked around, there wasn’t anyone in sight—so I put it down to nervousness and let it go at that. The feeling wouldn’t leave me, though, right up to my own door.

I’d been home about five minutes when I thought I heard a creak on the flooring outside in the hall. I stiffened, listening. It came again, nearer the door but less distinct than the first time. But no knock or anything followed.

I realized now that my instinct had been right. There had been someone following me all the way home, even though I hadn’t been able to distinguish who it was. There was almost certainly someone standing out there now, motionless, trying to listen to me just as I was trying to listen to him. I tiptoed over, bent down, and put my eye level with the keyhole. Chilling confirmation came at once. My view was blocked. Instead of the opposite side of the hall, all I could see was a blur of dark suiting, standing there perfectly still.

The voice nearly threw me back on my heels, it came through so unexpectedly. The most terrifying thing about it was the casual, matter-of-fact tone he used, as though there were no door in between, as though I had been in plain sight the whole time.

"Come on, little lady, quit playing hide and seek."

Under a sort of hypnotic compulsion, I touched the key finally, gave it a gingerly little twist as though it was red hot, and he did the rest.

He came in slowly. It was the same man who had been standing outside the store. He had a funny little cowlick down the middle of his forehead, like a fish-hook, and it wouldn't stay back. I couldn't take my eyes off it.

He closed the door after him. Then he heeled his hand at me, showing a glint of silver. He said: "You're Francine Everton, that right?"

I said it was.

He took out a newspaper and was suddenly holding Masters's picture before my eyes. "Ever see this man before?"

"No!" The sudden shock alone made my denial convincing, if nothing else.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes!" If I said I'd seen him, I'd have to say I'd seen him killed. If I said I'd seen him killed—

"Who's the woman got you your job at Chalif's?"

So they'd found that out. I decided to bluff it out. It was the only thing I could do. "An acquaintance of mine. Her name is Edwards, I think. I don't know her very well. Iran into her on the street and told her I had no job."

It came with treacherous glibness. "When was the last time you were up there?"

Instinct, like a fine wire running through me, jangled warningly: "Make one admission, anywhere along the line, and the whole thing'll come out." I said, "Up where? What do you mean?"

“Then how do you explain this?”

Even more suddenly than the newspaper, he had opened an envelope and was holding a charred fragment of snapshot before me. Everything that didn’t matter had been burned away. The face remained, yellowed but perfectly recognizable.

Sparring for time, I asked: “How’d it get burnt?”

He flicked back: “How’d it get where it got burnt?”

“I’d been put out of my room just before I met my girlfriend. I had no place to go. She—took a little bagful of my belongings with her, to keep them for me until I found a place. She was supposed to bring them back, but she never did—”

“And you’ve never been up where she hangs out at any time?”

“Never. She didn’t seem to want me to look her up—”

“I don’t doubt that,” he said dryly. It was suddenly over, to my unutterable relief. I’d thought it would go on for hours yet.

He got up to go. “Well, kid, maybe you’re telling the truth and maybe you’re not. Maybe you’re afraid to.” He got as far as the door, and then added: “Don’t be afraid to. We’ll look after you—” He waited a minute and then went on: “Are you sure there isn’t anything more you want to tell me?”

“How could there be, when I’ve told you everything there is?”

He closed the door. It opened again, unexpectedly. “Armour’s the name,” he added, “in case you should change your mind.”

It closed a second time and I heard the stairs creak complainingly with his descent. I turned and flopped down by the window, peeping under the drawn shade.

I saw him come out and look up, and then he went down the street.

A figure detached itself from the shelter of a dark doorway opposite and started over toward the house I lived in. I knuckled the pane to attract his attention, threw up the lower sash, and called down guardedly: “Don’t come in, Eddie. Wait for me around the corner.”

It was my boy friend. I didn’t want him to get mixed up in it. When I went out to meet him, I went all the way around the block in the opposite direction and approached the corner from the far side—a primitive precaution that wouldn’t have fooled anybody. if I was really being watched.

He said: “Who was the guy just up there to see you?”

I took his arm. “I’ll tell you all about it. Let’s get away from here first.” I hadn’t meant to say that. I only realized it after it was out. I couldn’t tell him all about it. And then again—why not?

I waited until we were in a secluded booth in our usual Chinese restaurant. He said: “What’s the matter, Francie? Is there something on your mind? You don’t seem yourself tonight.”

It was so easy to get started, after that. What was more natural than to confide your troubles to your boyfriend?

“He was a detective, that man you saw,” I blurted out.

He wasn’t as surprised as I’d expected him to be. He piled rice on my plate. “What’d he wani with you?” he said.

“This man Masters they picked up from the river—he held his picture up to my eyes and asked me if I’d ever seen him before.”

A forkful of chow mein halted halfway to his mouth.

“I said no, of course.”

The forkful of chow mein went the rest of the way up.

“Then he asked me about—abcut a friend of mine named Jean Edwards, that got me my job. Asked me if I’d ever been up to her place. I said no, of course.”

“Then what’re you downhearted about? You gave him straight answers to straight questions. That’s all there is to it. What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing,” I said muffledly.

He looked at me a minute or two. He scribbled something down on a scrap of paper and handed it to the Chinese waiter. I saw the waiter take it over to the bandleader. The music came around me, soft and persuasive.

All your fears are foolish fancies maybe—

Eddie stood up, held out his arms. “Come on, Francie, that’s ours. You never could resist that number. It’ll fix everything up.”

I leaned my head against him as we glided around in the twilight. “Feel better now?” he whispered.

“A little.”

“Never mind, baby, it’ll all come out in the wash.”

I went out of step. “Oh, don’t—don’t use that word. I can’t stand it—”

“Why?”

It got away from me so easily, like the tail of a kite, when the kite’s already out of your hands. “Because it always reminds me of the way I saw him carried out that night—”

“Who, Masters?” He kept guiding me around softly in the shadowy crowd. “But I thought you said you weren’t up there—”

“I told him that. But I was. I was hiding up there in a closet. I saw the whole thing happen. I can’t tell you more than that about it, Eddie, because there’s another person involved—”

The music ended and we went back to the booth. He had to make a phone call when the kumquats came on. It took him a little while, but he was smiling the same as ever when he came back. We didn’t talk about it any more after that. I’d got it off my chest and I felt a lot better.

Instead of going on to a show the way we usually did, he took me back to my room. “You’re tired and you ought to get a little rest, Francie.”

“Suppose he comes around again?”

“He won’t.” He sounded strangely confident. “He won’t bother you any more.” Then he said: “I’ll wait across the street until I see your room light go on, so you’ll feel safer.” Almost as though he knew ahead of time.

I went in and up the stairs and unlocked my darkened room. There were two messages under my door—a telegram and a phone message from Jean, in the landlady’s writing—Jean Edwards wants you to come up to her place at once, highly important. Then when I opened the telegram, to my surprise that was from Jean too. Just five words—Meet me by the mannequin.

I ran to the window first of all, threw it up, signaled down to Eddie. “Eddie, wait for me. I have to go out again.”

A large black car had drawn up a few doors down, and the driver had come over to him to ask for a light or something. I saw the two of them standing there chattering casually the way men do.

Then I stood there knitting my brows over the two messages. One contradicted the other. Maybe one was fake, but if so, which one of the two? Her words that first night rang in my ears again. “Promise me you’ll never go near there again.” Still and all, both could be from her and both could be on the level. Maybe something had happened to change her plans. Maybe she’d found out she couldn’t get away, and had sent the second message to cancel the first. The thing was, which one had preceded the other? Well, there was a way of finding that out.

I knocked on the landlady’s door. “Which of these came first—can you tell me?”

“The telegram,” she said unhesitatingly. “I remember I’d just finished slipping it under your door, when the phone started to ring down in the lower hall, and that was for you too.”

“Thanks,” I said. Jean’s place had it, then. The phone message was the one to go by.

I hurried outside to Eddie. The other man was gone now, but the car was still standing there.

"That was a guy I used to know," he began. "He said I could have the use of his car until he comes out again—"

I hardly paid any attention to what he was saying. "Eddie, don't ask me any questions, but—just come along with me, will you?"

"You bet," he agreed, the way a boy friend should.

We passed Chalif's on our way up to Jean's place. I was glad now that I hadn't taken the telegram at its face value. There was no one in front of the mannequin. Jean had changed her mind after sending it.

"Stop just a minute," I said, on an impulse.

"Why here? The store was closed hours ago—"

"No, you don't understand. I have a habit whenever I'm in trouble—"

"Oh, yeah. That mascot of yours. You told me about that once." He veered accommodatingly to the curb and braked.

I jumped out and went over, while he stayed in the car. The window lights were on, the way they were every night until midnight. She was in a different gown tonight. Then I remembered it was Thursday. They changed the window displays every other Thursday. They must have just finished dressing the window before we got there.

There was something about her face—A shock went through me as I halted before the thick plate-glass. It was Jean's face! I must be' delirious, or losing my mind. She made a swift little gesture, hidden from the street. Touched one finger to her lips to warn me to silence. Then her hand stiffened into the mannequin's rigid wrist-bent pose again. I smothered a scream.

She remained motionless after that—all but her lips. I could see them wavering slightly. She was trying to say something to me. I watched them with desperate intentness, while she repeated endlessly, until I got it: "Don't—go. Don't—go. Don't—go."

“Come on,” Eddie called impatiently from the car. “I thought you were in such a hurry to get wherever it is you’re heading for.”

“Don’t—go.” The silent syllables kept pounding through the glass. She added an almost imperceptible shake of her head, invisible except to me.

“Are you coming? What’s holding you up?”

“No,” I said, hypnotized. I couldn’t take my eyes off her face.

He got out, strode over to me, caught me roughly by the arm. “Why—what’s the matter?” A sudden change had come over him—I couldn’t quite identify it yet. He didn’t waste a glance on the figure in the window. His back was to her. Over his shoulder I could see the warning shake of her head become frenzied.

“Then I’ll give it to you right here—what’s the difference where you get it, as long as we shut you up for good!”

The mask had fallen off, and I saw him now, for the first time, as he really had been all along. His face was now as repulsive as Rosetti’s and those other men’s. He had me trapped between two showcases, where the main store-entrance was, and there wasn’t a soul in sight on the streets to help me.

He cast a quick glance over his shoulder, as though trying to decide whether to risk the sound of a gunshot. Then, instead, he brought out something stubby, and it suddenly doubled its length in his hand. A wicked blade shot out of it right while he held it.

“So you saw Masters go out with the dirty wash, did you? Well, here’s an extra mouth to tell it to the cops through—a mouth in the middle of your heart!”

A terrible game of puss-in-corner began between us. As I shifted from side to side, looking for an opening, he shifted in accompaniment each time, blocking me. I didn’t dare take my eyes from the vicious knife feinting at me, but I was

dimly aware of a flurry of motion behind him in the store window.

Suddenly I saw an opening—or thought I did. Maybe he gave it to me purposely. He had shifted over a little too far to one side. I darted for the avenue of escape like an arrow, flashed through—almost, but not quite. He swerved quickly behind me, his free hand shot out, clamped itself on my shoulder and pinned me fast. I could feel the flirt of air as the knife swept up. It would come down over me and plunge into my heart.

There was a flash inside the window beside me, a hollow thud, and pieces of glass fell out, leaving a jagged hole shaped like a maple leaf. A puff of smoke misted Jean's head and shoulders for a minute, then rose and disappeared. She hardly seemed to have moved at all. One hand, that had held a tinseled evening-bag until now, now grasped a snub-nosed revolver instead. Cottony smoke still licked from it.

The knife clattered to the sidewalk before my eyes. Then, horribly, his whole weight sagged against me from behind, I stepped forward, and he fell to the ground and lay there without moving.

Jean had disappeared inside the store. I was still cowering there, staring at his body, when she unlocked the front door and came out—still in the metallic wig she'd worn in the window.

"You poor innocent. Do you know who you picked for a boy friend? Rosetti's star banker. He presides at the main roulette table up at The Place every night. They must have sicced him on you purposely, to find out if you knew enough to be dangerous to them. And the minute he found out, he reported back to Rosetti.

"Luckily, I happened to get on an extension phone in the next room while he was making his tip-off call tonight. I had to reach you fast, and I didn't know how to do it. You were already out with the very guy that had fingered you. It was a cinch he wasn't going to let you out of his sight.

Something you said last time I saw you came back to me. ‘If you ever want me in a hurry and don’t know where to find me, you can always meet me by the mannequin.’

“I got a hold of a gun and slipped out. I sent you a telegram to your room, and then I went over to the store. They were in the midst of dressing the windows when I got there, and the entrance had been left unlocked, so the guy supervising the work could slip out front and inspect the window every once in a while. That gave me an inspiration. I couldn’t just wait for you on the open sidewalk. Eddie knew me too well. He would have spotted me and whisked you off with him before I had a chance to get in my warning. He was too good a triggerman to fool around with. I had to get the drop on him in some way.

“So I sneaked inside, unnoticed, and hid behind one of the counters until the window dressers had finished and gone. When I opened the window, took out your mascot, changed clothes with her, fixed up my face and arms with some ochre powder I found in the store, put on her metallic wig, and stood there in her place, with the gun in my little jeweled bag.

“It was taking a big chance, until I had frozen into the right pose, but the streets are pretty quiet around here and no one passing by on the outside caught me at it. Then I had to hold the pose for what seemed like hours, and I thought you’d never come.”

“What’ll we do now?” I asked helplessly, looking down at the still form at our feet.

She shrugged. “I’ll have to stay out of course, now that I’ve made the break, but it’s just a matter of a day or two before they get the two of us. How can we buck a machine like the one Rosetti has got?”

“A detective named Armour—he was the one who questioned me—said if I ever had anything to tell him, he’d look after me.”

“That’s what they all say, but how can we be sure they’re not taking presents from Rosetti on the side—”

“No, he was different. He was honest. You could see it in his face. He had a funny little cowlick down the middle of his forehead, like a fishhook, and it wouldn’t stay back—”

“My God!” she exclaimed.

I said: “What’s the matter?”

“Then they got him too, tonight. He must have been up there looking around for evidence single-handed, the fool! That proves he was honest, if nothing else. There was a guy with a cowlick drifting around from table to table, going through the motions of playing. I noticed him before I left. I could tell by Rosetti’s face that they were wise to him, were getting ready to close in on him. Trixie was getting out the blanks and sombrero, to cover it up, when I came away. I bet he’s already gone out in the wash!”

The prowl-car must have sidled up with its siren muffled. The first we knew about it was when two cops jumped out with guns drawn.

Jean didn’t waste any time—there wasn’t any to waste. “O.K. I did this, and here’s the gun. But if you’ve got any sense you won’t stop to ask questions about this guy. He’ll keep until later. Send in a call quick, for all the reserves they can spare. Do you two know a plainclothesman named Armour?”

One of them nodded. “Yeah, Danny Armour. He’s attached to this precinct.”

“Well, he’s attached to the sky-patrol by now, but if you get up there in time you may be able to catch them red-handed with the body. Rosetti’s gambling place—I’ll take you in the back way.”

One of them said in a low voice to the other: “He was up to something tonight. I saw him marking bills in the back room—”

The other one hitched his gun ominously. “We’ll take a chance. Put in the call, Bill.”

And so I got my first ride in a police radio-car.

We stopped around the corner from Jean's place. She led the way in through the delivery entrance.

What she asked the colored boy on the elevator should have been very funny. Somehow it wasn't, it was gruesome.

"Has any laundry been sent out from upstairs yet, Jimmy?"

He said: "Yes, Miss Jean. The truck just pulled away li'l while ago. Pow'ful big wash tonight, too."

"Too late," she moaned.

One of the cops with us said through his clenched teeth: "Dead or alive, he's still evidence. Hurry up, what'd that truck look like?"

"I've seen it. You can spot it a mile away," Jean snapped. "Ivory-colored, and all lacquered-up like a bandbox. It'll be a toss-up between the two rivers, though."

"Well, this is a westbound street, so we'll take the one it heads for!"

We climbed back in the patrol-car and tore off again. The cordon was beginning to form around Rosetti's place as we left.

That truck must have made marvelous time, to get all the way down where we finally caught up with it. But our ride was nothing short of maniacal. I wasn't able to draw a full breath from the time we took off.

We overtook it halfway to the lonely warehouse district along the waterfront, screeched a little too far past, nearly turned over, but managed to come up onto the sidewalk in the process. The two "laundrymen" were armed, but never had a chance to prove it. The cops were on them before they'd even finished staggering out. By the time Jean and I came up they already had the big basket of "wash" out on the ground and were ripping it open.

They kicked away the blood-spattered towels and pillow cases, and I saw his face by the pale arc-light. It was he, all

right, the man who had come up to my room. The cowlick was jagged and stiff with blood now.

"He's still evidence, poor fellow," one of the cops said.

"He's better than that!" Jean explained electrically, straightening up from bending over him. "There's still life in him, I just felt his heart! They were in too much of a hurry this time. Get him to a hospital quick, and you may still be able to pull him through!"

I'd thought we'd ridden fast on the first two legs of our trip but we had practically been bogged down compared to that stretch from waterfront to hospital.

I never thought I'd see that cowlick again, but I did—three weeks later, when Jean and I were taken down to the hospital. I even heard a voice come from under it. He was weak as a rag, but they'd pulled him through. The assistant D.A. who was going to prosecute Rosetti and his whole ring for murder was present at his bedside, to make the final arrangements with us. Jean was to be granted immunity for turning State's evidence as to the operation of Rosetti's many gambling establishments that she had presided over. I didn't need immunity to agree to testify to the murder of Masters, because I hadn't done anything.

I saw that cowlick all through the trial, sticking out stubborn as ever from under a huge gauze head-bandage.

Rosetti has long since been just a blackout in a prison lightingsystem, but I'm still seeing that cowlick.

I see it every Saturday night around 8, and sometimes during the week, when I answer the doorbell in the little flat that Jean and I have taken together. And it won't be long now before I'll be Mrs. Cowlick—Mrs. Armour to you!

CINDERELLA AND THE MOB

This is the real story of what happened the night I went out looking for glamour and met an ice man (who was also a nice man). In fact the whole evening was simply super until everybody started shooting . . .

I

The whole family jumped on me at once. You'd think I was a mere child or something, instead of sixteen. You'd think a person would have some rights on a Thursday evening. You'd think school-work was the most important thing in the world.

You'd think—well anyway, you'd *think!*

Father said: "Not with that sore throat you've got, young lady! We'll tell you all about the picture when we come home."

Mother said "And even if she didn't have a sore throat she'd stay home tonight! She's got to study *some* of the time."

And of course Fran, my older sister, who wasn't going with them but was going out with her this-month's beau, had to put her two cents' worth in too, like she always did. "When I was your age—" she started to say.

“Oh sure,” I sighed wearily, “back in those Roman times things were different.”

But it didn’t do a bit of good. They all got ready and they all went out, and there I was stuck with a lot of books again. The last thing I got told was, “Now remember, I expect to find you in bed when we come home. None of this running over to Betty Lou’s house!” The front door went *bang!* and I was Cinderella again.

I gritted my teeth and opened my history book, but I couldn’t see a thing it had in it for a long-time, just waves of red. “Isn’t something exciting or glamorous ever going to happen to me?” I seethed. “Do I have to be about twenty, and all bent over and rheumatic, before I even begin to live at all?”

And then, like it was just waiting for that much encouragement, the phone started to ring. I knew it was probably Fran’s boy-friend calling to find out what was keeping her so long; she was the only one ever got phone calls in our family.

First I wasn’t going to bother about it—let him ring—but it kept on until it got annoying, so I went out to it.

“Hello,” I croaked, and between what the sore throat had done to my voice and what the family had done to my disposition by leaving me home alone like this, I must have sounded like someone sawing wood.

It was a man’s voice, but it wasn’t Fran’s boy-friend. He sounded sort of—I don’t know how to put it—confidential, as if he was talking out of one corner of his mouth and didn’t want anyone but me to hear him. He said, “Hello, is this Chicago Rose?”

For a minute I was so surprised I just blinked, and then before I had a chance to tell him I wasn’t he rushed ahead, as if he was afraid I was going to hang up before lie got through saying what he had to.

“Listen, you don’t know me, Rose,” he said, “but it’s all right; Eddie gave me your number. You know, Eddie Dubois back in Chi. He wrote it down for me before I came away; I mislaid it just now, but it didn’t matter; I had it memorized anyway. He told me you’d sound just like you do, like you just had your tonsils taken out.”

I’d kept trying to tell him, through the whole thing, that he must have the wrong number, but he was talking so fast I couldn’t even get one good-sized word in.

And then it started to sound intriguing, so I changed my mind. I looked at it this way: every added five minutes I spent at the phone meant that much less time I’d have to spend over those poisonous books afterward, so what did I have to lose anyway?

He said: “There’s a bunch of us just in and we got a little job for you. Your kind of job, y’know, Rose? The kind of stuff that made you famous in Chicago.”

“Oh,” I said. Which is a pretty safe word. It was the only one I could think of, anyway.

“You’ll get a cut,” he went on, like he was trying to coax me.

He didn’t say where, but I looked at my arms apprehensively; who likes to have to wear court-plaster? “Well, if it’s all the same to you—” I started to say.

“Oh I see, cash on the line ahead of time. Well, we’ll do it your way then, Rose.” Then he asked, “Are you warm right now?”

I felt my forehead. There *was* a good deal of heat coming up, Father had shaken up the furnace before he went out. “A little,” I said, “but not enough to bother me.”

“As long as you’re not red-hot it’s okay. Now listen, Rose, I can’t give it to you over the phone, naturally. How’s about coming out to your place?”

I looked around me and I rolled my eyes to myself. I could just imagine *their* faces if they came home and found—

“No,” I said quickly, “I don’t think you better do that.” Was I having fun by now! This had the dates of the English kings beat all hollow.

“What’s matter?” he said. “Ain’t you paying protection these days? Well all right, make it anywhere you say, Rose.”

I’d never met anyone at all until now, except Betty Lou, and I always met her in Gilman’s Drugstore down on our corner, right by the soda fountain. I couldn’t make it there, because that fresh Willie Smith that tends the fountain knew me awfully well, and besides I owed him thirty cents for back sodas and he might humil’ate me by asking for it.

“*You* name the place,” I said.

“I’ll park on Main and Center,” he said. “Flow’ll that be? Northwest corner; you can’t miss me.”

That was all the way downtown, and it kind of scared me for a minute; if they ever found out that I went that far downtown at this hour, I’d never hear the end of it. Even in the daytime that was out of bounds for me.

But I remembered I didn’t really have to go; I could just tell him I would and then never show up, so it didn’t matter. “All right,” I said.

“I’ll tell you how you’ll know me,” he said. “I’m wearing a very light lid, almost the lightest in town. I’ll keep turning it around in my hands, like I was looking at the band.”

“Well, uh, did—” I kept trying to remember that name he’d used at the beginning, and couldn’t. “Did he tell you what I look like?”

“Eddie Dubois? Naw, only that you’re red-headed and an eyeful.”

I glanced in the hall-mirror next to me, covered up a snicker with my hand. “Well I changed that a couple weeks ago. I’m blonde now.”

He didn’t seem surprised to hear that, as if all the girls he knew were always doing that to their hair. “Oh sure, I know

how it is. You just gimme the business, I'll know you."

I could tell he was getting ready to leave the phone, and I knew I ought to tell him that I wasn't Chicago Rose, he'd been speaking to the wrong party the whole time; but I didn't have the nerve now any more, after waiting this long.

The last thing he said was, "Make it as soon as you can, huh, Rose; don't keep me waiting there on the open corner too long, it's not healthy." Then he rang off.

I hung up with a sigh, it had been the most interesting conversation I'd ever had, and I hated it to be over. Now I'd have to go back to those hum books waiting there all over the dining-room table.

I sighed again. I was wishing I really was Chicago Rose; I bet she didn't have to study civics and go to bed at eleven on week-nights.

Then I thought: I *could* be if I wanted to, just for a few minutes. He doesn't even know what she looks like himself. Or I could just go down there and take a peek at him from around the corner and then come straight back again. And that wag, my study time would be all used up and it would be too late to bother with these books any more tonight.

And before I knew it I was upstairs in Fran's room, looking her things over.

I took down one of her old evening dresses and put it on. It didn't fit so good, so I pinned it tight behind me and that made it fit better. But my face looked too babyish sticking up out of it. So then I opened the bureau drawer and found a black crayon I'd watched her use sometimes and made rings around my eyes.

That helped a little, and then I spread on all the powder and rouge she had there, until hardly any real skin showed through anywhere.

When I got through it didn't look so awfully good maybe, but at least it didn't look like me any more.

I found a pair of her shoes and put them on too, because my own all had low heels. We both wore about the same

size. They kind of threw me forward, like standing on stilts, until I got the hang of them.

Up to now I'd been just sort of playacting. You know, like you do when you're twelve, dress-up in grown-up clothes and make believe you're going somewhere. I didn't really think I'd have the nerve to go.

But as long as I was all rigged up like that, it seemed a shame not to go down there and take a peek at him just for fun. Then I could tell Betty Lou all about it tomorrow in class, and we'd have a lot of fun over it.

I knew I'd be back long before they came home from the movie at half past eleven—I'd have to be—but just to be on the safe side, in case Fran had a fight with her boy-friend and came home early, like sometimes happened, I put a laundry bag full of old clothes under the bedcovers to make it look like it was me lying there all cuddled up. With the light out you couldn't tell the difference.

Then I went downstairs. I fell down the last three or four because I wasn't so steady on those extra-high heels yet, but what was a little thing like that? I just got right up again and straightened myself out.

I put out all the lights and then I watched carefully from the front door, to make sure none of the neighbors were at their windows or out on the sidewalk just then, to see me come out.

As soon as I was sure the coast was clear, I ducked out. I had my own key, that I used in the daytime to let myself in when I came home from school, so I wasn't worried about getting in again.

I waited fast until I got away from our house, and then I slowed down a little, so as not to attract attention.

What made me get in the cab was an accident. I mean, I made the first block all right without meeting anybody, and

then this cab showed up and started trailing along next to me, on account of how swell I was dressed, I guess.

"Cab, lady?" the driver said. That gave me a thrill; it was the first time anyone had ever called me "lady." But of course I didn't need a cab; it was only thirty blocks from our house down to where he'd said he'd be, and that's not much of a walk. So I just shook my head politely.

Then the very next minute Mr. and Mrs. Jurgens, who lived right next door to us, turned the corner not ten yards ahead and started to come straight toward me. There was no chance to get out of their way. Luckily the cab was still there, right next to me. I gave kind of a sideways jump, and before I knew it I was in it.

The Jurgenses went right by without even looking at me, but before I could get out again, the cab had picked up speed and was on its way, so there didn't seem to be anything to do but go ahead and tell the driver where I was going.

He kind of looked up sharp when he heard how scrapey my voice was, and then I saw him squinting at all the makeup on my face, in the rear-sight mirror. After a while he asked, kind of friendly and understanding, "How's business, sister?"

I didn't know much about business, only what I heard my father say, so I repeated an expression I'd heard him use to my mother lots of times.

"It's been so long since I made a sale," I said solemnly, "that I might just as well give my stock away to the Salvation Army!"

He looked kind of surprised at such a thought, but he shook his head sympathetically.

When we got near Main and Center I said, "Stop in the middle of the block, before you get all the way to the corner." I figured that way I could edge up to it and peak around it without him seeing me.

When he did, I got out and said cordially, “Well, thanks ever so much, it was awful nice of you to bring me all the way down here.”

He said, “Wa-a-ait a minute, what is this?” And he started to climb out after me real slow.

I didn’t like the look on his face, so I started to back away little by little. Then when I saw him spit on his hands and rub them together, I turned and started going real fast.

But I made the mistake of looking back over my shoulder the whole time, and that way I forgot to watch where I was going. He took a jump and started sliding after me, like on an ice-pond. I gave a squeak and turned away too late.

My whole face went *spiff* into somebody’s chest. It was hard, too, like a barrel; I nearly saw stars for a minute.

I got around behind him, hung onto him, and said: “Make him go ’way! I didn’t ask him to ride in his cab, he asked *me* if I wanted to.”

II

By the time I saw him stoop over to pick up a very light ice-cream color hat he’d dropped, it was too late. He said, “I guess you’re Rose, by that voice alone.”

Then he laughed and said, “Same old Rose. Eddie told me about that trick of yours of getting out of cabs before they stop, and then when the drivers turn around to collect the fare they find the back seat empty. Only you seem to have gone sort of kitten shh with it.”

He shoved a bill at the driver and growled: “Geddoud there before I wrap the crankshaft around your neck!”

What a growl that was! Like a sea-lion in the zoo.

Then before I knew what was happening, he had me by the arm and I was all the way over at a big black sedan

waiting at the opposite curb. “Come on, Rose, I’ll take you around to meet the boys.”

“Y-you been waking long?” I quavered. The only reason that kept it from sounding as frightened as it was, was how inflamed my vocal cords were, I guess.

“Plenty #&!©# long!” he said. I’d heard two of the words before, but the other one was brand-new. Something told me this wasn’t a very good time to tell him I wasn’t Rose, that maybe I better put it off a little while, until a better opportunity came.

There were two other men in the sedan, one at the wheel, one in back. He introduced me, but only after we were already under way and I was firmly wedged on the back seat between him and one of the two others.

“Here she is, boys. Trigger, this is Rose. Rose, meet Oh-Johnny.”

It seemed a worse time than ever to bring up about not being Rose. But compared to what it was going to be like later, if I’d only known it, it was practically ideal.

I said, “I don’t even know *your* name yet,” to my original acquaintance. There didn’t seem to be any harm in that.

“I’m Blitz Burley,” he said, like he was supposed to be famous or something.

They seemed to do their best to be agreeable to me, as if I was someone who might be valuable to them later on. The one called Trigger said, trying to make polite small-talk, “I b’lieve a moll I used to go around with knew your older sister in the Women’s Reformatory at . . .”

And the one next to me asked considerately: “Does my shoulder-sling bother you the way we’re sitting? I’ll move it out of the way if it does.”

“Huh,” Blitz sad scornfully before I could answer, “she probably curls her hair with a repeater every night, don’tcha Rose?”

I didn’t exactly know what they were talking about, but the sensible thing to say seemed to be: “I used to, but I

found out I wasn’t getting the best results that way.” So I said it.

By this time we’d gotten where they were bringing me, so we all got out.

There was one pressed close on each side of me, and the one called Oh-Johnny was right in back of me. I don’t think they meant anything by it, they were just being sociable, but the only place I could have gotten to by breaking away suddenly from them and running would have been where we were going anyway, so there didn’t seem to be much sense to that.

It was some kind of a hotel, but it wasn’t a very presentable or tidy one. They went in the side way so they wouldn’t have to pass anyone, and up to a door on the third floor. It had an elevator, but they walked up.

Blitz knocked, in a funny way. Two quick ones and two slow ones. The door opened in a funny way too. First just a ribbon of orange showed, as if someone was looking out with just one half of one eye. Then it opened all the way, and we went in one behind the other.

Trigger was going to go first, but Blitz, who had very good manners, knocked him out of the way with his elbow and said, “Ladies first.”

“Why?” Trigger asked.

“I dunno; I suppose so if there’s a rod waiting behind it they get it first and you got time to draw.”

There was another man on the inside of the door just finishing putting something away; I guess it was a handkerchief in his back pocket. There were also two more men in the room, playing cards at a table. I was now surrounded by six of them.

I still thought it could wait a little longer, to tell them I wasn’t Rose but just Penny Richards of Thomas Jefferson

High School. Maybe till I got outside again by myself, for instance.

There was a clock staring me in the face across the room, and it was already twenty after ten by now. I had less than an hour left, if I wanted to get back home before the family came in from the movies.

And to make matters worse, I'd lost track of just where we were, they'd driven in such a confusing, roundabout way coming over; I didn't know how long it would take me to get back from here.

I kind of stood there in the middle of them and they all sized me up. This was the first time they'd gotten a good look at me under a real bright light, even Blitz. He slapped his side and said: "I gotta hand it to you dames, I don't know how you do it these days! If I didn't know better, I could eat my hat you were only a twenty-year-old chicken just breaking in. Why, the frill I go around with looks older than you, and she's only nineteen."

"Yeah," another one nodded. "Wudje do, Rose, have the old muzzle lifted on you?"

But they didn't waste any more time over that. They all pulled up chairs and kind of moved in close around me, like they were going to have a conference. Blitz said, "Okay, have a drink, Rose, while we're giving this to you."

First I said yes, because a nice cherry phosphate or something would have gone good right then; all that sticky lip stuff of Fran's had made me feel parched. But what he handed me was tan and tasted like gasoline sprinkled with red pepper. When I got what was left of my blistered tongue safely back inside again I said no, I'd changed my mind, and handed it back.

"She's right," somebody spoke up. "Not when she's on a job."

"All right, now here it is, Rose," Blitz said, sitting down and hitching up his trousers at the knees. "We got a guy all nicely fingered-up for rubbing." I shook my head hopelessly

to myself, without letting them see me, before he even went any further. Out of that whole sentence he'd just given me, I only knew what the first four words meant.

Of course, anyone knows what rubbing is, in a way. It's when you put the wrong end of a pencil down and push. But it didn't sound like he meant it in that way, somehow.

I suppose I would have known more about it if I'd followed some kinds of movies more closely—they reminded me a lot of some people I'd once seen in a movie—but the kind I went to mostly were Garbo pictures, where they didn't talk that way much.

"Fie come here from Chicago, and we come here after him," he went on. "He don't know we're here yet, and he thinks he's pulled a curtain down after him. But even so, he's cagey, he's wise as they come. We can't get him out in the right spot where we can get at him easy. And then there's another reason why we ain't dropped him yet."

I knew what that word meant, at least. It's when you stop associating with somebody, snub them. Like when I dropped a girl last year in my French class because she always laughed every time I got up to recite.

"Now, he's getting it because he lammed out with the whole haul instead of splitting the way the agreement was. I was doing a little time right then, and a couple of the other boys had a little heat on them, and I guess he thought it: was too good an opportunity to pass up.

"Well, he'll find cut his mistake. But that don't do us no good, see Rose? First we gotta find out what he did with the haul. If we don' once we dust him off, we can kiss it goodbye, we'll never see it again. That's where you come in."

What good is it when a person keeps talking and you don't even know what they're saying at all? I had the hardest time not yawning in their faces; I only kept from it

by closing my mouth tight and pushing the yawn back, because I knew it would be bad manners; I'd been scolded enough at home for doing that.

The whole thing wasn't even particularly glam'rous, just sort of over a person's head, like some things in civics. I was beginning to wish I hadn't come. It hadn't turned out to be as much fun as I thought it would be.

"Now he's a pushover for a dame. Always has been. But she's got to be his kind of dame, not just any dime at all. Machine-gun slugs can't drag a word out of him.

"But give him his head with a dame and he'll start talking. If she's the right kind of a dame, and he has confidence in her.

"The only thing which has saved him so far is that he goes for a peculiar, sweet, milk-fed type which have gone completely out of circulation; you can't find 'em any more. Enough of 'em have tried to be that way with him, but it don't go over, he can spot a fake a mile away.

"So you can see this ain't going to be an easy job, Rose. He's no fool. The minute a girl acts like she's too wise, he starts putting up his guard. And in a case like this, if he ever tumbles we primed you for this, it'll be curtains for you!"

I couldn't see much inducement in that. What'd I need curtains for anyway, we had plenty at home, on every window.

I looked at the clock. It was quarter to eleven now. I didn't see how I was going to do it, and still get home safely ahead of the family. "About how long will it take?" I asked doubtfully.

"That depends entirely on how good you are yourself, Rose," Blitz said. "If he falls at all, he falls hard and right away—he's that kind of a guy. If he once gets his fur up and starts suspectin' you, you'll never get anywhere in a week."

I thought maybe I better just say I would do it, and then go straight home and not pay any more attention to them at

all, once I was out of here. I hate arguments, and some of their faces looked kind of mean.

"All right," I sighed unenthusiastically.

"Now, we know where he's holed up, and we'll plant you where he can't miss you; we got everything worked out.

"The first thing you gotta do, is find out what he done with that haul. Naturally, he ain't going to spill that easy, not even if he thinks you're his kind of a dame.

"So here's how you work it. There was some ice with it. Not much, it was mostly lettuce. But anyway, there was a little ice with it. The idea is, wherever the ice is, the dough ain't gonna be so far away.

"You tease him for some ice. If you've made a dent at all, he'll come across without thinking twice. That'll tell us what we want to know. He wouldn't bank it, accounta it's hot. It's a cinch it's around some place, not very far from him.

"Now the rest of it's simple. He'll wanta take you out. You see to it that he makes it the Jingle Club—" He stopped and grinned at me. "D'jever hear of that before?"

"No," I said truthfully.

"No one else ever did either, before tonight. We're opening it specially for his benefit, just for this one night. It's a dummy, get it? Everything is all fixed, just waiting for you to show up there with him. The waiters, the couples dancing, even the guys playing in the band are all props, so don't be surprised when you see them start easing out one by one, leavin' you all by yourselves.

"It's your job to keep him from noticing what's going on around him. You won't be left uncovered, don't worry. Every knothole will be plugged up with lead. We're doing this thing right. Now have you got it all straight, Rose?"

Straight? It was a complete blur as far as I was concerned; as bad as one of Professor Peabody's dry lectures on a spring day when you're not paying attention.

Just about three or four words out of the whole thing were floating around loose in my head, without any meaning. *Ice. Jingle Club. Rubbing. Curtains.* "Um-hum," I said vaguely.

"Whether you wangle the location of the haul outta him before or after you get to the Jingle Club don't matter, just so long as you wangle it. You be the best judge of that yourself. Soft music and dim lights sometimes help to loosen a guy up too, y'know."

I perked up a little at that, for the first time. "Oh, is there going to be music and dancing there?"

"Yeah," he answered dryly. "First there'll be music and dancing, for a front. Then as soon as you get up from the table for a tip-off that you've got the goods on the haul, there'll just be music without the dancing."

They all sort of smiled at that. But what did I care? If there's one thing I'm crazy about-—I started bouncing up and down on my chair. "Oo, I wish I was there already! I can hardly wait!"

He looked encouragingly at the others. "See? She's rehearsing already. Only, don't overdo it, Rose. You almost act too young, you almost act like you was on'y about sixteen. Don't let him spot you for a phoney or—"

I remembered that from the time before. "Curtains," I said placidly.

He rested his hand on my shoulder for a minute. "Babe, you got guts all right."

They all started to shove their chairs back, like it was over. For my part I was glad; it hadn't been a bit interesting.

The last thing Blitz warned me was, "And for Pete's sake, Rose, when you do get up—to go back and powder your nose or whatever the stall is—stand good and clear of that table, or Heaven help you. It'll be wood one minute, Swiss cheese the next."

That was childish, talking that way; how can a table be wood one minute and cheese the next? You'd think a person believed in witches casting spells, like in those children's stories.

They were all kind of waiting, watching me. I didn't know what I was supposed to do next, so I didn't do anything, just sat on there without moving. A look of enlightenment crossed Blitz' face, "Oh, I get it!" he said, and reached in his pocket and took out a bunch of bills. Before I knew it, they were in my folded hands.

"What do I do with this?" I asked, puzzled.

"Okay, Rose, okay," he said soothingly, like he didn't want any argument, and took out some more and added them to what I was holding already. "That ought to hold you. And you can keep whatever ice he gives you."

Now I ask you, what good is keeping ice? In half an hour, all you've got is water.

III

They stood me up and looked me over, turning me around like a top. "Maybe she ought to scrape off a little of that plaster of Paris," one suggested. "She looks kind of weird, like a house-painter's assistant."

"Naw," Blitz interposed hurriedly, "if she takes any of that off, her real age'll probably show through. This way she's just about right; she'll get under his skin. She gives the impression, kind of, of a school kid trying to act grown up."

With that, they all started to get ready to go out Only instead of straightening their coats around their necks, like most people do, they all started smoothing and patting them down under their arms, like they had on woollen underwear that scratches.

Blitz gave them their final orders. “Okay, boys. Now Trigger and me are going over with her. The rest of you go to the Jingle and get in position. You all know your places.

“Al, you take the pantry doors. Biff, you’re in the dummy phone booth, down out of sight. Oh-Johnny, you’re down behind the bar. Spike, you take it from above, through the ceiling; we got a sight-hole bored through. Me and Trigger’ll seal up the front, once the stooges are out of the way.

“We’re gonna have a truck outside dumping coal down a tin chute; you know how much noise *that* makes. There won’t be a sound heard.”

Meanwhile I was still clutching this bunch of bills in my hand. I thought it would be a good opportunity to get rid of it someplace around the room while their attention was all taken up listening to him; I mayn’t know lots of things, but I know enough not to take money from strangers.

I noticed a box with cigarettes in it on a table near the door, so I slipped it in there and closed the lid, when no one was watching.

But after they already had the door open, and half of them were already outside in the hall, the last one to leave must have reached into the box for a cigarette. He suddenly said: “Hey!” and stood there pointing down to the money.

They all moved so swiftly and so silently, like big cats, you could hardly follow them with your eyes. Before I knew it, I was back inside the doorway again, and they were all around me in a ring, squinting hard and holding their hands under their arms, as if they had started to scratch themselves and then forgot to go ahead.

“Y’weren’t going to double-iggy us, were you, Rose? Is that why you left this behind?” Blitz asked. His lips had turned sort of white, I don’t know why.

I seemed to be the only person in the whole room who wasn’t all excited and shaking. “I was going to come back for it later,” I explained coolly. If they were going to get that

worked-up about my refusing it, I supposed I'd have to pretend to accept it.

They all took deep breaths and kind of relaxed. "Oh," Blitz explained, relieved, "she don't want Brennan to catch her with that much dough on her while she's around him, that's all it is, fellas. He might smell a rat."

We all went down the stairs and out the side way again, me in the middle of the six of them. I kept thinking: "I've *got* to get away from them soon, I can't stay much longer; I'll just get in ahead of the family by the skin of my teeth as it is."

Anyway, I didn't like them much any more. The novelty had worn off. They were too quarrelsome and touchy, and I only understood about one word out of every three they said to me. I hadn't had a good time at all, the whole time I was up there with them.

Outside the hotel four of them left us, went down to another car standing waiting further down the dark street, and Blitz and myself and Trigger got in the first car.

I had made up my mind that the quickest and easiest way of getting away from them, instead of going into a lot of wrangling and explaining, was to let them take me over to this other man they'd been talking about all evening, whoever he was. It wouldn't take more than five or ten minutes longer, and that way I'd get rid of them, first of all.

Then instead of having two people to get away from, I'd only have one, and it would be a lot simpler. I hadn't pretended to him I was Chicago Rose in the first place, so I wouldn't have to go ahead doing it.

I'd just say, "I'm Penny Richards from Jefferson High School and I was sent here to take you to the Jingle Club so you could get curtains, but you can just go over and get your own curtains, I'm going home!"

And if he didn't like it, he could lump it!

So I just sat still between them on the front seat and bided my time. If Betty Lou could make any sense out of this whole thing, when I told her about it tomorrow, she was better than I was, that was all.

On the way Blitz said, “Y’nervous?”

I thought of how late it was getting to be and what a calling down I was going to get if I ever got caught sneaking in at this hour, so I admitted: “A little bit, not very much.”

“Who wouldn’t he?” Trigger said. “Until she gets him into the Jingle she’s outtalking a thirty-eight every inch of the way, with no one to back her up. He’ll drop her in a minute if he wises onto her. It’s him or us, and he knows it.”

Being dropped by someone I hadn’t even taken up with yet wasn’t going to worry me any. But like everything else they said, there wasn’t any sense to that.

They stopped finally around at the side of a great big building with a lighted glass shed over its entrance. I guess it was another hotel; none of these people seemed to have any homes of their own.

“We’re just in time,” Trigger said. “That’s his car waiting there, he’ll be coming out in a minute.”

Blitz said to me: “Y’know how y’gonna connect with him, don’tcha?” He sounded like I was a telephone wire. “Shoot out around the corner and let his fender throw you as soon as he turns on the ignition. You know how to work it so you won’t get hurt, y’used to be in the fake-accident racket in Chi.”

“No, I—” I quailed.

Trigger made that pawing gesture under his coat again.

“Just stage-fright,” Blitz assured him tolerantly. “She’ll be over it in a minute. All right, get out and get ready for your dive, Rose.”

They stood me up between them against the building-wall, just back of the corner. Trigger kept watching around it. Blitz kept hold of me by the arms. It was cark around there where we were.

Trigger gave a sudden cut of his hand. “Here he comes now.”

Blitz tightened his grip, turned me around and pointed me out toward the gutter that fronted the hotel. “No,” I whined, trying to squirm away.

“He’s in,” Trigger whispered. There was the sound of a motor turning over, out of sight around the corner. Wheels started to slither.

“Okay, you’re on the air, Rose,” Blitz grunted. He gave me a sudden shove out away from him, like I was a volley-ball. I went staggering out across the sidewalk trying to keep from falling flat on my face, and the big headlights of a car were coming to meet me from the side.

I couldn’t stop short of the gutter; the sidewalk was too narrow; and the car and I both got there at the same time.

I remembered something he’d said about grabbing the fender, and as I went down I caught at it with both hands and lay flat on top of it instead of going under it.

The car stopped short—it had hardly begun to pick up speed yet anyway—and I rolled off the fender and sat down on the ground in front of it.

A man with a leathery tan face and silver hair jumped out and came running around to me. “Are you hurt, miss?” he asked, picking me up. Then when he saw I was all right, he got kind of sore. “You should look where you’re going; you could have been killed.”

“Somebody pushed me,” I insisted tearfully. I looked over where Trigger and Blitz had been, but there wasn’t anyone there any more.

The doorman, who had come over to us, growled: “Ah, they always say that, Mr. Brennan.”

Brennan looked around, said: “Help me take her into the lobby a minute, Joe, before there’s cops around asking a lot of questions. I don’t want the papers mentioning my name and address.”

They helped me in between them. I looked around over my shoulder just before we stepped through the revolving door. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I could make out a slice of ice-cream-color hat-brim sticking out around the corner down there.

I sat down and rested in the lobby for a minute and the doorman brought me a glass of water. Then Brennan stood up, said: “Wait a minute, let’s see if I can’t square this with you.”

I didn’t know what he was talking about, and I didn’t care.

He sat down over in the corner and wrote something, then came back with a scrap of light-blue paper and tried to give it to me. “Will fifty be all right, just so there’s no hard feelings?”

“Fifty what?” I said. Then when I saw that it was a check, like my father brings home sometimes, I pushed it back at him, told him politely but firmly that I wasn’t allowed to take money from strangers.

He acted for a minute like he couldn’t believe his ears. “How old are you?” he asked.

I was kind of tired pretending I was Chicago Rose by now; I hadn’t pretended I was to him, anyway, so I didn’t have to go ahead. “Sixteen and two months,” I said defiantly.

He nodded to himself and murmured: “You’d have to be, to turn down money like you just did.” Then he looked at me kind of skeptically. “You dress kind of old for your age. Well, if you won’t take this, can I offer you a drink?”

“Yes,” I said eagerly. I almost never seem to get enough refreshments.

He frowned a little and his eyes got squinty. “Come on in the bar,” he said shortly.

I’d never been in one before. It was just like a soda fountain, only it didn’t have faucets. He whispered something to the man behind it and then he left me sitting there.

“You go ahead,” he said. “I’ve got a phone call to make.”

The man brought two of those rotten tan things like I’d already made the mistake of tasting over at *their* place. And then he brought the most irresistible pink malted you ever saw, and left it standing by itself a couple of chairs away from me, like it didn’t belong to anyone. So of course I moved off down there where it was and started in on it.

Just when I got down to where the straw was gurgling at the bottom, I turned around and Mr. Brennan was standing there without a sound watching me. “That’s another way of telling,” he said.

We went back in the lounge and sat down again. He asked me how I happened to be going around, at my age, all dressed up like that and with all those crayon-marks on my face.

“Well, they all went out to the movies and wouldn’t take me with them,” I started to explain, “so I got sore and went up to my sister’s room—”

“I understand,” he smiled, “just making believe, like little girls do.”

I was going ahead and tell him the rest of it, how Blitz had called our house by mistake and everything, but just then I happened to get a look at a clock across the way and it said 11:25. That drove everything else out of my hand.

I jumped up and started edging away from him. “I’ll have to go now, they’ll be back any minute.”

“Won’t you stay just five minutes longer?” he urged. “I always wanted to have a little daughter of my own, to take

her around and show her the sights. We could go some place where there's music and dancing—"

But I started to run without waiting to hear any more. Was I going to get it when I got home! I pushed out through the revolving door and then I stopped short.

Blitz was standing there down by the corner, leaning back against the wall waiting, with his hat pulled down over his face and smoking a cigarette.

I looked up the other way and Trigger was standing up *there,* waiting the same way.

They both saw me, and they both started to take a slow step toward me. But they didn't have time to finish it; I turned around and went in again as fast as I'd come out.

Mr. Brennan was still sitting there, sort of day-dream ng about having a little girl like me, I guess. I went back to him and said: "I guess I will stay a *little* while, after all."

The damage was done now anyway, the family was almost certainly home by this time. The only thing left to do was wait a little longer, until they were safely in bed and had the lights out, and *then* go back.

He brightened right up and said: "Swell! Now, it's no fun here. Let me take you some place where you'll enjoy yourself."

Then he looked at me sort of helplessly. "I don't know much about showing a little girl your age a good time. It's kind of late for amusement like parks or movies. Where would you like to go? I'll take you any place you say."

I remembered that place they'd spoken of, the "Jingle." I wouldn't have suggested it if I could have thought of any other, but I couldn't, and he kept waiting to hear me say where I wanted to go, so finally in order not to seem a complete fool who didn't even know where she wanted to go herself, I mentioned it.

His eyes got that narrow look again for a minute and he said: "Have you ever been there before?"

“No,” I said, “I just happened to hear somebody speak of it.”

His face cleared again and he smiled. “Oh, I see, Cinderella wants to pretend she’s grown up just for one night, is that it? All right, we’ll see if we can find it and we’ll go there.”

IV

We went out and got in his car.

This time you couldn’t see a sign of Blitz or Trigger around, but when we flashed past the corner I could see that car they’d brought me in still standing there in the gloom, so I knew they weren’t very far away.

I was going to tell him all about them—I really liked him much better than them by now—but he seemed so happy to be taking me out as if I was really his daughter, that I hated to spoil his evening for him, so I decided not to. The best way to treat mean people is to ignore them, not mention them at all.

He had a little trouble finding the “Jingle,” because no one seemed to have heard of it before tonight, but finally a taxi driver told us where there was a new club being opened, and when we finally found it it turned out to be the one, all right.

It was in a creepy sort of dead-end street, up against the river, and there was a coal truck standing there backed up against a sidewalk grate, but it hadn’t dumped its load yet, was just waiting.

We drew up outside and a man with a lot of brass buttons came over and opened the car door. Brennan said, “Haven’t I seen your face somewhere before?” and the man got kind of confused, but told him he must be mistaken.

Then Mr. Brennan turned and looked at me, and asked: “Are you still sure you want to go in?” I could hear music coming out, and the colored lights looked so cozy, I couldn’t resist. I told him yes, I’d love to.

“Well, I couldn’t be wrong about *you,”* he said to himself; but out loud: “If you’ve got me fooled, I’m sure slipping and I deserve to be bagged’.” So we got out and went in.

It was small, but it had the prettiest colored bulbs strung all around, like a Christmas tree, and one or two people sitting at tables all dressed up pretty, and one or two dancing.

It was the first really glam’rous place I’d been in all evening, and when he saw how my eyes were shining and how thrilled I was, he sort of relaxed.

“Why does it have to be that table?” he asked, when the waiter tried to take us over to a certain one against the wall.

“That’s the only one left; all the others are reserved, only the people are late getting here,” the waiter said.

So we went over and sat down. The waiter asked us what we’d like to have. “Double choc’late soda,” I said instantly.

Mr. Brennan sighed, “Ah, Cinderella, Cinderella, everything seems magic to your eyes.”

After I’d finished my soda and we’d been sitting there a while, one of those disconnected words they’d used came back to my mind. “Ice.” But I didn’t ask him for some because they’d told me to, but because I really was kind of dry and sticky. It certainly was close in there.

For a minute his face changed and he gave me that same squinty look again, and his hand even went in toward his coat, like those other people’s had all the time. Then he said very quietly, “Sure, you can have some ice.” When the waiter brought it, he kept watching my face very closely, like he wanted to see what I’d say about it. Well, all I said

was “Thank you,” because it was just like any other ice I’d ever had. I looked at it kind of satisfied and started to crunch a piece between my teeth.

He dropped his hand down again and gave me a funny kind of a smile. “I thought you meant the other kind,” he said. “I’m so used to—”

“What other kind is there?” I asked him. He seemed kind of silly.

“You wouldn’t know about those things, Cinderella. But there is another kind. I’ve got some of it, and I’ve got a lot of green money, and there’s some men I left behind me in Chicago would give their right arms to know where I’ve got it. I’m going to let you in on my secret, Cinderella, because I know it’s safe with you.”

He smiled some more. “We came here on it.”

“How could we? It isn’t snowy on the streets or anything.”

He laughed, chucked me under the chin. “It’s in the tires of the car, all packed in cotton wool.”

That wasn’t so terribly interesting; I couldn’t see why they’d wanted to find out so bad. I was going to tell him about them, that they weren’t in Chicago at all but right here, and that I’d been with them myself just before I met him; but he went ahead talking and I didn’t have the chance.

I’ve been brought up never to interrupt people until they get through. When we first came in there’d been two couples dancing on the floor. Then after a while there was only one. Then there weren’t any, but the music kept on playing.

There wasn’t anyone sitting at the tables now any more either, and I hadn’t even seen them get up to go. But the colored lights shone down mostly in the middle of the room, so you couldn’t tell so easily what was going on around the sides.

The music kept sounding thinner and thinner, as if each time there was one less instrument, and then finally there

was just one man left, picking away at the piano soft and low. Then before you knew it, he must have strolled outside to rest a while; there was silence. The waiters had disappeared too. We were the only ones left in the place. There was a lull, like when something is going to happen I couldn't tell, because I'd never been in a lull before.

And Mr. Brennan was so taken up talking to me, he didn't seem to notice anything going on around him. I seemed to have gotten him into a sentimental, reminiscent mood. He was giving me his life story.

"I'm sorry now for all the laws I've broken and all the things I've done, but it's too late. If I'd married and settled down and had a sweet little girl like you for a daughter in the beginning, instead of going after the quick money—"

Then he stopped and looked at me and asked, "Am I rubbing you the wrong way, by telling you all these things about my past?"

"No—" I started to say. But that expression reminded me of something from earlier in the evening. "Mr. Brennan," I asked curiously, "excuse me for interrupting, but what does it mean when they speak about *rubbing* a person?"

"It means to kill someone. But the way I used it just now —"

My mouth opened wider than it ever had before, made a great big round O, and I put both hands at once over it.

He saw something was the matter. "Ah, I've frightened you," he said penitently. "I shouldn't have told you that."

"Curtains," I whispered hoarsely through my hands; "what do curtains mean?"

"Curtains mean a person's end."

"Mr. Brennan, you've got to listen to me!" I breathed, aghast. And I told him the whole thing;, everything that had happened from the time Blitz first rang our house by mistake at nine o'clock, until they'd pushed me in front of his car. Or at least as much of it as I could remember.

“I didn’t mean to do it!” I whimpered. “I didn’t know what I was doing, I didn’t know what they meant, until you told me just now!”

For a minute he was altogether different than he’d been until now. He was like they were, mouth all twisted and white, eyes hard as buttons.

“So they’ve got me sewed up, have they, thanks to you?” His hand went in under his coat. “Well, I’ll go—but I’m gonna take you with me.”

“Where to?” I asked wonderingly. “We can’t get out—”

He sighed, and little by little his face went back to what it had been like before. He shook his bead a little sadly.

“No, I guess you didn’t know,” he said. “Such thickness couldn’t be faked; it must be the McCoy.

“Listen, Cinderella, I’ve got to go anyway; but they’ll let you through. You get up and slowly walk away from the table, like you hadn’t just told me.

“I won’t give you away, I’ll act like nothing was the matter. They might get tired waiting and give it to you with me, if you sit here much longer.”

“But that’s the signal, it’ll begin the minute I do that.” I swallowed hard, but I wouldn’t budge. “No,” I said, “I didn’t mean to, but I brought you in here. I’m not going to get up and walk away. I’m going to stay here at the table with you. They’ll—they’ll have to rub us both, I guess.”

“But aren’t you scared?”

“Oh, awfully,” I whispered.

His hand dropped back to his lap again. “You saved yourself that time,” he said. “I would have dropped you before you got a foot away, if you’d taken me up on it. But now I see that you’re on the level. That’s the last time tonight I doubt you. I guess it’s the last time tonight for anything.”

We didn’t say anything for a minute or two. It was awfully quiet in there; you could hear a pin drop. I had a creepy feeling like eyes were watching me, but I couldn’t tell where they were coming from. After a while I asked, “Will it hurt much? I never was shot before.”

“We’re probably good for another few minutes sitting here,” he said, “so let’s think this out. Don’t look around, Cinderella, just bend your head like you were listening, and I was talking to you like I was before.”

“And don’t talk too loud,” I warned him under my breath. “Another thing I forgot to tell you, there’s a hole right over us in the ceiling and one of them’s up there.”

His eyes didn’t go up at all. He just took out a very shiny cigarette case and looked at the inside of the lid while he helped himself to one, then he put it away again.

“Yeah, there is,” he said quietly. “I can see the rim of a gat-muzzle pointing down through it, right into the middle of my brain.”

He took a careless puff and tasted it with his tongue, and went on: “Now Cinderella, the lights are our only chance. This place was rigged up in a hurry, just for tonight. The wiring is all strung around on the outside of the walls, not covered up; see it? It must be plugged into a master outlet at one certain place, this whole circuit of colored bulbs. Let me see if I can find where that is first of all.”

His eyes roamed around indifferently like he didn’t have a thought on his mind. “Talk to me,” he said out of the corner of his mouth.

“Three times three is nine,” I pattered desperately, “four times three is twelve, five times three—”

Right while he went on looking he found time to say to me, “Your lips are shaking, kid. Steady them.”

The family didn’t seem so awful to me right then; I was wishing I was back with them. But I couldn’t get up and go.

They'd shoot him.

"I've found it," he said. "Porcelain too, like I hoped. Now I've got to hit it squarely with just one shot, and blow the whole place to darkness. I've got to have a chance to draw and sight. Are you afraid of the noise of a gun, right up against your face?"

"I never heard one before."

"Then lean over me, from across the table, and pretend to be taking a cinder out of my eye. I'm gonna try to aim and fire with your body covering me, so they won't see me unlimber.

"Now listen close, Cinderella. I don't think we can make it, but at least we'll take a try. Throw yourself flat on the floor and crawl along it the minute the lights go. Don't lift your head an inch, but *swim* for it. You're young and supple, you ought to be able to move fast even that way.

"There's no use trying to get out the front way, into the street. That's where they'll expect us tc head for and that's where they'll point: their fire. I'll hold mine after that first shot, to keep from showing them where we are.

"We'll make for the back. There must be stairs back there some place, leading up into the building over us. We'll try to get up through it and over the roof.

"Turn your head slow and place the direction you're going in, for yourself, while you still can see. It's that middle opening in the shadows back there, between the dummy phone booth and the pantry swinging door; see it?

"And if you once get out past it okay, don't wait for me. Hotfoot it all the way up, as high as you can go."

Then he said, "Are you ready, Cinderella?"

"I'm ready," I said, clenching my two hands down at my sides.

"Are you frightened, Cinderella?"

I took a deep breath. "I'll let you know after it's over."

He smiled to give me courage. "Then here we go, Cinderella."

He blinked his eye and pretended he'd gotten something in it. I leaned over him, pretending to help him get it out. Once I happened to glance down, and he had a big monster of a black gun out in his hand, wedged between the two of us, right under my chin. It was turned out, toward where that china light-plug was.

The last thing he said was, "In closer, Cinderella; there's someone over us too, don't forget."

So I leaned as close to him as I could, and by then I was nearly crying.

Something went *boom* right under my face like a lot of dynamite, and all the lights went out. I didn't have to drop like he told me to. I got such a fright when the thing went off right under me. I fell all the way over backwards, flat on the floor.

So then I just rolled over and started wriggling fast toward where I'd last seen that middle back door.

I heard the table we'd been at go over with a crash, and one of the little pieces of ice that had been on it hit me on the back of the neck and made me go even faster.

Meanwhile, the whole place was full of starry flashes, like there was a terrific lightning storm going on.

They came from all over—from behind the bar, from the telephone booth, from the front door, the pantry door, and even from the ceiling.

I heard Blitz' voice suddenly yell in from somewhere outside: "Get her too, you guys, she's ratted on us!"

I was nearly over at the back door by now. I was glad that dress of Fran's I'd borrowed was black and didn't show up in the flashes that kept streaking around me. I couldn't tell what had happened to Mr. Brennan, whether he was down on the floor like I was, or flat up against the wall somewhere.

And then suddenly my head and shoulders wedged in between somebody's straddled legs. He was standing there with his feet spread out, firing over me toward the front doorway.

I was so scared I didn't know what I was doing. I grabbed hold of a leg with both hands, pushed with all my might to try to shove it cut of the way. It kicked up in the air, somebody yelled and fell over on the floor right next to me with his whole weight.

Then I stood up, ran into the door with my hands out in front of me to guide me, flung it open and ran out into a back hall. It wasn't much lighter than in there where we'd been, except for a tiny point of flickering flame over a wall gas-jet.

But at the end of it I saw a flight of stairs and I ran toward them for all I was worth and started up them without waiting for him, like he'd told me to.

I went up one whole flight, and around the landing, and half-way up the next flight; and then I stopped and stood there in the gloom, listening and leaning over to see if he was coming. My heart was going so fast it nearly made as much noise as all that shooting down there.

Suddenly he came out, backwards and crouched over low, and just before he backed away from the door he fired once into the dark, smoking room behind it.

Then he turned and sprinted as far as the foot of the stairs, and there he turned and crouched and fired again, to keep them back, because they'd seen him go and were trying to come out after him.

While he was standing there like that, with his back to the stairs, a shadow suddenly came out onto the landing between him and me—I guess the one that had been planted at the hole in the ceiling over us—and I caught the glint of a gun, raised and all ready in his hand. He pointed it square down at Brennan, at the back of his bead.

There wasn’t even time to yell a warning to Brennan, because by the time he turned to look up at me, it would have been too late.

Somebody had left a pailful of garbage standing there on the step below me. I grabbed it up with both hands and flung it down there at the landing where he was with all my might.

I didn’t even aim it, I was just lucky

I guess. It hit him right in the side of the head and keeled him over sideways, and the gun went off into the ceiling, and eggshells and dirty vegetables poured all over him.

Brennan turned and looked up. “Good work, Cinderella!” he yelled. Then he came running up, and stooped and snatched the gun up without stopping as he went by. He caught up with me, grabbed me by the hand, and started to tow me along with him.

They kept firing as they came up after us, but they couldn’t get us in a straight line, because the stairs broke direction every flight and turned back on themselves.

When he’d finished using all the shots in his own gun, he threw it down at their heads and used the one he’d taken from the other man.

We got up to the roof door finally.

It was locked, but he fired a shot at it and blew it open, and then we were out on the roof, running across it, scattering particles of gravel as we went.

Once a loose clothesline nearly tripped me, but he had my hand and I managed to stay up.

We skimmed over a low partition ridge between the two buildings and got to the skylight hutch of the other house. They’d come out after us by now and were firing at us from the first roof door. You could hear little things like wasps go humming by your ears.

The hutch here was locked like the other, but this time he couldn't blow it open because the padlock was on the inside.

"I'll get it," he panted, "the wood's rotten. Grab me by the coat if it caves in."

He backed up and took a run at the door, and crashed his whole shoulder into it. It shot in, and if I hadn't grabbed him by tie tail of the coat like he'd said, he would have gone down the whole flight of stairs inside head first.

He swung around and hit the side of the framework. Then he righted himself and we started down through the new house. A lock of my hair fell off, like something had snipped it loose.

A minute later they got to the roof door we'd just come in by, and started firing down at us from up there. But again the zig-zagging of the stairs saved us.

And then, just a; we'd gotten halfway down through the house and it looked like we'd be out in the street in another minute, a shot came up at us from *below.*

We both staggered to a stop and looked over the rail. Faces were grinning up at us from below, more of *their* faces. Some of them had been told by the others what we were trying to do, and had come in from the street to head us off. They had us blocked.

Another shot came up through the little sliver of opening, and we both snatched our heads back.

"A whole army," he said bitterly, "just to get one man and a girl!"

"Everyone in there was in on it," I told him. "I heard them say so; waiters and musicians and all."

We couldn't go back either; the others were coming down behind us from the roof.

"Quick!" he said. "See if they'll let us in one of these flats here; it's our only chance."

I turned away from the stairs and ran down the long hall pounding at door after door with the flat of my hands.

“Open! Help us! Let us in—oh *please* let us in!”

He stayed behind there on the landing to keep them tack a little longer.

I could hear people behind some of die doors, but they were too scared to open up, on account of all the firing that had been going on for the past ten minutes or more.

Frightened voices jabbered back at me, “Go away! Help! Leave us alone!” And I heard one woman saying frantically —I guess she bad a phone in there with her—“Quick, send over all the men you have. There’s something terrible going on out here—two people being murdered up and down the halls.”

“Shoot in one of the locks—*make* them—” I pleaded distractedly to Brennan.

Something made a clicking sound in his hand. “I have no more left,” he said, and he aimed at someone’s head coming up, but with the back part of his gun, and then pitched it like a baseball.

There was only one more door left and then the hall ended, and then they’d just come into that corner-pocket after us and shoot us down, slow, over and over and over.

I rained slaps all up and down this door, and all of a sudden it swung in loose; the flat behind it must have been vacant.

“Brennan!” I squealed, “Here!”

And I jumped in there, into the dark. A minute later he scuffed down the hall, turned in after me, and got the door closed oil the two of us.

The shooting out on the stairs stopped, and you could hear feet slithering along the hall toward where we were. And in the sudden stillness I heard Blitz’ voice said “It’s all right, take y’time, boys. We’ve got them now, he’s out of slugs.”

V

Brennan said: “See if there’s a fire escape outside any of those windows behind us. I’ll hold the door against them until you get down.” I ran from one to the other, flattening my nose against the grimy panes, swallowing dust and cobwebs, peering down. I didn’t find one until I’d gone two empty rooms away.

I tugged at the warped window until I’d gotten it up. A shot thudded in there where he was, sounding like it came through wood or something.

I turned away from the window and ran back to him through the dark. “Flurry up, I’ve found one!”

“Too late, Cinderella,” he grunted. He was still holding the door, but he was sagging lower on it now. “Quick, get down it, I still can hold this—”

“I’m not going to leave you up here,” I said. “I like you too much for that.”

“Game little Cinderella,” he coughed. Then the door swept back, carrying him with it, and about five or six of them walked in, one behind the other. They were just black silhouettes first, against the hall light. Awful things, like goblins in a dream, throwing long shadows before them.

Blitz’ voice said, “Bring a light.” Someone turned on a flashlight and shone it on Brennan, making a big moon against the wall for him to die in. Blitz looked down at him where he was lying against the baseboard, and he took careful, slow aim and he fired.

Brennan jolted against the baseboard as if a nail had gone into him. I screamed and ran at Blitz, but they caught me and threw me back.

“That’s for dishing us out of our share of the Chicago racket money. Now, where is it?”

Brennan just smiled sleepily.

“All right, you Rose, did he tell you where it is?” They pulled me forward again and threw me at him, and switched the light on me.

“I’m not Rose and I never was!”

“We know that now and it’s your tough luck. But did he tell you where the haul is?”

Brennan’s voice said brokenly from somewhere in the dark: “Tell them I did, Cinderella.”

“Yes,” I said into the dazzling torchlight.

“Out with it then, hurry up! Where is it?”

I waited, listening. Brennan’s weak gasp came again. “Don’t tell them yet—hear me? Hold out as long as you can, they won’t touch you as long as—”

He was trying to save my life, I guess.

Blitz snarled, “We’ll see how long she can hold out!”

He grabbed my arm, wrenched it up behind my back until I thought I’d nearly faint. I went crashing down on my knees, pinned to him backwards.

Brennan’s voice pleaded, “Don’t—don’t—promise to let the kid go and I’ll tell you—”

One of them warned Blitz excitedly, “Come on, we gotta get outta here, don’t you realize that?”

“Not until I put one into this interfering brat!” he raged. He let go of me and I tumbled forward on my face and rocked there on the floor, rubbing at my shoulder, looking around at him.

I saw his arm stretch out toward me, and the torch caught the gun at the end of it and made it shine.

I could hear Brennan trying to reason with them, but I was listening for the sound of the shot, not his voice any more.

The flash came from too far back behind Blitz, way back in the hallway. Blitz went up on his toes first and seemed to get twice as tall as he was, then he started to come down on

me, leaning over more and more, and finally he fell flat right on top of me and pinned me there.

For a minute a puff of hot breath stirred my hair, and then it stopped and didn't come again.

They must have made the mistake, Blitz' gang, of all crowding into the room around us to watch and hear what went on, and left the street doorway and the stairs unguarded.

For a minute or two the whole thing started over again, just like before; flashes everywhere and thunder and feet running in all directions trying to get out. I wound my arms tight around my head and buried my face in them.

It didn't last as long as the first time; it ended right away. Lights came in, and there were heavy thuds as guns dropped to the floor here and there.

I raised my head and saw some of them standing with their hands up. Some more came in that way from the other room, wish policemen behind them.

Someone was lying still on the floor in there; I could see his feet sticking out.

A policeman's face bent down close and peered at me. "She's just a kid!" he gasped in surprise.

"Mister," I begged weakly, "will you please get this man off me so I can get up?"

"Didje get them all?" somebody asked. "How about them two that got down the fire escape?"

"They're both lying down there in the back yard, now. The first one missed his footing and pulled down a whole section of the rusty thing with him. The second ore just went down clean—"

They were bending over Brennan, and I heard him whispering: "—it's all in the tires of my car, just slit them. I know I got no right to ask you boys favors, but let the kid go home, she's just a little school kid."

Then they told me he wanted to say something to me. I bent down close by him. I could hardly hear him, he

whispered so low.

"—always wanted to have a little girl of my own like you —"

Then his face sort of turned empty. I looked at them, not understanding, and one of them said quietly, "He's gone, Cinderella."

I started to cry. I'd only known him a little while, but I'd liked him a lot and it felt like I'd known him a long time.

They didn't let me go straight home, though, even after Brennan had asked them to. First they took me down town with them some place, and I had to answer a lot of questions.

Even then they weren't sure whether they ought to let me go home or not, until one of them, who seemed to be the boss of all the others, happened to hear me say I went to Thomas Jefferson High School.

"I got a daughter goes there too," he said.

"What's her name?" I asked.

He told me, and then he wanted to know, "Know her?"

Did I? "She sits right next to me in French class!" I gasped.

"I don't suppose your family would like it if they heard about you getting mixed up in a thing like this," he murmured thoughtfully.

"I'll probably never hear the end of it," I admitted.

"Will you promise me you'll never dress up like this again and go roaming around?" he warned to know.

"Will I!" I exclaimed fervently.

He turned to the others around him, and I heard him say under his breath, "Let's send the kid home and keep her name out of it. Her deposition is just as valid if presented by proxy, and we've got the rest of those guys to sweat it out of. I know I wouldn't like it if it was my own kid."

So they called a motorcycle policeman up to the front don;-, and I told him where I lived and climbed on behind him, and we went skittering away.

When we got out to the house, I climbed down and hobbled across the sidewalk to our front door. “What’s the matter with your foot?” the policeman wanted to know.

“I lost one of my slippers on those tenement stairs, but I never noticed it until now.”

“If that don’t beat everything!” he said, slapping his handlebar. “Just like she did in the story book!”

Cinderella eased her front door open; Cinderella sure was glad to be home.

THE RED TIDE

Young Mrs. Jacqueline Blaine opened a pair of gas-flame-blue eyes and looked wistfully up at the ceiling. Then she closed them again and nearly went back to sleep. There wasn't very much to get up for; the party was over.

The party was over, and they hadn't raised the twenty-five hundred dollars.

She rolled her head sidewise on the pillow and nestled it against the curve of one ivory shoulder, the way a pouting little girl does. Maybe it was that last thought made her do it, instinctively. Water was sizzling downward against tiling somewhere close by; then it broke off as cleanly as at the cut of a switch, and a lot of laggard, left-over drops went *tick, tick, tick* like a clock.

Jacqueline Blaine opened her eyes a second time, looked down her arm over the edge of the bed to the little diamondsplintered microcosm attached to the back of her wrist. It was about the size of one of her own elongated fingernails, and very hard to read numbers from. She raised her head slightly from the pillow, and still couldn't make out the time on the tiny watch.

It didn't matter; the party was over, they'd all gone—all but that old fossil, maybe. Gil had seemed to pin his hopes on him, had said he hoped he could get him alone. She could have told Gil right now the old bird was a hopeless case; Gil wouldn't be able to make a dent in him. She'd seen

that when she tried to lay the groundwork for Gil the day before.

Well, if he'd stayed, let Leona look after him, get his breakfast. She sat up and yawned, and until you'd seen her yawn, you would have called a yawn an ungainly grimace. Not after, though. She propped her chin up with her knees and looked around. A silverish evening dress was lying where she last remembered squirming out of it, too tired to care. Gil's dress tie was coiled in a snake formation on the floor.

She could see a green tide rising and falling outside of the four windows, on two sides of the room. Not water, but trees swaying in the breeze. The upper halves of the panels were light-blue. The sun was somewhere straight overhead, she could tell that by the way it hardly came in past the sills. It wasn't a bad lookout, even after a party. "It would be fun living in it," she mourned to herself, "if the upkeep wasn't so tough; if I didn't have to be nice to eccentric old codgers, trying to get them to cough up. All to keep up appearances."

Gil came out of the shower alcove. He was partly dressed already—trousers and undershirt, but feet still bare—and mopping his hair with a towel. He threw it behind him onto the floor and came on in. Her eyes followed him halfway around the room with growing curiosity.

"Well, how'd you make out?" she asked finally.

He didn't answer. She glanced at the adjoining bed, but it was only rumpled on top, the covers hadn't been turned down. He must have just lain down on it without getting in.

She didn't speak again until she had come out of the shower in turn. He was all dressed now, standing looking out of the window, cigarette smoke working its way back around the bend of his neck. She snapped off her rubber bathing cap, remarked:

"I guess Leona thinks we died in our sleep."

She wriggled into a yellow jersey that shot ten years to pieces—and she'd looked about twenty to begin with.

"Is Burroughs still here," she asked wearily, "or did he decide to go back to town anyway, after I left you two last night?"

"He left," he said shortly. He didn't turn around. The smoke coming around the nape of his neck thickened almost to a fog, then thinned out again, as though he'd taken a whale of a drag just then.

"I was afraid of that," she said. But she didn't act particularly disturbed. "Took the eight-o'clock train, I suppose."

He turned around. "Eight o'clock, hell!" he said. "He took the milk train!"

She put down the comb and stopped what she was doing. "What?" Then she said. "How do you know?"

"I drove him to the station, that's how I know!" he snapped. His face was turned to her, but he wasn't looking at her. His eyes focused a little too far to one side, then shifted over a little too far to the other, trying to dodge hers.

"What got into him, to go at that unearthly hour? The milk train—that hits here at 4:30 a.m., doesn't it?"

He was looking down. "At 4:20," he said. He was already lighting another cigarette, and it was a live one judging by the way it danced around before he could get it to stand still between his cupped hands.

"Well, what were you doing up at that hour yourself?"

"I hadn't come up to bed yet at all. He decided to go, so I ran him in."

"You had a row with him," she stated positively. "Why else should he leave—"

"I did not!" He took a couple of quick steps toward the door, as though her barrage of questions was getting on his nerves, as though he wanted to escape from the room. Then he changed his mind, stayed in the new place, looking at

her. “I got it out of him,” he said quietly. That special quietness of voice that made her an accomplice in his financial difficulties. No, every wife should be that. That special tone that seemed to make her his shill in a confidence game. That special tone that she was beginning to hate.

“You don’t act very happy about it,” she remonstrated.

He took a wallet out of his pocket, split it lengthwise, showing a pleating of currency edges. And it was so empty, most of the time!

“Not the whole twenty-five hundred?”

“The works.”

“You mean he carries that much in ready cash around with him, when he just comes for a week end in the country! Why . . . why, I saw him go in to cash a twenty-five-dollar check Saturday afternoon in the village. So he could hold up his end when he went out to the inn that night. I was embarrassed, because he asked me if I thought you could oblige him; I not only knew you couldn’t, but I knew it was up to us as hosts to pay his way, and I didn’t know what to say. Luckily you weren’t around, so he couldn’t ask you; he finally went in to get it cashed himself.”

“I know,” he said impatiently. “I met him out front and drove him in myself!”

“You?”

“I told him I was strapped, couldn’t help him out. Then after he’d cashed it himself and was putting it away, he explained that he had twenty. five hundred on him, but it was a deposit earmarked for the bank Monday morning. He hadn’t had time to put it in Friday afternoon before he came out here; our invitation had swept him off his feet so. He wanted this smaller amount just for expense money.”

“But then he handed the twenty-five hundred over to you anyway?”

“No, he didn’t,” he said, goaded. “At least, not at first. He had his check book on him, and when I finally broke down

his resistance after you'd gone to bed last night, he wrote me out a check. Or started to. I suggested as long as he happened to have that exact amount in cash, he make the loan in cash; that I was overdrawn at my own bank, and if I tried to put his check through there they'd put a nick in it and I needed every penny. He finally agreed; I gave him a receipt, and he gave me the cash."

"But then why did he leave at that ungodly hour?"

"Well, he did one of those slow burns, after it was all over and he'd come across. You know him when it comes to parting with money. It must have finally dawned on him that we'd only had him out here, among a lot of people so much younger than him, to put the bee on him. Anyway, he asked when the next train was, and I couldn't induce him to stay over; he insisted on leaving then and there. So I drove him in. In one way, I was afraid if he didn't go, he'd think it over and ask for his money back, so I didn't urge him *too* much."

"But you're sure you didn't have words over it?"

"He didn't say a thing. But I could tell by the sour look on his face what he was thinking."

"I suppose he's off me, too," she sighed.

"So what? You don't need an extra grandfather."

They had come out of the bedroom and started down the upper hail toward the stairs. She silenced him at sight of an open door ahead, with sunlight streaming out of it. "Don't say anything about it in front of Leona. She'll expect to get paid right away."

An angular Negress with a dust cloth in her hand looked out at them as they reached the open door. "Mawnin'. I about gib you two up. Coffee's been on and off 'bout three times. I can't drink no more of it myself; make me bilious. I done fix the old gentleman's room up while I was waitin'."

"Oh, you didn't have to bother," Jacqueline Blaine assured her happily, almost gayly; "we're not having any more guests for a while, thank—"

“He still here, ain’t he?” asked Leona, peering surprisedly.

This time it was Gil who answered. “No. Why?”

“He done lef’ his bag in there—one of ‘em, anyway. He want it sent to the station after him?”

Jacqueline looked in surprise from the maid to her husband. The blinding sunlight flashing through the doorway made his face seem whiter than it actually was. It was hard on the eyes, too, made him shift about, as in their bedroom before.

“He must’ve overlooked it in his hurry, gone off without it,” he murmured. “I didn’t know how many he’d brought with him so I never noticed.”

Jacqueline turned out the palms of her hands. “How could he do that, when he only brought two in the first place, and”—she glanced into the guest room—“this one’s the larger of the two?”

“It was in the clothes closet; maybe he didn’t see it himself,” offered Leona, “and forgit he hab it with him. I slide it out just now.” She hurried down the stairs to prepare their delayed breakfast.

Jacqueline lowered her voice, with a precautionary glance after her, and asked him: “You didn’t get him drunk, did you? Is that how you got it out of him? He’s liable to make trouble for us as soon as he—”

“He was cold sober,” he growled. “Try to get him to drink!” So he had tried, she thought to herself, and hadn’t succeeded.

“Well, then, I don’t see how on earth anyone could go off and leave a bag that size, when they only brought one other one out with them in the first place.”

He was obviously irritable, nerves on edge; anyone would have been after being up the greater part of the night. He cut the discussion short by taking an angry step over, grasping the doorknob, and pulling the door shut. Since he seemed to take such a trifling thing that seriously, she

refrained from dwelling on it any longer just then. He'd feel better after he'd had some coffee.

They sat down in a sun-drenched porch, open glass on three sides. Leona brought in two glasses of orange juice, with the pulp shreds all settled at the bottom from standing too long.

"Wabbie 'em around a little," she suggested cheerily; "dat makes it clear up."

Jackie Blaine believed in letting servants express their individualities. When you're a good deal behind on their wages, you can't very well object, anyway.

Gil's face looked even more drawn down here than it had in the lesser sunlight upstairs. Haggard. But his mood had cleared a little. "Before long, we'll sit breakfasting in the South American way—and will I be glad of a change of scene!"

"There won't be much left to travel on, if you take care of our debts."

"If," he said half audibly.

The phone rang.

"That must be Burroughs, asking us to forward his bag." Jackie Blaine got up and went in to answer it.

It wasn't Burroughs, it was his wife.

"Oh, hello," Jackie said cordially. "We were awfully sorry to hear you were laid up like that and couldn't come out with Mr. Burroughs. Feeling any better?"

Mrs. Burroughs' voice sounded cranky, put out. "I think it's awfully inconsiderate of Homer not to let me know he was staying over another day. He knew I wasn't well when he left! I think the least he might have done was phone me or send a wire if he wasn't coming, and you can tell him I said so."

Jackie Blaine tightened her hold on the telephone. "But, hold on, Mrs. Burroughs. He isn't here any more; he did leave, early this morning."

There was a startled stillness at the other end. Then: “Early this morning! Well, why hasn’t he gotten here? What train did he take?”

Jackie swiveled toward her husband, telephone and all. She could see him sitting out there from where she was. “Didn’t you say Mr. Burroughs took the milk train, Gil?”

She could see the gnarled lump of his Adam’s apple go all the way up, then ebb down again. Something made him swallow, though why he should swallow at that particular point—his cup wasn’t anywhere near his lips. Unless maybe there was some coffee left in his mouth from before, that he’d forgotten to swallow till now. He didn’t move at all. Not even his lips. It was like a statue speaking—a statue of gleaming white marble. “Yes, that’s right.”

Somehow there wasn’t very much color left in her own face. “What time would that bring him in, Gil?” She always used the car herself.

“Before eight.” She relayed it.

“Well, where is he then?” The voice was beginning to fray a little around the edges.

“He may have gone direct to his office from the train, Mrs. Burroughs; he may have had something important to attend to before he went home.”

Still more of the self-control in the other woman’s voice unraveled. “But he didn’t, I know he didn’t! That’s why I’m calling you; his office phoned a little while ago to ask me if I knew whether or not he’d be in today.”

“Oh.” The exclamation was soundless, a mental flash on Jackie’s part.

The voice had degenerated to a pitiful plea for assistance, all social stiffness gone now. It was the frightened whimper of a pampered invalid wife who suddenly has the tables turned on her. “But what’s become of him, Mrs. Blaine?”

Jackie said in a voice that sounded a little hollow in her own ears: “I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about, Mrs. Burroughs; I’m sure he’s just unavoidably detained

somewhere in town.” But somehow she caught herself swallowing in her turn now, as Gil had before. It was such a straight line from here-or rather from the station out here—to his home, how could anything possibly happen to anyone traveling it?

“He was feeling all right when you saw him off, wasn’t he, Gil?”

He started up from his chair, moved over to one of the glass panels, stood staring out, boiling smoke.

“Leave me out of it for two minutes, will you?” His voice came back to her muffledly.

That “Leave me out of it” blurred the rest of the conversation as far as she was concerned. The voice she was listening to disintegrated into sobs and incoherent remarks. She heard herself saying vaguely: “Please don’t worry . . . I feel terrible . . . Will you call me back and let me know?” But what was there she could do? And she knew, oh, she knew that she didn’t want to hear from this woman again.

She hung up. She was strangely unable to turn around and look toward where Gil was standing. It was a physical incapacity. She felt almost rigid. She had remained standing during the entire conversation. She sat down now. She lighted a cigarette, but it went right out again because she didn’t keep it going. She let her head fall slowly as of its own weight forward into her upcurved hand, so that it was planted between her eyes and partly shut them out.

She didn’t want any more breakfast.

* * * *

She saw the man get out of the car and come up to the house. She knew him by sight. He’d been here before. This was about three that afternoon, that Monday afternoon, the day Burroughs had—gone. He had a cheap car. The sound of it driving up and stopping was what had made her get up off the bed and go over to the window to look. She’d

stopped crying by then anyway. You can't cry *all* day long; there isn't that much crying in you.

Then when she saw who it was—oh, that wasn't anything. This was such a minor matter—now. And of course it could be taken care of easily enough—now. She stayed there by the window, waiting to see him walk out to his car and drive off again, within five minutes at the most—with the money he'd come for. Because Gil was down there; he could attend to it and get rid of him for good—now. Then there'd be one fewer to hound the two of them.

But the five minutes were up, and the man didn't come right out again the way she'd expected him to. He seemed to be staying as long as those other times, when all he got was a drink and a lot of build-up. Angry voices filtered up to her-one angry voice, anyway, and one subdued, placative one.

She went outside to the head of the stairs and listened tautly. Not that this was new to her, but it had a new, a terrible significance now.

The angry voice, that of the man who had come in the car, was barking: "How long does this keep up, Blaine? You gimme that same run-around each time! You think all I gotta do is come out here? Look at this house you live in! Look at the front you put up! You mean you haven't got that much, a guy like you?"

And Gil's voice, whining plaintively: "I tell you I haven't got it this minute! What am I going to do, take it out of my blood? You're going to get it; just give me time."

The angry voice rose to a roar, but at least it shifted toward the front door. "I'm warning you for the last time, you better get it and no more of this funny business! My boss has been mighty patient with you! There are other ways of handling welshers, and don't forget it!"

The door slammed and the car outside racketed up and dwindled off in the distance.

Jackie Blaine crept down the stairs a step at a time toward where Gil was shakily pouring himself a drink. Her face was white, as white as his had been that noon when they first got up. But not because of what she had just heard. Still because of its implication.

"Who was it?" she said hoarsely.

"Verona's stooge. Still that same lousy personal loan he once made me."

"How much is it?"

"Six hundred odd."

She knew all these things; she wanted to hear it from him. She spoke in a frightened whisper: "Then why didn't you give it to him? You have twenty-five hundred on you."

He went ahead with his drink.

"Why? Gil, look at me. Why?"

He wouldn't answer.

She reeled over to him, like someone about to pass out; her head fell against his chest. "D'you love me?"

"That's the one thing in my life that's on the level."

"Then you've got to tell me. I've got to know. *Did you do anything to him last night?*"

She buried her face against him, waiting. Silence.

"I can take it. I'll stick with you. I'll string along. But I've got to know, one way or the other." She looked up. She began to shake him despairingly by the shoulders. "Gil, why don't you answer me? Don't stand there—That's why you didn't pay Verona's debt, isn't it? Because you're afraid to have it known now that you have money on you—after *he* was here."

"Yes, I am afraid," he breathed almost inaudibly.

"Then you—" She sagged against him; he had to catch her under the arms or she would have gone down.

"No, wait. Pull yourself together a minute. Here, swallow this. Now . . . steady, hold onto the table. Yes, I did do something. I know what you're thinking. No, not that. It's bad enough, though. I'm worried. Stick with me, Jackie. I

don’t want to get in trouble. I met him coming out of the house Saturday, wanting to cash that pin-money check, and I drove him in, like I told you. The bank was closed for the half day, of course, and I suggested getting it cashed at the hotel. I told him they knew me and I could get it done easier than he could, so I took it in for him and he waited outside in the car.

“I didn’t mean to put one over on him; it all came up sort of sudden. I knew I didn’t have a chance at that hotel desk, not even if the check had been signed by a millionaire, and I didn’t want him to come in with me and see them turn me down. Jack McGovern happened to come through the lobby just as I walked in, and on the spur of the moment I borrowed twenty-five from him as a personal loan without giving him the check. I didn’t mean anything by it. It was just that I was embarrassed to let him know I couldn’t even accommodate one of my own house guests for a measly twenty-five. You know how they talk around here. I went out and gave the twenty-five to Burroughs, and I kept the endorsed check in my pocket. I intended tearing it up, but I couldn’t very well do it in front of him. Then later I forgot about it.

“I tackled him last night after you went to bed, and he didn’t come through. He got crabby, caught on we’d just played him for a sucker, refused to finish out the visit, insisted on taking the next train back. I drove him in; I couldn’t very well let him walk at that hour. He got out at the station and I came on back without waiting.

“I started to do a slow burn. There I was, not only no better off than before we asked him out, but even more in the red, on account of the expense of the big house party we threw to impress him. Naturally I was sore, after all the false hopes we’d raised, after the way you’d put yourself out to be nice to him. I couldn’t sleep all night, stayed down here drinking and pacing back and forth, half nuts with worry. And then sometime after daylight I happened to stick

my hand in my pocket for something and suddenly turned up his twenty-five-dollar endorsed check.

"It was a crazy thing to do, but I didn't stop to think. I lifted it, added two zips to the figures, got in the car then and there, and drove all the way in to town. I cashed it at his own bank the minute the doors opened at nine. I knew he had twenty times that much on tap at all times, so it wouldn't hurt him any."

"But, Gil, didn't you know what would happen, didn't you know what he could do to you?"

"Yeah, I did, but I guess I had a vague idea in the back of my mind that if it came to a showdown and he threatened to get nasty with me about it—well, there were a couple of times he got a little too affectionate with you; you told me so yourself—I could threaten to get just as nasty with him about that. You know how scared he is of that wife of his."

"Gil," was all she said, "Gil."

"Yeah, I'm pretty low."

"As long as it's not the other. But then what's become of him? Where did he go?"

"I don't know."

"Did you *see* him get on the train?"

"No, I just left him there at the station and turned around and drove back without waiting."

She hesitated a moment before speaking. Then she said slowly: "What I've just heard hasn't exactly been pleasant, but I told you I could take it, and I can, and I have. And I think—I know—I can stand the other, the worse thing, too, if you tell it to me now, right away, and get it over with. But now's the time. This is your last chance, Gil. Don't let me find out later, because later—it may be different, I may not still be able to feel the same way about it. You didn't *kill* Burroughs last night, did you?"

He breathed deeply. His eyes looked into hers. "I never killed anyone in my life. And now, are you with me?"

She raised her head defiantly. "To the bitter end."

“Bitter.” He smiled ruefully. “I don’t like that word.”

* * * *

His name was Ward, he said. She wondered if that was customary on their parts, to give their names like that instead of their official standing. She wasn’t familiar with their technique, had never been interviewed before. And of course, she would be alone in the house when he happened to drop in. Still, on second thought, that might be better. Gil might have given a—well, a misleading impression, been keyed up, on account of that check business. This was Tuesday, the day after Burroughs had last been seen.

Her caller spared her any of that business of flaunting a badge in front of Leona; that was another consoling thing. He must have just given his name to Leona, because Leona went right back to the kitchen instead of stalling around outside the room so she could hear. Just people that came to try to collect money didn’t interest her any more; the novelty had worn off long ago.

Jackie Blaine said: “Sit down, Mr. Ward. My husband’s gone in to town—”

“I know that.” It came out as flat as a sheet of onion-skin paper, but for a minute it made her a little uneasy; it sounded as though they were already watching Gil’s movements.

“If there’s anything I can do—”

“There always is, don’t you think?”

He didn’t look so coarse, so hard-bitten, as she’d always imagined those men did. He looked—well, no different from any number of other young fellows they’d entertained out here, whom she’d danced with, golfed with, and almost invariably found herself putting in their places, in some dimly lighted corner, before the week-end was over. She knew how to handle the type well. But then she’d never parried life-and-death with them before. And maybe he just *looked* the type.

He said: “Mr. Homer Burroughs was here at your house from Friday until some time late Sunday night or early Monday morning.” There wasn’t the rising inflection of interrogation at the end of it.

“He was.”

“When did you last see him?”

“My husband drove him to the station in time for—”

“That isn’t what I asked you, Mrs. Blaine.”

She didn’t like that; he was trying to differentiate between Gil and herself. They were together in this, sink or swim. She answered it his way. “I said good night to Mr. Burroughs at ten to one Monday morning. My husband remained downstairs with him. My husband drove him—”

He didn’t want that part of it. “Then 1 A.M. Monday was the last time you saw him. When you left him, who else was in the house with him besides your husband, anyone?”

“Just my husband.”

“When you said good night, was it understood you weren’t to see him in the morning? Did he say anything about leaving in the small hours of the night?”

That was a bad hurdle to get over. “It was left indefinite,” she said. “We’re . . . we’re sort of casual out here about those things—formal good-byes and such.”

“Even so, as his hostess, wouldn’t it be up to him to at least drop some hint to let you know he was going, to thank you for your hospitality before taking his leave?”

She brought a gleam of her old prom-girl manner, of three or four years before, to the surface. Keep it light and off dangerous ground. It had worked to ward off boa-constrictor hugs; maybe it would work to keep your husband out of difficulties with the police. “You’ve read your Emily Post, I see. Won’t you have a drink while you’re doing this?”

He flattened her pitiful attempt like a locomotive running on a single track full steam ahead. “No, I won’t! Did he drop

the slightest remark to indicate that he wouldn't be here by the time you were up the following morning?"

He'd given her an opening there: her own and Gil's habitual late hour for rising any day in the week. "Well, we took that for granted. After all, he had to be back at the office by nine and—"

But it didn't work out so good. "But he didn't have to take the milk train to get back to the office by nine. Isn't it a little unusual that he should leave in the dead of night like that, a man of sixty-four, without getting his night's rest first?"

"Well, all right. Say it is!" she flared resentfully. "But we're not accountable for his eccentricities, why come to us about it? He left here, I assure you. Look under the carpet if you don't think so!" A second later she wished she hadn't said that; it seemed to put her ahead of him, so to speak. They got you all muddled, these professional detectives. Just think if it had been a case of out-and-out murder, instead of just trying to conceal that money business of Gil's!

Ward smiled wryly at her dig about the carpet. "Oh, I don't doubt he left the house, here."

She didn't like the slight emphasis he gave the word "house," as though implying something had happened to him right outside it, or not far away.

"Then what more have we got to do with it? Who's putting these ideas in your head, his wife?"

"I don't have ideas in my head, just instructions, Mrs. Blaine."

"Why don't you check at the other end, in the city? Why don't you find out what became of him there?"

He said very quietly, "Because he never got there, Mrs. Blaine."

Womanlike, she kept trying to retain the offensive, as the best defense. "How do you know for sure? Just because he didn't appear either at his home or his office? He may have

been run over by a taxi. He may have been overcome by amnesia."

"To get to the city, he would have had to take the train first of all, wouldn't he, Mrs. Blaine? A man of sixty-four isn't likely to thumb a ride in along the highway at four in the morning, with week-end baggage in the bargain, is he?"

"He did take the train. He must have. My husb—"

"We happen to know he didn't. We've questioned the conductor on that train whose business it is to punch the passengers' tickets as they get on at each successive stop. No one got on the 4:20 train at all at your particular station out here. And that milk train is empty enough to make it easy to keep track. The ticket agent didn't sell anyone a ticket between the hours of one and six thirty that morning, and since you drove him out in the car yourself on Friday afternoon, it isn't likely he had the second half of a round-trip ticket in his possession; he would have had to buy a one-way one."

A cold chill ran down her spine; she tried not to be aware of it. "All I can say is, my husband drove him to the station and then came on back without watching him board the train. He may have strolled a little too far to the end of the platform while waiting and been waylaid by a footpad in the dark."

"Yes," he said reasonably enough. "But why should the footpad carry him off bodily with him into thin air? We've searched the immediate vicinity of the station pretty thoroughly, and now we're combing over the woods and fields along the way. His baggage has disappeared, too. How many pieces did he bring with him, Mrs. Blaine?"

That one was a son of a gun. Would it be better to say one and try to cover up the presence of the one he'd left behind? Suppose it came out later that he'd brought two-as it was bound to-and they identified the second one, upstairs, as his? On the other hand, if she admitted that he'd left one behind, wouldn't that only add to the strange

circumstances surrounding his departure? She couldn't afford to pile that additional strangeness on top of the already overwhelming strangeness of the hour at which he'd gone; it made it look too bad for them, too much as though his leave-taking had been impromptu, conditioned by anger or a quarrel. And then in the wake of that would unfailingly come revelation of Gil's misdeed in regard to the check.

She took the plunge, answered the detective's question with a deliberate but not unqualified falsehood, after all this had gone through her mind. "I believe . . . one."

"You can't say for sure? You brought him out in the car with you, Mrs. Blaine."

"I've brought so many people out in the car. Sometimes I dream I'm a station-wagon driver."

Then, just as she felt she couldn't stand another minute of this cat-and-mouse play, just as she could feel the makings of a three-alarm scream gathering in her system, she recognized the sound of their own car outside and Gil was back at last. He sounded the horn once, briefly, as in a sort of questioning signal.

"Here's my husband now," she said, and jumped up and ran to the door before he could stop her.

"Hello, Gil," she said loudly. She wound an arm around his neck, kissed him on the side of the face, back toward the ear—or seemed to. "There's a detective in there," she breathed.

His own breath answered hers: "Wait a minute; stay like this, up against me." He said loudly down the back of her neck: "Hello, beautiful. Miss me?"

She could feel his hand fumbling between their bodies. He thrust something into her disengaged hand, the one that wasn't clasping the nape of his neck. Spongy paper, currency. "Better get rid of this. I don't think he'll search me, but bury it in your stocking or somewhere, till he goes." And then in a fulibodied voice: "Any calls for me?"

“No, but there’s a gentleman inside waiting to see you now.”

And under cover of that he’d gone on: “Go out and get in the car; take it away. Go down the village and . . . buy things. Anything. Keep buying, keep buying. Stay out. Phone here before you come back. Phone here first.”

Then they had to break it up; they’d gotten away with m —Not that word! They’d gotten away with a lot, as it was.

She followed Gil’s instructions now, but she did it her way. She couldn’t fathom the motivation. But she couldn’t just walk out the door, get in, and drive off; that would have been a dead give-away he’d cued her. She did it her way; it only took a minute longer. She went back into the living room after him, across it just to the opposite doorway, and called through to Leona in a war whoop: “Leona, need anything?” She didn’t have to worry about getting the wrong answer; she knew how they’d be fixed.

“Sure do,” said the uninhibited Leona, “all we got lef’ after that bunch of cannibals is a lot of nothin’ !”

“All right, I’ll run down and bring you back a shot of everything.” But as she passed the two men a second time, short as the delay had been—and necessary, she felt, for appearances’ sake—Gil’s face was almost agonized, as though he couldn’t wait for her to do as he’d told her and get out. Maybe the other man couldn’t notice it, but she could; she knew him so well. The detective, on the other hand, not only offered no objection to her going, but seemed to be deliberately holding his fire until she was out of the way, as though he preferred it that way, wanted to question Gil by himself.

She got in and drove off leisurely, and as she meshed gears, at the same time cached the wad of unlawful money under the elastic top of her stocking. Gil’s motive for so badly wanting her to get in the car and get away from the house, and stay away until the fellow left, must be this money, of course. He wanted to avoid being caught in

incriminating possession of it. That must be it; she couldn't figure out any other logical reason. Still, they couldn't keep on indefinitely running bases with it like this.

She'd stepped up speed now, was coursing the sleek turnpike to the village at her usual projectile clip. But not too fast to glimpse a group of men in the distance, widely separated and apparently wading around aimlessly in the fields. She had an idea what they were doing out there, though. And then a few minutes later, when that strip of woods, thick as the bristles of a hairbrush, closed in on both sides of the road, she could make out a few more of them under the trees. They were using pocket lights in there, although it wasn't quite dusk yet.

"What are they looking for him this far back for?" she thought impatiently. "If Gil says he let him off at the station platform—" Stupid police. That malicious Mrs. Burroughs, paying them back now because she'd sensed that the old fool had had a soft spot for Jackie. And then in conclusion: "How do they know he's dead, anyway?"

She braked outside the village grocery. She subtracted a twenty from the money first of all, tucked that in the pocket of her jumper. She hadn't brought any bag; he'd rushed her out so. Then she went in and started buying out the store.

By the time she was through, she had a knee-high carton filled with stuff. "Take it out and put it in the rumble for me, I'll take it right along with me. Let me use your phone a minute; I want to make sure I've got everything."

Gil answered her himself. "I just got rid of him this minute," he said, in a voice hoarse from long strain. "Whew!"

She said for the benefit of the storekeeper, "Do you need anything else while I'm out?"

"No, come on back now; it's all right." And then sharply: "Listen! If you run into *him*, don't stop for him, hear me? Don't even slow down; just drive past fast. He's got no authority to stop you; he's a city dick. He's done his

questioning and he's through. Don't stop for *anyone* and don't let anyone get in the car with you."

The store manager called in to her just then from out front: "Mrs. Blaine, the rumble's locked. I can't get into it. Where'll I put this stuff?"

"The whole key rack's sticking in the dashboard; take it out yourself. You know the one, that broad flat one."

"That key ain't on it any more. I don't see it here with the rest."

"Wait a minute, I'll ask my husband. Gil, where's the key to the rumble? We can't find it."

"I lost it." She couldn't really hear him the first time; his voice choked up. Maybe he'd been taking a drink just then.

The storekeeper said: "Maybe it's just jammed. Should I try to pry it up for you?"

"No, you might spoil the paint job."

Gil was saying thickly in her ear: "Never mind about the rumble; let it alone. Get away from that store." Suddenly, incredibly, he was screaming at her over the wire! Literally screaming, like someone in pain. "Come on back, will ya! Come on back, I tell ya! *Come on back* with that car!"

"All right, for Heaven's sake; all right." Her eardrum tingled. That detective certainly had set his nerves on edge.

She drove back with the carton of stuff beside her on the seat. Gil was waiting for her all the way out in the middle of the roadway that passed their house.

"I'll put it to bed myself," he said gruffly, and drove the car into the garage, groceries and all, he was in such a hurry.

His face was all twinkling with perspiration when he turned to her after finishing locking the garage doors on it.

* * * *

She woke up that night, sometime between two and three, and he wasn't in the room. She called, and he wasn't in the house at all. She got up and looked out the window, and the

white garage doors showed a slight wedge of black between their two halves, so he'd taken the car out with him.

She wasn't really worried at first. Still, where could he have gone at this unearthly hour? Where was there for him to go—around here? And why slip out like that, without saying a word to her? She sat there in the dark for about thirty, forty minutes, sometimes on the edge of the bed, sometimes over by the window, watching the road for him.

Suddenly a black shape came along, blurring the highway's tape-like whiteness. But in almost absolute silence, hardly recognizable as a car, lights out. It was gliding along, practically coasting, the downward tilt of the road past the house helping it.

It was he, though. He took the car around, berthed it in the garage, and then she heard him come in downstairs. A glass clinked once or twice, and then he came up. She'd put the light on, so as not to throw a scare into him. His face was like putty; she'd never seen him look like this before.

"Matter, couldn't you sleep, Gil?" she said quietly.

"I took the car out for a run, and every time I'd stop and think I'd found a place where I was alone, I'd hear some other damn car somewhere in the distance or see its lights, or think I did, anyway. Judas, the whole country seemed awake—twigs snapping, stars peering down—"

"But why stop? Why should it annoy you if there were other cars in the distance? What were you trying to do, get rid of something, throw something away?"

"Yeah," he said, low.

For a minute she got badly frightened again, like Monday morning, until he, seeming to take fright from her fright in turn, quickly stammered:

"Uh-huh that other bag of his, that second bag he left behind. He's coming back, that guy, I know he is; he isn't through yet. I was on pins and needles the whole time he was here, this afternoon, thinking he was going to go

looking around and find it up there." He let some sulphur matches trickle out of his pocket. "I was going to try to burn it, but I was afraid somebody'd see me, somebody was following me." He threw himself face down across the bed. Not crying or anything, just exhausted with spent emotion. "The bitter end," he panted, "the bitter end."

A minute later she stepped back into the room, astonishment written all over her face.

"But, Gil, you didn't even have it with you, do you realize that? It's right there in the guest-room closet, where it's been all along!"

He didn't turn his head. His voice came muffledly: "I'm going crazy, I guess. I don't even know what I'm doing any more. Maybe I took one of our own by mistake."

"Why did all this have to happen to us?" she sobbed dryly as she reached out to snap off the light.

* * * *

He was right, Ward came back. The next day, that was Wednesday, two days after It. He had a different air about him, a disarming, almost apologetic one, as though he were simply here to ask a favor.

"What, more questioning?" she greeted him caustically.

"I'm sorry you resent my interviewing you yesterday. It was just routine, but I tried to be as inoffensive as I could about it. No, so far as we're concerned, you people no longer figure in it—except of course as his last known jumping-off place into nothingness. We have a new theory we're working on."

"What is it?" she said, forgetting to be aloof.

"I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to divulge it. However, a couple of interviews with Mrs. Burroughs were enough to give it an impetus. She's a hypochondriac if there ever was one."

"I think I know what you're driving at. You mean his disappearance was voluntary, to get away from the

sickroom atmosphere in his home?”

His knowing expression told her she was right. And for a moment a great big sun came up and shone through the darkness she had been living in ever since Mrs. Burroughs’ phone call Monday noon. How wonderful it would be if that should turn out to be the correct explanation, what a reprieve for herself and Gil! Why, it would automatically cover up the check matter as well. If the old man had been about to drop from sight, he certainly could have been expected to cash a check for that amount, to keep himself in funds; there wouldn’t be any mystery about it, then.

Meanwhile, as to Ward: You could tell he wasn’t here altogether on business. He was looking into her face a little too personally, she thought. Well, he was only a man after all. What could you do about it?

“The local chief out here, whom I’m co-operating with, can’t put me up at his house; he’s got three of our guys staying with him already. I was wondering if it would put you out if I . . . er . . . asked permission to make this my headquarters; you know, just sleep here while I’m detailed out here, so I wouldn’t have to keep running back and forth, to the city and out again, every night?”

She nearly fell over. “But this is a private home, after all.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be in your way much. You can bill the department for it if you like.”

“That isn’t the point. There’s a perfectly good hotel in the village.”

“I already tried to get quarters there. They’re all filled up. You’re entitled to refuse if you want to. It’d just be a way of showing your good will and willingness to cooperate. After all, it’s just as much to the interest of you and your husband as anyone else to have this matter cleared up.”

By the time she got in to Gil, she was already beginning to see the humorous side of it. “It’s Ward again. He wants to be our house guest; can you tie that? He hinted that now

they think Burroughs disappeared voluntarily, to get away from that invalid wife of his."

His face was a white pucker of frightening suspicion. "He's lying! He's trying different tactics, that's all. He's trying to plant himself here in the house with us as a spy."

"But don't you think it'll look worse, if we seem to have anything to hide by not letting him in? Then they'll simply hang around watching us from the outside. If we let him in, we may be able to get rid of him for good in a day or two."

"He'll watch every move I make, he'll listen to every word that's said. It's been tough up to now; it'll be hell that way."

"Well, you go out and shoo him away then; you're the boss."

He took a quick step toward the door. Then his courage seemed to ooze out of him. She saw him falter, come to a stop, rake his fingers through his hair.

"Maybe you're right," he said uncertainly, "maybe it'll look twice as bad if we turn him away, like we have something to hide. Tell him 0. K." And he poured himself a drink the size of Lake Erie.

"He'll sleep on the davenport in the living room and like it," she said firmly. "I'm not running a lodging-house for homeless detectives."

* * * *

It was the least she could do, she felt, meeting him along the road like that: ask him if he wanted a lift back to the house with her. After all, she had nothing against the man; he was just doing his job. And Gil's half-hysterical injunction, over the wire the day before, "Don't take anyone in the car with you!" was furthest from her thoughts, had no meaning at the moment. For that matter, it had had no meaning even at the time.

"Sure, don't mind if I do," he accepted. He slung himself up on the running board without obliging her to come to a complete stop, and dropped into the seat beside her

without opening the door, displacing some parcels she'd had there.

"Why don't you put these in the rumble?" he asked, piling them on his lap for want of a better place.

She took one hand off the wheel, snapped her fingers. "That reminds me, I wanted to stop at a repair shop and have a new key made; we've lost the old one."

He was sitting sideways, face turned toward her, studying her profile. In one way it was annoying, in another way it was excessively flattering. She kept her eyes on the road ahead.

"Didn't the mister object to your coming out like this?"

She thought it was said kiddingly; it was one of those things should have been said kiddingly. But when she looked at him, his face was dead serious.

She eyed him in frank surprise. "How did you know? We had a little set-to about the car, that was all. I wanted it and he didn't want me to have it; wanted it himself, I guess. So I took it anyway, while he was shaving, and here I am." Then, afraid she had given him a misleading impression of their domestic relations, she tried to minimize it. "Oh, but that's nothing new with us, that's been going on ever since we've had a car." It wasn't true; it had never happened before—until tonight.

"Oh," he said. And an alertness that had momentarily come into his expression slowly left it again.

They came to the belt of woods that crossed and enfolded the roadway, and she slowed to a laggard crawl. She fumbled for a cigarette and he put a match to it. Without their noticing it, the car had come to a full halt. The light wind, no longer in their faces, veered, changed direction. Suddenly she flung the cigarette away from her with a disgusted grimace.

They both became aware of it at the same time. She crinkled her nose, threw in the clutch.

“There must be something dead in these woods,” she remarked. “Do you notice that odor? Every once in a while you get a whiff of it.”

“There’s something dead—somewhere around,” he agreed cryptically.

As soon as they picked up speed again and came out between the open fields, it disappeared, left behind—apparently—under the dank trees. He didn’t say a word from that time on. That only occurred to her later. He forgot to thank her when they drew up at the house. He forgot even to say good night. He was evidently lost in thought, thinking of something else entirely.

Gil’s grip, as she entered their bedroom in the dark, fell on her shoulder like the jaws of a steel trap—and was just as merciless. He must have been standing unseen a little inside the doorway. His voice was an unrecognizable strangled sound.”

Didn’t I tell you not to let anyone get in that car with you!”

“I just met him now, on my way back.”

“Where’d you go with it? I’ve died every minute since you left!”

“I told you I wanted to see the new war picture.”

The idea seemed to send him floundering back against the bedroom wall in the dark.

“You went to the *movies?*” he gasped. “And where was the car? What’d you do with it while you were in there?”

“What does anyone do with a car while they’re in seeing a show? I left it parked around the corner from the theater.”

This time he just gave a wordless gasp—the sort of sound that is wrenched from a person when something goes hurtling by and narrowly misses hitting him.

* * * *

She was in a half sleep when some sense of impending danger aroused her. It was neither a sound nor a motion, it

was just the impalpable *presence* of some menace in itself. She started up. There was a late moon tonight, and the room was dark-blue and white, not black. Gil was crouched to one side of the window, peering down, his back to her. Not a muscle rippled, he was so still.

"Gil, what is it?" she breathed softly.

His silencing hiss came back even softer, no louder than a thread of steam escaping from a radiator valve.

She put her foot to the floor, crept up behind him. The sibilance came again:

"Get back, you fool. I don't want him to see me up here."

The sound of a stealthy tinkering came up from below, somewhere. A very small sound it was in the night stillness. She peered over his shoulder. Ward was standing down there at the garage doors, fumbling with them.

"If he gets them open and goes in there—"

Suddenly she foreshortened her glance, brought it down perpendicularly over Gil's shoulder, saw the gun for the first time, blue-black as a bottle fly in the moonlight. Steady, for all Gil's nerves; held so sure and steady there wasn't a waver in it. Centered remorselessly on the man outside the garage down there.

"Gil!" Her inhalation of terror seemed to fill the room with a sound like rushing wind.

He stiff-armed her behind him, never even turned his head, never even took his eyes off his objective. "Get back, I tell you. If he gets them open, I'm going to shoot."

But this would be murder, the very thing she'd dreaded so Monday, and that had missed them the first time by a hairbreadth. He must have the money hidden in there in the garage. She had to do something to stop him, to keep it from happening. She floundered across the room on her bare feet, found the opposite wall, groped along it.

"Gil, get back. I'm going to put on the lights."

She just gave him time enough to swerve aside, snapped the switch, and the room flared into noonday brilliance that

cast a big warning yellow patch on the ground outside.

There was a single retreating footfall on the concrete runway down there, and the next time they looked, the space in front of the garage doors showed empty.

She crept out to the head of the stairs, listened, came back again.

“He’s gone to bed,” she said. “I heard the day bed creak.”

The reaction had set in; the tension Gil had been under must have been terrific. He was shaking all over like someone attached to an electric reducing belt. “He’ll only make another stab at it again tomorrow night. I can’t stand it any more, I can’t stand it any more! I’m getting out of here—now.”

It was no use reasoning with him, she could see that at a glance. He was in a state bordering on frenzy. For a moment she was half tempted to say: “Oh, let’s go downstairs to him now, the two of us, admit you raised the check, give him back the money, and get it over with! Anything’s better than this nightmare!”

But she checked herself. How much did they get for doing what he’d done? Ten years? Twenty? Her courage failed her; she had no right to ask him to give up that much of his life.

Meanwhile he was whipping a necktie around his collar, shrugging on his jacket. She whispered: “Gil, let’s stop and think before we cut ourselves off completely—Where can we go, at this hour?”

“I rented a furnished room in the city today, under an assumed name.” He whispered an address. “We’ll be safe there for a couple of days at least. As soon as I can get boat tickets—I have to get rid of that car, that’s the main thing.”

“But, Gil, don’t you see we’re convicting ourselves, by doing this?”

“Are you coming with me? Or are you doing to let me down just when I need you most, like women usually do? You’re half in love with him already! I’ve seen the looks he’s

starting to give you. They all fall for you; why shouldn't he? All right, stay here with him then."

She silenced him by pressing her fingers to his mouth. "To the bitter end," she whispered, misty-eyed, "to the bitter end. If you want it this way, then this is the way it'll be."

He didn't even thank her: she didn't expect him to, anyway. "Go out there again and make sure he's sleeping."

She came back, said: "He's snoring; I can hear him all the way up here."

While she began to dress with frantic haste, Gil started down ahead.

"I'll take the brakes off, you take the wheel, and I'll push it out into the road so he won't hear us start."

Ward's snoring filled the house as she crept down the dark stairs after Gil moments later. "Why? Why?" she kept thinking distractedly. But she'd made her decision; she went ahead unfalteringly.

He had the garage doors open by the time she'd joined him. The place smelled terrible; a stray cat must have found its way in and died in there some place. She got in, guided the car out backward as he pushed at the hood. Then he shifted around to the rear. The incline of the concrete path helped carry them down to the road. You could still hear Ward snoring inside the house, from out where they were. Gil pushed it down the road a considerable distance from the house, before he jumped in and took over the wheel.

"Made it," he muttered hoarsely.

She wasn't a slow driver herself by any means, but she'd never forced the car to such a speed as he got out of it now. The gauge broke in new numbers on their dial. The wheels seemed to churn air most of the time and just come down for contact at intervals.

"Gil, take a little of the head off it." She shuddered. "You'll kill the two of us!"

“Look back and see if there’s anything in sight behind us.”

There was, but far away. It had nothing to do with them. It definitely wasn’t Ward; he couldn’t have gotten another car that quickly. But it spurred Gil on to keep up that death-inviting pace long after they’d lost sight of it. And then suddenly, ahead—

The other car peered unexpectedly at them over a rise. There was plenty of room for them both, at a normal rate of speed. They wouldn’t even have had to swerve; neither was hogging the road. But Gil was going so fast, and in the attempt to shift over farther, their rear wheels swept out of line with their front, they started a long forward skid, and the other car nicked them in passing. It wasn’t anything; at an ordinary rate of speed it would have just scraped the paint off their fender or something. But it swept them against a tree growing close to the roadway, and that in turn flung them back broadside on the asphalt again. Miraculously they stayed right side up, but with a bad dent toward their rear where they’d hit the tree. The rumble lid had sprung up and that whole side of the chassis was flattened in.

The other car had stopped farther down the road; it hadn’t been going any too slow itself. She was on the floor, thrown there in a coiled-rope formation, but unhurt. She heard Gil swear icily under his breath, fling open the door, shoot out as though pursued by devils.

She looked up into the rear-sight mirror and there was a face in it. The sunken, hideously grinning face of Homer Burroughs, peering up above the level of the forcibly opened rumble. She could see it so plain, swimming on the moonlit mirror; even the dark bruises mottling it under the silvery hair, even the heavy auto wrench riding his shoulder like an epaulette, thrown up out of the bottom of the rumble as his body had been thrown up—like a macabre jack-in-the-box. And the odor of the woods that she and Ward had

noticed earlier was all around her in the night, though she was far from those particular woods now.

She acted quickly, by instinct alone. Almost before Gil had gotten back there, to flatten the rumble top down again, smother what it had inadvertently revealed before the occupants of the other car came up and saw it, she had opened the door on her side and jumped down. She began to run silently along the edge of the road, in the shadows cast by the overhanging trees. She didn't know where she was going. She only wanted to get away from this man. This man who had killed. This man who was no longer her husband, who spelled Fear and Horror to her now. She saw now that she had lied to him—and to herself—Monday, when she told him she could stand it even if he'd done this, so long as he only admitted it. If she'd seen Burroughs' battered corpse at the time, as she had now, the same thing would have happened then: she would have fled away from Gil like one demented. She couldn't stand cowardly murder.

He'd gotten the rumble down, and was standing there pressed slightly backward upon it, at bay, arms out at either side to hold it down. He either didn't see her scurry by along the edge of the trees, or was too preoccupied in facing the two men who were coming solicitously back toward him, to pay any attention. The half-formed idea in her churning mind was to get into that other, momentarily vacated car and get away from him. Anywhere, but get away!

She was halfway to it now. She could hear their voices, back there where she'd run from:

"Are you all right, brother? How badly did we hit you?"

"Gee, we banged up his rumble, Art."

And then Gil's sharp, dangerous: "Get away from it!"

The two shots came with sickening suddenness. Just *bam!* and then *bam!* again, and there were two huddled, loglike forms on the roadway in the moonlight up there by Gil's car.

Murder again. Murder trebled now. How far, how far away they'd stopped that other car! She'd never make it. She saw that now. He'd already called her name warningly once, he was already running toward her like a winged messenger of death. She was up to it at last, had one foot on the running board now. But he had a smoking gun in his hand that could reach out from where he was to where she was quicker than any car could get under way. And this one, too, like theirs, had brought up broadside to the road. Before she could back up for clearance, turn, and get away, he'd be upon her. In her frustrated panic, hand on the door catch, she was conscious of the caked dust spewed upon the sides of the car, thrown up by its wheel action. They'd driven it hard.

Instead of getting in, she ran around it to the opposite side, away from him, as though to take cover. Then she stood there staring at him over it. At last she rounded it once more at the rear and came back toward him, away from it. Met him a few paces before it.

He seized her relentlessly by the wrist. "So now you know," he heaved. "So you ran out on me."

"I lost my head for a minute; anyone would have."

"I watched you. You didn't go the other way. You started back toward *him*, the guy you love now."

He was dragging her toward their own car, swinging her from side to side like a primordial ape with a living victim.

"You're dangerous to me now, I can see that. I've just shot two men; I'm fighting for my life. And anything or anyone that might help to trap me, has got to be removed."

"Gil, you wouldn't do such a thing. I'm your wife!"

"Fugitives have no wives."

He half raised the gun toward her, lowered it again. He looked up the road, and down. The moonlight was crafty in his eyes.

"Get in, I'll give you one more chance."

She knew it was only a postponement. One thing at a time; he had to get to cover first. If he left her lying out here on the open road they'd know instantly who had done it. She could read her death warrant in his eyes, as they started off once more toward the city.

* * * *

It was inconceivable that he meant to go through with such a thing. Even the sight of the grimy tenement room, suggestive of crime and violence, failed to make it more plausible. "This isn't happening," she thought, "this isn't real; my husband hasn't brought me to this unspeakable room in the slums, intending to do away with me. I'm still asleep, at home, and I'm having a bad dream.

"Yet all these days he's known, and he hasn't told me. All these days I've been living with a murderer." She visualized again the way he'd shot those two men down in cold blood, without a qualm, without a moment's hesitation. Why wouldn't he be capable of doing the same to her? He was kill-crazy now, at bay. The red tide of murder had swept over him, effacing all love, trust, compassion, wiping away their very marriage itself. And he could kill this woman in the room with him, he could kill anyone on God's earth tonight.

She sat slumped on the edge of the creaky iron bedstead, fingers pressed to her temples. He'd locked the room door after they came in, pulled down the patched blue shade on the window. He stood listening for a moment by the door, to see if anyone had followed them up, then he turned to her. "I've got to get rid of that car first," he muttered to himself. Suddenly he'd come over, thrust her aside, was disheveling the bed, pulling out the sheets from under the threadbare cotton blankets. They squealed like pigs as he tore long strips down their lengths.

She guessed what they were for. "No, Gil, don't!" she whimpered smotheredly. She ran for the door, pulled

uselessly at the knob. He swung her around back behind him.

“Don’t do this to me!”

“I can’t just leave you locked in here. You’d scream or break a window. You sold out to him, and you’re my enemy now.”

He flung her face-down on the bed, caught her hands behind her back, deftly tied them together with strips of sheeting. Then her ankles in the same way. He sat her up, lashed her already once-secured hands to the iron bed frame. Then he wound a final length around her face, snuffing out her mouth. Her eyes were wide with horror. It wasn’t so much what was being done to her, as whom it was being done by.

“Can you breathe?” He plucked it down a little from the tip of her nose. “Breathe while you can.” His eyes, flicking over to the length of tubing connecting a wall jet with a one-burner gas ring, then back again to her, betrayed his intended method when the time came. He’d stun her first with a blow from his gun butt, probably, then remove her bonds to make it look like a suicide, disconnect the tube and let the gas take its course. That happened so often in these cheap rooming houses; that was the way out so many took.

He listened carefully at the door. Then he unlocked it, and as he turned to go glanced back and said to her:

“Keep your eyes on this doorknob. And when you see it start to turn, begin saying your prayers.”

She heard him lock the door again on the other side, and the faint creak of his step descending the warped stairs.

He would come back—in forty minutes, in an hour—and kill her. But therein didn’t lie the full horror of it. It was that this man and she had danced by moonlight not so long ago, had exchanged kisses and vows under the stars. It was that he had brought her candy, and orchids to wear on her coat. It was that they had stood up together and sworn to cherish and cling to one another for the rest of their lives.

Yet she saw that it must have been in him from the beginning, this fatal flaw of character that had finally led him to murder. People didn't change that abruptly; they couldn't. There were some who could never be capable of murder, no matter what the circumstances. And others, like Gil, needed only a slight push in that direction to fall into it almost of their own accords. He'd been a potential murderer all along. He hadn't known it and she hadn't, so who was to blame?

She couldn't free her hands. She only succeeded in tightening the knots in the sheeting more inextricably when she strained against them; it was that kind of material. The bed had no casters, and one foot, caught in a crack in the floor, held it fast against her attempts to drag it after her.

He'd been gone a long time. Against her will she found herself eying the china knob on the inside of the door. When it started to turn, he'd said—

And suddenly the light, given back by its glossy surface, seemed to flash, to waver. It was moving, it was going slowly around! Without his having made a sound on the stairs outside. She could feel her temples begin to pound. But the key rattle didn't come. Instead the knob relapsed again to where it had been. With a slight rustling sound, so she knew she hadn't been mistaken, she had actually seen it move. She stared toward it till her eyes threatened to start from their sockets, but it didn't move again. Why didn't he come in and get it over with? Why this exquisite additional torture? Maybe he'd heard someone coming on the stairs.

There was another agonizing wait, during which she screamed silently against the gag. There, he was coming back again. This time she could hear the furtive tread on the oil-cloth covered stairs. He must have gone down to the street again for a minute to make doubly sure no one was about.

The key hardly scraped at all, so deftly did he fit it in. And once again the china knob wheeled and sent out wavers of

light. And this time the door opened—and let Death in. Death was a face she'd kissed a thousand times. Death was a hand that had stroked her hair. Death was a man whose name she had taken in place of her own.

He locked the door behind him, Death did. He said, tightlipped: "I sent it into the river. It was misty and there was no one around to see. At last I'm rid of him, that damned old man! And by the time they fish him out again, if they ever do, I'll be far away. There's a tanker leaves for Venezuela at midday."

The rubber extension tube went *whup!* as he pulled off the nozzle of the jet. The key didn't make any sound as he turned it, and the gas didn't either, as it started coming in.

He dropped his eyes before hers. "Don't look at me like that; it's no use. I'm going through with it."

He drew his gun and gripped it down near the bore, and then he shifted his cuff back out of the way, as a man does when he doesn't want anything to hamper the swing of his arm. The last thing he said was "You won't feel anything, Jackie." That was Gil Blaine, dying inside the murderer.

Then he raised the gun butt high over his head, with a terrible intensity, so that his whole arm shook. Or maybe it was just the way she was looking at him, so that he had to use twice as much will power, to get it done.

It had gone up as high as it could; now it started to come down again. Her head seemed to be made of glass. It shattered, she could *hear* it shatter with the blow, and her skull seemed to rain all around her on the floor, and the blow itself exploded deafeningly in her own ears, like a shot. But without causing any pain.

Then as her eyes started spasmodically open again, it was *he* that was falling, his whole body, and not just his arm any more. She turned her head dazedly. The window shade was being held aside by an arm, and there was broken glass all over the floor, and Ward was out there looking into the room through a sort of saw-toothed halo where the

windowpane had been, lazy smoke soft-focusing him. He reached up and did something to the catch, raised the frame, climbed through across the sill.

When he'd turned off the gas jet and freed her, she hid her face against him, still sitting there on the bedstead, and clung like that for a long time. It was a funny thing to do, with a mere detective, but still—who else had she?

"You weren't in line with the keyhole when I squinted through it, or I would have shot the lock off then. I wasn't sure that this was the right room, so I went through to the back yard and climbed the fire escape from there. All I had to go by was what you'd traced in the dust on the side of that car left standing out there on the road: just my name and this address. And, gee, Jackie, if you knew how close I came to never noticing it at all!"

"I didn't think it would be seen, but it was all I had time to do. Anything could have happened. Someone's sleeve could have brushed against it and erased it.

"He killed Burroughs early Monday morning. And he's had him in our locked rumble seat ever since! That explains so many things in his behavior the past few days I couldn't understand. But, oh, you're so blind when you trust anyone! He finally dumped him, car and all, into the river just now, before he came back."

"We'll get it up. I was sure of him from the first, but without a body or any trace of one, our hands were tied. And then you, you pulled so much weight in his favor just by being in the picture at all, so honest and so-We all knew you couldn't be a party to a murder."

She lifted her head, but without trying to see past him into the room. He seemed to understand what she was trying to ask, and told her:

"He's dead. I wasn't very careful, I guess."

She wondered if he'd meant to do it that way. It was better that way. Better even for Gil himself.

Ward stood her up and walked her out through the door, leaning her against him so she wouldn’t have to look at Gil lying on the floor. Outside the night seemed clean and fresh again, all evil gone from it, and the stars looked as new as though they’d never been used before. She drew a deep breath, of infinite pity but no regret.

“So this is how it ends.”

MURDER ALWAYS GATHERS MOMENTUM

Paine hung around outside the house waiting for old Ben Burroughs' caller to go, because he wanted to see him alone. You can't very well ask anyone for a loan of $250 in the presence of someone else, especially when you have a pretty strong hunch you're going to be turned down flat and told where to get off, into the bargain.

But he had a stronger reason for not wanting witnesses to his interview with the old skinflint. The large handkerchief in his back pocket, folded triangularly, had a special purpose, and that little instrument in another pocket—wasn't it to be used in prying open a window?

While he lurked in the shrubbery, watching the lighted window and Burroughs' seated form inside it, he kept rehearsing the plea he'd composed, as though he were still going to use it.

"Mr. Burroughs, I know it's late, and I know you'd rather not be reminded that I exist, but desperation can't wait; and I'm desperate." That sounded good. "Mr. Burroughs, I worked for your concern faithfully for ten long years, and the last six months of its existence, to help keep it going, I voluntarily worked at half-wages, on your given word that my defaulted pay would be made up as soon as things got better. Instead of that, you went into phony bankruptcy to cancel your obligations."

Then a little soft soap to take the sting out of it. “I haven’t come near you all these years, and I haven’t come to make trouble now. If I thought you really didn’t have the money, I still wouldn’t. But it’s common knowledge by now that the bankruptcy was feigned; it’s obvious by the way you continue to live that you salvaged your own investment; and I’ve lately heard rumors of your backing a dummy corporation under another name to take up where you left off. Mr. Burroughs, the exact amount of the six months’ promissory half-wages due me is two hundred and fifty dollars.”

Just the right amount of dignity and self-respect, Pauline had commented at this point; not wishy-washy or maudlin, just quiet and effective.

And then for a bang-up finish, and every word of it true. “Mr. Burroughs, I have to have help tonight; it can’t wait another twenty-four hours. There’s a hole the size of a fifty-cent piece in the sole of each of my shoes; I have a wedge of cardboard in the bottom of each one. We haven’t had light or gas in a week now. There’s a bailiff coming tomorrow morning to put out the little that’s left of our furniture and seal the door.

“If I was alone in this, I’d still fight it through, without going to anyone. But, Mr. Burroughs, I have a wife at home to support. You may not remember her, a pretty little dark-haired girl who once worked as a stenographer in your office for a month or two. You surely wouldn’t know her now—she’s aged twenty years in the past two.”

That was about all. That was about all anyone could have said. And yet Paine knew he was licked before he even uttered a word of it.

He couldn’t see the old man’s visitor. The caller was out of range of the window. Burroughs was seated in a line with it, profile toward Paine. Paine could see his mean, thin-lipped mouth moving. Once or twice he raised his hand in a desultory gesture. Then he seemed to be listening and

finally he nodded slowly. He held his forefinger up and shook it, as if impressing some point on his auditor. After that he rose and moved deeper into the room, but without getting out of line with the window.

He stood against the far wall, hand out to a tapestry hanging there. Paine craned his neck, strained his eyes. There must be a wall safe behind there the old codger was about to open.

If he only had a pair of binoculars handy.

Paine saw the old miser pause, turn his head and make some request of the other person. A hand abruptly grasped the looped shade cord and drew the shade to the bottom.

Paine gritted his teeth. The old fossil wasn't taking any chances, was he? You'd think he was a mind-reader, knew there was someone out there. But a chink remained, showing a line of light at the bottom. Paine sidled out of his hiding place and slipped up to the window. He put his eyes to it, focused on Burroughs' dialing hand, to the exclusion of everything else.

A three-quarters turn to the left, about to where the numeral 8 would be on the face of the clock. Then back to about where 3 would be. Then back the other way, this time to 10. Simple enough. He must remember that—8-3-10.

Burroughs was opening it now and bringing out a cashbox. He set it down on the table and opened it. Paine's eyes hardened and his mouth twisted sullenly. Look at all that money! The old fossil's gnarled hand dipped into it, brought out a sheaf of bills, counted them. He put back a few, counted the remainder a second time and set them on the tabletop while he returned the cashbox, closed the safe, straightened out the tapestry.

A blurred figure moved partly into the way at this point, too close to the shade gap to come clearly into focus; but without obliterating the little stack of bills on the table. Burroughs' claw-like hand picked them up, held them out. A

second hand, smoother, reached for them. The two hands shook.

Paine prudently retreated to his former lookout point. He knew where the safe was now, that was all that mattered. He wasn't a moment too soon. The shade shot up an instant later, this time with Burroughs' hand guiding its cord. The other person had withdrawn offside again. Burroughs moved after him out of range, and the room abruptly darkened. A moment later a light flickered on in the porch ceiling.

Paine quickly shifted to the side of the house, in the moment's grace given him, in order to make sure his presence wasn't detected.

The door opened. Burroughs' voice croaked a curt "Night," to which the departing visitor made no answer. The interview had evidently not been an altogether cordial one. The door closed again, with quite a little force. A quick step crossed the porch, went along the cement walk to the street, away from where Paine stood pressed flat against the side of the house. He didn't bother trying to see who it was. It was too dark for that, and his primary purpose was to keep his own presence concealed.

When the anonymous tread had safely died away in the distance, Paine moved to where he could command the front of the house. Burroughs was alone in it now, he knew; he was too niggardly even to employ a full-time servant. A dim light showed for a moment or two through the fanlight over the door, coming from the back of the hall. Now was the time to ring the doorbell, if he expected to make his plea to the old duffer before he retired.

He knew that, and yet something seemed to be keeping him from stepping up onto the porch and ringing the doorbell. He knew what it was, too, but he wouldn't admit it to himself.

"He'll only say no point-blank and slam the door in my face" was the excuse he gave himself as he crouched back

in the shrubbery, waiting. “And then once he’s seen me out here, I’ll be the first one he’ll suspect afterwards when—”

The fanlight had gone dark now and Burroughs was on his way upstairs. A bedroom window on the floor above lighted up. There was still time; if he rang even now, Burroughs would come downstairs again and answer the door. But Paine didn’t make the move, stayed there patiently waiting.

The bedroom window blacked out at last, and the house was now dark and lifeless. Paine stayed there, still fighting with himself. Not a battle, really, because that had been lost long ago; but still giving himself excuses for what he knew he was about to do. Excuses for not going off about his business and remaining what he had been until now—an honest man.

How could he face his wife, if he came back empty-handed tonight? Tomorrow their furniture would be piled on the sidewalk. Night after night he had promised to tackle Burroughs, and each time he’d put it off, walked past the house without summoning up nerve enough to go through with it. Why? For one thing, he didn’t have the courage to stomach the sharp-tongued, sneering refusal that he was sure he’d get. But the more important thing had been the realization that once he made his plea, he automatically canceled this other, unlawful way of getting the money. Burroughs had probably forgotten his existence after all these years, but if he reminded him of it by interviewing him ahead of time—

He tightened his belt decisively. Well, he wasn’t coming home to her empty-handed tonight, but he still wasn’t going to tackle Burroughs for it either. She’d never need to find out just how he’d got it.

He straightened and looked all around him. No one in sight. The house was isolated. Most of the streets around it were only laid out and paved by courtesy; they bordered vacant lots. He moved in cautiously but determinedly

toward the window of that room where he had seen the safe.

Cowardice can result in the taking of more risks than the most reckless courage. He was afraid of little things—afraid of going home and facing his wife empty-handed, afraid of asking an ill-tempered old reprobate for money because he knew he would be reviled and driven away—and so he was about to break into a house, become a burglar for the first time in his life.

It opened so easily. It was almost an invitation to unlawful entry. He stood up on the sill, and the cover of a paper book of matches, thrust into the intersection between the two window halves, pushed the tongue of the latch out of the way.

He dropped down to the ground, applied the little instrument he had brought to the lower frame, and it slid effortlessly up. A minute later he was in the room, had closed the window so it wouldn’t look suspicious from the outside. He wondered why he’d always thought until now it took skill and patience to break into a house. There was nothing to it.

He took out the folded handkerchief and tied it around the lower part of his face. For a minute he wasn’t going to bother with it, and later he was sorry he had, in one way. And then again, it probably would have happened anyway, even without it. It wouldn’t keep him from being seen, only from being identified.

He knew enough not to light the room lights, but he had nothing so scientific as a pocket torch with him to take their place. He had to rely on ordinary matches, which meant he could only use one hand for the safe dial, after he had cleared the tapestry out of the way.

It was a toy thing, a gimcrack. He hadn’t even the exact combination, just the approximate position—8-3-10. It wouldn’t work the first time, so he varied it slightly, and then it clicked free.

He opened it, brought out the cashbox, set it on the table. It was as though the act of setting it down threw a master electric switch. The room was suddenly drenched with light and Burroughs stood in the open doorway, bathrobe around his weazened frame, left hand out to the wall switch, right hand holding a gun trained on Paine.

Paine's knees knocked together, his windpipe constricted, and he died a little—the way only an amateur caught red-handed at his first attempt can, a professional never. His thumb stung unexpectedly, and he mechanically whipped out the live match he was holding.

"Just got down in time, didn't I?" the old man said with spiteful satisfaction. "It mayn't be much of a safe, but it sets off a buzzer up by my bed every time it swings open—see?"

He should have moved straight across to the phone, right there in the room with Paine, and called for help, but he had a vindictive streak in him; he couldn't resist standing and rubbing it in.

"Ye know what ye're going to get for this, don't ye?" he went on, licking his indrawn lips. "And I'll see that ye get it too, every last month of it that's coming to ye." He took a step forward. "Now get away from that. Get all the way back over there and don't ye make a move until I—"

A sudden dawning suspicion entered his glittering little eyes. "Wait a minute. Haven't I seen you somewhere before? There's something familiar about you." He moved closer. "Take off that mask," he ordered. "Let me see who the devil you are!"

Paine became panic-stricken at the thought of revealing his face. He didn't stop to think that as long as Burroughs had him at gunpoint anyway, and he couldn't get away, the old man was bound to find out who he was sooner or later.

He shook his head in unreasoning terror.

"No!" he panted hoarsely, billowing out the handkerchief over his mouth. He even tried to back away, but there was a chair or something in the way, and he couldn't.

That brought the old man in closer. “Then by golly I’ll take it off for ye!” he snapped. He reached out for the lower triangular point of it. His right hand slanted out of line with Paine’s body as he did so, was no longer exactly covering it with the gun. But the variation was nothing to take a chance on.

Cowardice. Cowardice that spurs you to a rashness the stoutest courage would quail from. Paine didn’t stop to think of the gun. He suddenly hooked onto both the old man’s arms, spread-eagled them. It was such a harebrained chance to take that Burroughs wasn’t expecting it, and accordingly it worked. The gun clicked futilely, pointed up toward the ceiling; it must have jammed, or else the first chamber was empty and Burroughs hadn’t known it.

Paine kept warding that arm off at a wide angle. But his chief concern was the empty hand clawing toward the handkerchief. That he swiveled far downward the other way, out of reach. He twisted the scrawny skin around the old man’s skinny right wrist until pain made the hand flop over open and drop the gun. It fell between them to the floor, and Paine scuffed it a foot or two out of reach with the side of his foot.

Then he locked that same foot behind one of Burroughs’ and pushed him over it. The old man went sprawling backwards on the floor, and the short, unequal struggle was over. Yet even as he went, he was victorious. His down-flung left arm, as Paine released it to send him over, swept up in an arc, clawed, and took the handkerchief with it.

He sprawled there now, cradled on the point of one elbow, breathing malign recognition that was like a knife through Paine’s heart. “You’re Dick Paine, you dirty crook! I know ye now! You’re Dick Paine, my old employee! You’re going to pay for this—”

That was all he had time to say. That was his own death warrant. Paine was acting under such neuromuscular compulsion, brought on by the instinct of self-preservation,

that he wasn’t even conscious of stooping to retrieve the fallen gun. The next thing he knew it was in his hand, pointed toward the accusing mouth, which was all he was afraid of.

He jerked the trigger. For the second time it clicked—either jammed or unloaded at that chamber. He was to have that on his conscience afterwards, that click—like a last chance given him to keep from doing what he was about to do. That made it something different, that took away the shadowy little excuse he would have had until now; that changed it from an impulsive act committed in the heat of combat to a deed of cold-blooded, deliberate murder, with plenty of time to think twice before it was committed. And conscience makes cowards of us all. And he was a coward to begin with.

Burroughs even had time to sputter the opening syllables of a desperate plea for mercy, a promise of immunity. True, he probably wouldn’t have kept it.

“Don’t! Paine—Dick, don’t! I won’t say anything. I won’t tell ’em you were here—”

But Burroughs knew who he was. Paine tugged at the trigger, and the third chamber held death in it. This time the gun crashed, and Burroughs’ whole face was veiled in a huff of smoke. By the time it had thinned he was already dead, head on the floor, a tenuous thread of red streaking from the corner of his mouth, as though he had no more than split his lip.

Paine was the amateur even to the bitter end. In the death hush that followed, his first half-audible remark was: “Mr. Burroughs, I didn’t mean to—”

Then he just stared in white-faced consternation. “Now I’ve done it! I’ve killed a man—and they kill you for that! Now I’m in for it!”

He looked at the gun, appalled, as though it alone, and not he, was to blame for what had happened. He picked up the handkerchief, dazedly rubbed at the weapon, then

desisted again. It seemed to him safer to take it with him, even though it was Burroughs' own. He had an amateur's mystic dread of fingerprints. He was sure he wouldn't be able to clean it thoroughly enough to remove all traces of his own handling; even in the very act of trying to clean it, he might leave others. He sheathed it in the inner pocket of his coat.

He looked this way and that. He'd better get out of here; he'd better get out of here. Already the drums of flight were beginning to beat in him, and he knew they'd never be silent again.

The cashbox was still standing there on the table where he'd left it, and he went to it, flung the lid up. He didn't want this money any more; it had curdled for him; it had become bloody money. But he had to have some, at least, to make it easier to keep from getting caught. He didn't stop to count how much there was in it; there must have been at least a thousand, by the looks of it. Maybe even fifteen or eighteen hundred.

He wouldn't take a cent more than was coming to him.

He'd only take the two hundred and fifty he'd come here to get. To his frightened mind that seemed to make his crime less heinous, if he contented himself with taking just what was rightfully his. That seemed to keep it from being outright murder and robbery, enabled him to maintain the fiction that it had been just a collection of a debt accompanied by a frightful and unforeseen accident. And one's conscience, after all, is the most dreaded policeman of the lot.

And furthermore, he realized as he hastily counted it out, thrust the sum into his back trouser pocket, buttoned the pocket down, he couldn't tell his wife that he'd been here—or she'd know what he'd done. He'd have to make her think that he'd got the money somewhere else. That shouldn't be hard. He'd put off coming here to see Burroughs night after night; he'd shown her plainly that he hadn't relished the

idea of approaching his former boss. She'd been the one who had kept egging him on.

Only tonight she'd said, "I don't think you'll ever carry it out. I've about given up hope."

So what more natural than to let her think that in the end he hadn't? He'd think up some other explanation to account for the presence of the money; he'd have to. If not right tonight, then tomorrow. It would come to him after the shock of this had worn off a little and he could think more calmly.

Had he left anything around that would betray him, that they could trace to him? He'd better put the cashbox back; there was just a chance that they wouldn't know exactly how much the old skinflint had had on hand. They often didn't, with his type. He wiped it off carefully with the handkerchief he'd had around his face, twisted the dial closed on it, dabbed at that. He didn't go near the window again; he put out the light and made his way out by the front door of the house.

He opened it with the handkerchief and closed it after him again, and after an exhaustive survey of the desolate street, came down off the porch, moved quickly along the front walk, turned left along the gray tape of sidewalk that threaded the gloom, toward the distant trolley line that he wasn't going to board at this particular stop, at this particular hour.

He looked up once or twice at the star-flecked sky as he trudged along. It was over. That was all there was to it. Just a jealously guarded secret now. A memory that he daren't share with anyone else, not even Pauline. But deep within him he knew better. It wasn't over, it was just beginning. That had been just the curtain raiser, back there. Murder, like a snowball rolling down a slope, gathers momentum as it goes.

He had to have a drink. He had to try to drown the damn thing out of him. He couldn't go home dry with it on his

mind. They stayed open until four, didn't they, places like that? He wasn't much of a drinker; he wasn't familiar with details like that. Yes, there was one over there, on the other side of the street. And this was far enough away, more than two-thirds of the way from Burroughs' to his own place.

It was empty. That might be better; then again it might not. He could be too easily remembered. Well, too late now, he was already at the bar. "A straight whiskey." The barman didn't even have time to turn away before he spoke again. "Another one."

He shouldn't have done that; that looked suspicious, to gulp it that quick.

"Turn that radio off," he said hurriedly. He shouldn't have said that; that sounded suspicious. The barman had looked at him when he did. And the silence was worse, if anything. Unbearable. Those throbbing drums of danger. "Never mind, turn it on again."

"Make up your mind, mister," the barman said in mild reproof.

He seemed to be doing all the wrong things. He shouldn't have come in here at all, to begin with. Well, he'd get out, before he put his foot in it any worse. "How much?" He took out the half-dollar and the quarter that was all he had.

"Eighty cents."

His stomach dropped an inch. Not *that* money! He didn't want to have to bring that out, it would show too plainly on his face. "Most places, they charge thirty-five a drink."

"Not this brand. You didn't specify." But the barman was on guard now, scenting a deadbeat. He was leaning over the counter, right square in front of him, in a position to take in every move he made with his hands.

He shouldn't have ordered that second drink. Just for a nickel he was going to have to take that whole wad out right under this man's eyes. And maybe he would remember that tomorrow, after the jumpy way Paine had acted in here!

“Where’s the washroom?”

“That door right back there behind the cigarette machine.” But the barman was now plainly suspicious; Paine could tell that by the way he kept looking at him.

Paine closed it after him, sealed it with his shoulder-blades, unbuttoned his back pocket, riffled through the money, looking for the smallest possible denomination. A ten was the smallest, and there was only one of them; that would have to do. He cursed himself for getting into such a spot.

The door suddenly gave a heave behind him. Not a violent one, but he wasn’t expecting it. It threw him forward off balance. The imperfectly grasped outspread fan of money in his hand went scattering all over the floor. The barman’s head showed through the aperture. He started to say: “I don’t like the way you’re acting. Come on now, get out of my pla—” Then he saw the money.

Burroughs’ gun had been an awkward bulk for his inside coat pocket all along. The grip was too big; it overspanned the lining. His abrupt lurch forward had shifted it. It felt as if it was about to fall out of its own weight. He clutched at it to keep it in.

The barman saw the gesture, closed in on him with a grunted “I thought so!” that might have meant nothing or everything.

He was no Burroughs to handle; he was an ox of a man. He pinned Paine back against the wall and held him there more or less helpless. Even so, if he’d only shut up, it probably wouldn’t have happened. But he made a tunnel of his mouth and bayed: “*Pol-eece!* Holdup! Help!”

Paine lost the little presence of mind he had left, became a blurred pinwheel of hand motion, impossible to control or forestall. Something exploded against the barman’s midriff, as though he’d had a firecracker tucked in under his belt.

He coughed his way down to the floor and out of the world.

Another one. Two now. Two in less than an hour. Paine didn't think the words; they seemed to glow out at him, emblazoned on the grimy washroom walls in characters of fire, like in that biblical story.

He took a step across the prone, white-aproned form as stiffly as though he were high up on stilts. He looked out through the door crack. No one in the bar. And it probably hadn't been heard outside in the street; it had had two doors to go through.

He put the damned thing away, the thing that seemed to be spreading death around just by being in his possession. If he hadn't brought it with him from Burroughs' house, this man would have been alive now. But if he hadn't brought it with him, he would have been apprehended for the first murder by now. Why blame the weapon, why not just blame fate?

That money, all over the floor. He squatted, went for it bill by bill, counting it as he went. Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty. Some of them were on one side of the corpse, some on the other; he had to cross over, not once but several times, in the course of his grisly paper chase. One was even pinned partly under him, and when he'd wangled it out, there was a swirl of blood on the edge. He grimaced, thrust it out, blotted it off. Some of it stayed on, of course.

He had it all now, or thought he did. He couldn't stay in here another minute; he felt as if he were choking. He got it all into his pocket any old way, buttoned it down. Then he eased out, this time looking behind him at what he'd done, not before him. That was how he missed seeing the drunk, until it was too late and the drunk had already seen him.

The drunk was pretty drunk, but maybe not drunk enough to take a chance on. He must have weaved in quietly, while Paine was absorbed in retrieving the money. He was bending over reading the list of selections on the coin phonograph. He raised his head before Paine could get

back in again, and to keep him from seeing what lay on the floor in there Paine quickly closed the door behind him.

"Say, itsh about time," the drunk complained. "How about a little servish here?"

Paine tried to shadow his face as much as he could with the brim of his hat. "I'm not in charge here," he mumbled, "I'm just a customer myself—"

The drunk was going to be sticky. He barnacled onto Paine's lapels as he tried to sidle by. "Don't gimme that. You just hung up your coat in there; you think you're quitting for the night. Well, you ain't quitting until I've had my drink —"

Paine tried to shake him off without being too violent about it and bringing on another hand-to-hand set-to. He hung on like grim death. Or rather, he hung on to grim death—without knowing it.

Paine fought down the flux of panic, the ultimate result of which he'd already seen twice now. Any minute someone might come in from the street. Someone sober. "All right," he breathed heavily, "hurry up, what'll it be?"

"Thass more like it; now you're being reg'lar guy." The drunk released him and he went around behind the bar. "Never anything but good ole Four Roses for mine truly—"

Paine snatched down a bottle at random from the shelf, handed it over bodily. "Here, help yourself. You'll have to take it outside with you, I'm—we're closing up for the night now." He found a switch, threw it. It only made part of the lights go out. There was no time to bother with the rest. He hustled the bottle-nursing drunk out ahead of him, pulled the door to after the two of them, so that it would appear to be locked even if it wasn't.

The drunk started to make a loud plaint, looping around on the sidewalk. "You're a fine guy, not even a glass to drink it out of!"

Paine gave him a slight push in one direction, wheeled and made off in the other.

The thing was, how drunk was he? Would he remember Paine; would he know him if he saw him again? He hurried on, spurred to a run by the night-filling hails and imprecations resounding behind him. He couldn't do it again. Three lives in an hour. He couldn't!

The night was fading when he turned into the little courtyard that was his own. He staggered up the stairs, but not from the two drinks he'd had, from the two deaths.

He stood outside his own door at last—3-B. It seemed such a funny thing to do after killing people—fumble around in your pockets for your latchkey and fit it in, just like other nights. He'd been an honest man when he'd left here, and now he'd come back a murderer. A double one.

He hoped she was asleep. He couldn't face her right now, couldn't talk to her even if he tried. He was all in emotionally. She'd find out right away just by looking at his face, by looking in his eyes.

He eased the front door closed, tiptoed to the bedroom, looked in. She was lying there asleep. Poor thing, poor helpless thing, married to a murderer.

He went back, undressed in the outer room. Then he stayed in there. Not even stretched out on top of the sofa, but crouched beside it on the floor, head and arms pillowed against its seat. The drums of terror kept pounding. They kept saying, "What am I gonna do now?"

The sun seemed to shoot up in the sky, it got to the top so fast. He opened his eyes and it was all the way up. He went to the door and brought in the paper. It wasn't in the morning papers yet; they were made up too soon after midnight.

He turned around and Pauline had come out, was picking up his things. “All over the floor, never saw a man like you —”

He said, “Don’t—” and stabbed his hand toward her, but it was already too late. He’d jammed the bills in so haphazardly the second time, in the bar, that they made a noticeable bulge there in his back pocket. She opened it and took them out, and some of them dribbled onto the floor.

She just stared. “Dick!” She was incredulous, overjoyed. “Not Burroughs? Don’t tell me you finally—”

“No!” The name went through him like a red-hot skewer. “I didn’t go anywhere near him. He had nothing to do with it!”

She nodded corroboratively. “I thought not, because—”

He wouldn’t let her finish. He stepped close to her, took her by both shoulders. “Don’t mention his name to me again. I don’t want to hear his name again. I got it from someone else.”

“Who?”

He knew he’d have to answer her, or she’d suspect something. He swallowed, groped blindly for a name. “Charlie Chalmers,” he blurted out.

“But he refused you only last week!”

“Well, he changed his mind.” He turned on her tormentedly. “Don’t ask me any more questions, Pauline; I can’t stand it! I haven’t slept all night. There it is; that’s all that matters.” He took his trousers from her, went into the bathroom to dress. He’d hidden Burroughs’ gun the night before in the built-in laundry hamper in there; he wished he’d hidden the money with it. He put the gun back in the pocket where he’d carried it last night. If she touched him there—

He combed his hair. The drums were a little quieter now, but he knew they’d come back again; this was just the lull before the storm.

He came out again, and she was putting cups on the table. She looked worried now. She sensed that something was wrong. She was afraid to ask him, he could see, maybe afraid of what she'd find out. He couldn't sit here eating, just as though this was any other day. Any minute someone might come here after him.

He passed by the window. Suddenly he stiffened, gripped the curtain. "What's that man doing down there?" She came up behind him. "Standing there talking to the janitor —"

"Why, Dick, what harm is there in that? A dozen people a day stop and chat with—"

He edged back a step behind the frame. "He's looking up at our windows! Did you see that? They both turned and looked up this way! Get back!" His arm swept her around behind him.

"Why should we? We haven't done anything."

"They're coming in the entrance to this wing! They're on their way up here—"

"Dick, why are you acting this way, what's happened?"

"Go in the bedroom and wait there." He was a coward, yes. But there are varieties. At least he wasn't a coward that hid behind a woman's skirts. He prodded her in there ahead of him. Then he gripped her shoulder a minute. "Don't ask any questions. If you love me, stay in here until they go away again."

He closed the door on her frightened face. He cracked the gun. Two left in it. "I can get them both," he thought, "if I'm careful. I've got to."

It was going to happen again.

The jangle of the doorbell battery steeled him. He moved with deadly slowness toward the door, feet flat and firm upon the floor. He picked up the newspaper from the table on his way by, rolled it into a funnel, thrust his hand and the gun down into it. The pressure of his arm against his side was sufficient to keep it furled. It was as though he had just

been reading and had carelessly tucked the paper under his arm. It hid the gun effectively as long as he kept it slanting down.

He freed the latch and shifted slowly back with the door, bisected by its edge, the unarmed half of him all that showed. The janitor came into view first, as the gap widened. He was on the outside. The man next to him had a derby hat riding the back of his head, a bristly mustache, was rotating a cigar between his teeth. He looked like—one of those who come after you.

The janitor said with scarcely veiled insolence, “Paine, I’ve got a man here looking for a flat. I’m going to show him yours, seeing as how it’ll be available from today on. Any objections?”

Paine swayed there limply against the door like a garment bag hanging on a hook, as they brushed by. “No,” he whispered deflatedly. “No, go right ahead.”

He held the door open to make sure their descent continued all the way down to the bottom. As soon as he’d closed it, Pauline caught him anxiously by the arm. “Why wouldn’t you let me tell them we’re able to pay the arrears now and are staying? Why did you squeeze my arm like that?”

“Because we’re not staying, and I don’t want them to know we’ve got the money. I don’t want anyone to know. We’re getting out of here.”

“Dick, what is it? Have you done something you shouldn’t?”

“Don’t ask me. Listen, if you love me, don’t ask any questions. I’m—in a little trouble. I’ve got to get out of here. Never mind why. If you don’t want to come with me, I’ll go alone.”

“Anywhere you go, I’ll go.” Her eyes misted. “But can’t it be straightened out?”

Two men dead beyond recall. He gave a bitter smile. “No, it can’t.”

“Is it bad?”

He shut his eyes, took a minute to answer. “It’s bad, Pauline. That’s all you need to know. That’s all I want you to know. I’ve got to get out of here as fast as I can. From one minute to the next it may be too late. Let’s get started now. They’ll be here to dispossess us sometime today anyway; that’ll be a good excuse. We won’t wait, we’ll leave now.”

She went in to get ready. She took so long doing it he nearly went crazy. She didn’t seem to realize how urgent it was. She wasted as much time deciding what to take and what to leave behind as though they were going on a weekend jaunt to the country. He kept going to the bedroom door, urging, “Pauline, hurry! Faster, Pauline!”

She cried a great deal. She was an obedient wife; she didn’t ask him any more questions about what the trouble was. She just cried about it without knowing what it was.

He was down on hands and knees beside the window, in the position of a man looking for a collar button under a dresser, when she finally came out with the small bag she’d packed. He turned a stricken face to her. “Too late—I can’t leave with you. Someone’s already watching the place.”

She inclined herself to his level, edged up beside him.

“Look straight over to the other side of the street. See him? He hasn’t moved for the past ten minutes. People don’t just stand like that for no reason—”

“He may be waiting for someone.”

“He is,” he murmured somberly. “Me.”

“But you can’t be sure.”

“No, but if I put it to the test by showing myself, it’ll be too late by the time I find out. You go by yourself, ahead of me.”

“No, if you stay, let me stay with you—”

“I’m not staying; I can’t! I’ll follow you and meet you somewhere. But it’ll be easier for us to leave one at a time than both together. I can slip over the roof or go out the basement way. He won’t stop you; they’re not looking for you. You go now and wait for me. No, I have a better idea. Here’s what you do. You get two tickets and get on the train at the downtown terminal without waiting for me—” He was separating some of the money, thrusting it into her reluctant hand while he spoke. “Now listen closely. Two tickets to Montreal—”

An added flicker of dismay showed in her eyes. “We’re leaving the country?”

When you’ve committed murder, you have no country any more. “We have to, Pauline. Now, there’s an eight o’clock limited for there every night. It leaves the downtown terminal at eight sharp. It stops for five minutes at the station uptown at twenty after. That’s where I’ll get on. Make sure you’re on it or we’ll miss each other. Keep a seat for me next to you in the day coach—”

She clung to him despairingly. “No, no. I’m afraid you won’t come. Something’ll happen. You’ll miss it. If I leave you now I may never see you again. I’ll find myself making the trip up there alone, without you—”

He tried to reassure her, pressing her hands between his. “Pauline, I give you my word of honor—” That was no good, he was a murderer now. “Pauline, I swear to you—”

“Here—on this. Take a solemn oath on this, otherwise I won’t go.” She took out a small carnelian cross she carried in her handbag, attached to a little gold chain—one of the few things they hadn’t pawned. She palmed it, pressed the flat of his right hand over it. They looked into each other’s eyes with sacramental intensity.

His voice trembled. “I swear nothing will keep me from that train; I’ll join you on it no matter what happens, no matter who tries to stop me. Rain or shine, *dead or alive,* I’ll meet you aboard it at eight-twenty tonight!”

She put it away, their lips brushed briefly but fervently.

"Hurry up now," he urged. "He's still there. Don't look at him on your way past. If he should stop you and ask who you are, give another name—"

He went to the outside door with her, watched her start down the stairs. The last thing she whispered up was: "Dick, be careful for my sake. Don't let anything happen to you between now and tonight."

He went back to the window, crouched down, cheekbones to sill. She came out under him in a minute or two. She knew enough not to look up at their windows, although the impulse must have been strong. The man was still standing over there. He didn't seem to notice her. He even looked off in another direction.

She passed from view behind the building line; their windows were set in on the court that indented it. Paine wondered if he'd ever see her again. Sure he would; he had to. He realized that it would be better for her if he didn't. It wasn't fair to enmesh her in his own doom. But he'd sworn an oath, and he meant to keep it.

Two, three minutes ticked by. The cat-and-mouse play continued. He crouched motionless by the window; the other man stood motionless across the street. She must be all the way down at the corner by now. She'd take the bus there, to go downtown. She might have to wait a few minutes for one to come along; she might still be in sight. But if the man was going to go after her, accost her, he would have started by now. He wouldn't keep standing there.

Then, as Paine watched, he did start. He looked down that way, threw away something he'd been smoking, began to move purposefully in that direction. There was no mistaking the fact that he was looking *at* or *after* someone, by the intent way he held his head. He passed from sight.

Paine began to breathe hot and fast. "I'll kill him. If he touches her, tries to stop her, I'll kill him right out in the

open street in broad daylight.” It was still fear, cowardice, that was at work, although it was almost unrecognizable as such by now.

He felt for the gun, left his hand on it, inside the breast of his coat, straightened to his feet, ran out of the flat and down the stairs. He cut across the little set-in paved courtyard at a sprint, flashed out past the sheltering building line, turned down in the direction they had both taken.

Then as the panorama before him registered, he staggered to an abrupt stop, stood taking it in. It offered three component but separate points of interest. He only noticed two at first. One was the bus down at the corner. The front-third of it protruded, door open. He caught a glimpse of Pauline’s back as she was in the act of stepping in, unaccompanied and unmolested.

The door closed automatically, and it swept across the vista and disappeared at the other side. On the other side of the street, but nearer at hand, the man who had been keeping the long vigil had stopped a second time, was gesticulating angrily to a woman laden with parcels whom he had joined. Both voices were so raised they reached Paine without any trouble.

“A solid half-hour I’ve been standing there and no one home to let me in!”

“Well, is it my fault you went off without your key? Next time take it with you!”

Nearer at hand still, on Paine’s own side of the street, a lounging figure detached itself from the building wall and impinged on his line of vision. The man had been only yards away the whole time, but Paine’s eyes had been trained on the distance; he’d failed to notice him until now.

His face suddenly loomed out at Paine. His eyes bored into Paine’s with unmistakable intent. He didn’t look like one of those that come to get you. He acted like it. He thumbed his vest pocket for something, some credential or

identification. He said in a soft, slurring voice that held an inflexible command in it, “Just a minute there, buddy. Your name’s Paine, ain’t it? I want to see you—”

Paine didn’t have to give his muscular coordination any signal; it acted for him automatically. He felt his legs carry him back into the shelter of the courtyard in a sort of slithering jump. He was in at the foot of the public stairs before the other man had even rounded the building line. He was in behind his own door before the remorselessly slow but plainly audible tread had started up them.

The man seemed to be coming up after him alone. Didn’t he know Paine had a gun? He’d find out. He was up on the landing now. He seemed to know which floor to stop at, which door to come to a halt before. Probably the janitor had told him. Then why hadn’t he come sooner? Maybe he’d been waiting for someone to join him, and Paine had upset the plan by showing himself so soon.

Paine realized he’d trapped himself by returning here. He should have gone on up to the roof and over. But the natural instinct of the hunted, whether four-legged or two, is to find a hole, get in out of the open. It was too late now: he was right out there on the other side of the door. Paine tried to keep his harried breathing silent.

To his own ears it grated like sand sifted through a sieve.

He didn’t ring the bell and he didn’t knock; he tried the knob, in a half-furtive, half-badgering way. That swirl of panic began to churn in Paine again. He couldn’t let him get in; he couldn’t let him get away, either. He’d only go and bring others back with him.

Paine pointed the muzzle of the gun to the crack of the door, midway between the two hinges. With his other hand he reached out for the catch that controlled the latch, released it.

Now, if he wanted to die, he should open this door. The man had kept on trying the knob. Now the door slipped in past the frame. The crack at the other side widened in

accompaniment as it swung around. Paine ran the gun bore up it even with the side of his head.

The crash was thunderous. He fell into the flat, with only his feet and ankles outside.

Paine came out from behind the door, dragged him the rest of the way in, closed it. He stopped, his hands probed here and there. He found a gun, a heftier, more businesslike one than his. He took that. He found a billfold heavy with cash. He took that, too. He fished for the badge.

There wasn't any in the vest pocket he'd seen him reach toward downstairs. There was only a block of cheaply printed cards. *Star Finance Company. Loans. Up to any amount without security.*

So he hadn't been one, after all; he'd evidently been some kind of a loan shark, drawn by the scent of Paine's difficulties.

Three times now in less than twenty-four hours.

Instinctively he knew he was doomed now, if he hadn't before. There wasn't any more of the consternation he had felt the first two times. He kept buying off time with bullets; that was all it was now. And the rate of interest kept going higher; the time limit kept shortening. There wasn't even any time to feel sorry.

Doors had begun opening outside in the hall; voices were calling back and forth. "What was that—a shot?"

"It sounded like in 3-B."

He'd have to get out now, right away, or he'd be trapped in here again. And this time for good. He shifted the body out of the line of vision from outside, buttoned up his jacket, took a deep breath; then he opened the door, stepped out, closed it after him. Each of the other doors was open with someone peering out from it. They hadn't ganged up yet in the middle of the hall. Most of them were women, anyway. One or two edged timidly back when they saw him emerge.

"It wasn't anything," he said. "I dropped a big clay jug in there just now."

He knew they didn’t believe him.

He started down the stairs. At the third step he looked over the side, saw the cop coming up. Somebody had already phoned or sent out word. He reversed, flashed around his own landing, and on up from there.

The cop’s voice said, “Stop where you are!” He was coming on fast now. But Paine was going just as fast.

The cop’s voice said, “Get inside, all of you! I’m going to shoot!”

Doors began slapping shut like firecrackers. Paine switched over abruptly to the rail and shot first.

The cop jolted, but he grabbed the rail and stayed up. He didn’t die as easy as the others. He fired four times before he lost his gun. He missed three times and hit Paine the fourth time.

It went in his chest on the right side, and knocked him across the width of the staircase. It flamed with pain, and then it didn’t hurt so much. He found he could get up again. Maybe because he had to. He went back and looked down. The cop had folded over the railing and gone sliding down it as far as the next turn, the way a kid does on a banister. Only sidewise, on his stomach. Then he dropped off onto the landing, rolled over and lay still, looking up at Paine without seeing him.

Four.

Paine went on up to the roof, but not fast, not easily any more. The steps were like an escalator going the other way, trying to carry him down with them. He went across to the roof of the next flat, and down through that, and came out on the street behind his own. The two buildings were twins, set back to back. The prowl car was already screeching to a stop, out of sight back there at his own doorway. He could hear it over the roofs, on this side.

He was wet across the hip. Then he was wet as far down as the knee. And he hadn't been hit in those places, so he must be bleeding a lot. He saw a taxi and he waved to it, and it backed up and got him. It hurt getting in. He couldn't answer for a minute when the driver asked him where to. His sock felt sticky under his shoe now, from the blood. He wished he could stop it until eight-twenty. He had to meet Pauline on the train, and that was a long time to stay alive.

The driver had taken him off the street and around the corner without waiting for him to be more explicit. He asked where to, a second time.

Paine said, "What time is it?"

"Quarter to six, cap."

Life was awfully short—and awfully sweet. He said, "Take me to the park and drive me around in it." That was the safest thing to do, that was the only place they wouldn't look for you.

He thought, "I've always wanted to drive around in the park. Not go anywhere, just drive around in it slow. I never had the money to do it before."

He had it now. More money than he had time left to spend it.

The bullet must still be in him. His back didn't hurt, so it hadn't come out. Something must have stopped it. The bleeding had let up. He could feel it drying on him. The pain kept trying to pull him over double though.

The driver noticed it, said: "Are you hurt?"

"No, I've got kind of a cramp, that's all."

"Want me to take you to a drug store?"

Paine smiled weakly. "No, I guess I'll let it ride."

Sundown in the park. So peaceful, so prosaic. Long shadows across the winding paths. A belated nursemaid or two pushing a perambulator homeward. A loiterer or two lingering on the benches in the dusk. A little lake, with a rowboat on it—a sailor on shore leave rowing his

sweetheart around. A lemonade and popcorn man trundling his wagon home for the day.

Stars were coming out. At times the trees were outlined black against the copper western sky. At times the whole thing blurred and he felt as if he were being carried around in a maelstrom. Each time he fought through and cleared his senses again. He had to make that train.

“Let me know when it gets to be eight o’clock.”

“Sure, cap. It’s only quarter to seven now.”

A groan was torn from Paine as they hit a lumpy spot in the driveway. He tried to keep it low, but the driver must have heard it.

“Still hurts you, huh?” he inquired sympathetically. “You oughta get it fixed up.” He began to talk about his own indigestion. “Take me, for instance. I’m okay until I eat tamales and root beer. Any time that I eat tamales and root beer—”

He shut up abruptly. He was staring fixedly into the rear-sight mirror. Paine warily clutched his lapels together over his darkened shirt front. He knew it was too late to do any good.

The driver didn’t say anything for a long time. He was thinking it over, and he was a slow thinker. Then finally he suggested offhandedly, “Care to listen to the radio?”

Paine knew what he was out for. He thought, “He wants to see if he can get anything on me over it.”

“May as well,” the driver urged. “It’s thrown in with the fare; won’t cost you nothing extra.”

“Go ahead,” Paine consented. He wanted to see if he could hear anything himself.

It made the pain a little easier to bear, like music always does. “I used to dance, too,” Paine thought, listening to the tune, “before I started killing people.”

It didn’t come over for a long time.

“A city-wide alarm is out for Richard Paine. Paine, who was about to be dispossessed from his flat, shot and killed a finance company employee. Then when Officer Harold Carey answered the alarm, he met the same fate. However, before giving up his life in the performance of his duty, the patrolman succeeded in seriously wounding the desperado. A trail of blood left by the fugitive on the stairs leading up to the roof over which he made good his escape seems to confirm this. He’s still at large but probably won’t be for long. Watch out for this man—he’s dangerous.”

“Not if you leave him alone, let him get to that train,” Paine thought ruefully. He eyed the suddenly rigid silhouette in front of him. “I’ll have to do something about him—now—I guess.”

It had come through at a bad time for the driver. Some of the main driveways through the park were heavily trafficked and pretty well lighted. He could have got help from another car. But it happened to come through while they were on a dark, lonely byway with not another machine in sight. Around the next turn the bypass rejoined one of the heavy-traffic arteries. You could hear the hum of traffic from where they were.

“Pull over here,” Paine ordered. He’d had the gun out. He was only going to clip him with it, stun him and tie him up until after eight-twenty.

You could tell by the way the driver pulled his breath in short that he’d been wise to Paine ever since the news flash, had only been waiting until they got near one of the exits or got a red light. He braked. Then suddenly he bolted out, tried to duck into the underbrush.

Paine had to get him and get him fast, or he’d get word to the park division. They’d cork up the entrances on him. He knew he couldn’t get out and go after him. He pointed low, tried to hit him in the foot or leg, just bring him down.

The driver had tripped over something, gone flat, a moment ahead of the trigger fall. The bullet must have ploughed into his back instead. He was inert when Paine got out to him, but still alive. Eyes open, as though his nerve centers had been paralyzed.

He could hardly stand up himself, but he managed to drag him over to the cab and somehow got him in. He took the cap and put it on his own head.

He could drive—or at least he'd been able to before he was dying. He got under the wheel and took the machine slowly on its way. The sound of the shot must have been lost out in the open, or else mistaken for a backfire; the stream of traffic was rolling obliviously by when he slipped into it unnoticed. He left it again at the earliest opportunity, turned off at the next dark, empty lane that offered itself.

He stopped once more, made his way to the back door, to see how the cabman was. He wanted to help him in some way if he could. Maybe leave him in front of a hospital.

It was too late. The driver's eyes were closed. He was already dead by this time.

Five.

It didn't have any meaning any more. After all, to the dying death is nothing. "I'll see you again in an hour or so," he said.

He got the driver's coat off him and shrouded him with it, to keep the pale gleam of his face from peering up through the gloom of the cab's interior, in case anyone got too close to the window. He was unequal to the task of getting him out again and leaving him behind in the park. The lights of some passing car might have picked him up too soon. And it seemed more fitting to let him rest in his own cab, anyway.

It was ten to eight now. He'd better start for the station. He might be held up by lights on the way, and the train only stopped a few minutes at the uptown station.

He had to rejoin the main stream of traffic to get out of the park. He hugged the outside of the driveway and

trundled along. He went off the road several times. Not because he couldn't drive, but because his senses fogged. He pulled himself and the cab out of it each time. "Train, eight-twenty," he waved before his mind like a red lantern. But like a spendthrift he was using up years of his life in minutes, and pretty soon he was going to run short.

Once an alarm car passed him, shrieking by, taking a short cut through the park from one side of the city to the other. He wondered if they were after him. He didn't wonder very hard. Nothing mattered much any more. Only eight-twenty—train—

He kept folding up slowly over the wheel and each time it touched his chest, the machine would swerve crazily as though it felt the pain, too. Twice, three times, his fenders were grazed, and he heard faint voices swearing at him from another world, the world he was leaving behind. He wondered if they'd call him names like that if they knew he was dying.

Another thing: he couldn't maintain a steady flow of pressure on the accelerator. The pressure would die out each time, as when current is failing, and the machine would begin drifting to a stop. This happened just as he was leaving the park, crossing the big circular exit plaza. It was controlled by lights and he stalled on a green out in the middle. There was a cop in control on a platform. The cop shot the whistle out of his own mouth blowing it so hard at him. He nearly flung himself off the platform waving him on.

Paine just sat there, helpless.

The cop was coming over to him, raging like a lion. Paine wasn't afraid because of what the back of his cab held; he was long past that kind of fear. But if this cop did anything to keep him from that eight-twenty train—

He reached down finally, gripped his own leg by the ankle, lifted it an inch or two clear of the floor, let it fall back again, and the cab started. It was ludicrous. But then some of the aspects of death often are.

The cop let him go, only because to have detained him longer would have created a worse traffic snarl than there was already.

He was nearly there now. Just a straight run crosstown, then a short one north. It was good he remembered this, because he couldn't see the street signs any more. Sometimes the buildings seemed to lean over above him as though they were about to topple down on him. Sometimes he seemed to be climbing a steep hill, where he knew there wasn't any. But he knew that was just because he was swaying around in the driver's seat.

The same thing happened again a few blocks farther on, directly in front of a large, swank apartment house, just as the doorman came flying out blowing a whistle. He'd caught hold of Paine's rear door and swung it wide before the latter could stop him, even though the cab was still rolling. Two women in evening dress came hurrying out of the entrance behind him, one in advance of the other.

"No—taken," Paine kept trying to say. He was too weak to make his voice heard, or else they ignored it. And he couldn't push his foot down for a moment.

The foremost one shrieked, "Hurry, Mother. Donald'll never forgive me. I promised him seven-thirty—"

She got one foot on the cab doorstep. Then she just stood there transfixed. She must have seen what was inside; it was better lighted here than in the park.

Paine tore the cab away from her, open door and all, left her standing there petrified, out in the middle of the street in her long white satin gown, staring after him. She was too stunned even to scream.

And then he got there at last. He got a momentary respite, too. Things cleared a little. Like the lights going up in a theater when the show is over, before the house darkens for the night.

The uptown station was built in under a viaduct that carried the overhead tracks across the city streets. He

couldn’t stop in front of it; no parking was allowed. And there were long lines of cabs on both sides of the no-parking zone. He turned the corner into the little dead-end alley that separated the viaduct from the adjoining buildings. There was a side entrance to the station looking out on it.

Four minutes. It was due in another four minutes. It had already left downtown, was on its way, hurtling somewhere between the two points. He thought, “I better get started. I may have a hard time making it.” He wondered if he could stand up at all.

He just wanted to stay where he was and let eternity wash over him.

Two minutes. It was coming in overhead, he could hear it rumbling and ticking along the steel viaduct, then sighing to a long-drawn-out stop.

That sidewalk looked awfully wide, from the cab door to the station entrance. He brought up the last dregs of vitality in him, broke away from the cab, started out, zigzagging and going down lower at the knees every minute. The station door helped pull him up straight again. He got into the waiting room, and it was so big he knew he’d never be able to cross it. One minute left. So near and yet so far.

The starter was calling it already. “Montreal express—eight-twenty!—Pittsfield, Burlington, Rouse’s Point, Montreyall! Bo-o-ard!”

There were rows of lengthwise benches at hand and they helped him bridge the otherwise insuperable length of the waiting room. He dropped into the outside seat in the first row, pulled himself together a little, scrambled five seats over, toppled into that; repeated the process until he was within reach of the ticket barrier. But time was going, the train was going, life was going fast.

Forty-five seconds left. The last dilatory passengers had already gone up. There were two ways of getting up, a long flight of stairs and an escalator.

He wavered toward the escalator, made it. He wouldn't have been able to get by the ticket-taker but for his hackman's cap—an eventuality he and Pauline hadn't foreseen.

"Just meeting a party," he mumbled almost unintelligibly, and the slow treadmill started to carry him up.

A whistle blew upstairs on the track platform. Axles and wheel-bases gave a preliminary creak of motion.

It was all he could do to keep his feet even on the escalator. There wasn't anyone in back of him, and if he once went over he was going to go plunging all the way down to the bottom of the long chute. He dug his nails into the ascending hand-belts at both sides, hung on like grim life.

There was a hubbub starting up outside on the street somewhere. He could hear a cop's whistle blowing frenziedly.

A voice shouted: "Which way'd he go?"

Another answered: "I seen him go in the station."

They'd at last found what was in the cab.

A moment after the descending waiting-room ceiling had cut off his view, he heard a spate of running feet come surging in down there from all directions. But he had no time to think of that now. He was out on the open platform upstairs at last. Cars were skimming silkily by. A vestibule door was coming, with a conductor just lifting himself into it. Paine went toward it, body low, one arm straight out like in a fascist salute.

He gave a wordless cry. The conductor turned, saw him. There was a tug, and he was suddenly sprawled inside on the vestibule floor. The conductor gave him a scathing look, pulled the folding steps in after him, slammed the door.

Too late, a cop, a couple of redcaps, a couple of taxi drivers, came spilling out of the escalator shed. He could hear them yelling a car-length back. The trainmen back

there wouldn’t open the doors. Suddenly the long, lighted platform snuffed out and the station was gone.

They probably didn’t think they’d lost him, but they had. Sure, they’d phone ahead, they’d stop the train to have him taken off at Harmon, where it changed from electricity to coal power. But they wouldn’t get him. He wouldn’t be on it. Just his body.

Each man knows when he’s going to die; he knew he wouldn’t even live for five minutes.

He went staggering down a long, brightly lighted aisle. He could hardly see their faces any more. But she’d know him; it’d be all right. The aisle ended, and he had to cross another vestibule. He fell down on his knees, for lack of seat backs to support himself by.

He squirmed up again somehow, got into the next car.

Another long, lighted aisle, miles of it.

He was nearly at the end; he could see another vestibule coming. Or maybe that was the door to eternity. Suddenly, from the last seat of all, a hand darted out and claimed him, and there was Pauline’s face looking anxiously up at him. He twisted like a wrung-out dishcloth and dropped into the empty outside seat beside her.

“You were going to pass right by,” she whispered.

“I couldn’t see you clearly, the lights are flickering so.”

She looked up at them in surprise, as though for her they were steady.

“I kept my word,” he breathed. “I made the train. But oh, I’m tired—and now I’m going to sleep.” He started to slip over sidewise toward her. His head dropped onto her lap.

She had been holding her handbag on it, and his fall displaced it. It dropped to the floor, opened, and everything in it spilled out around her feet.

His glazing eyes opened for one last time and centered feebly on the little packet of bills, with a rubber band around them, that had rolled out with everything else.

“Pauline, all that money—where’d you get that much? I only gave you enough to buy the train tickets—”

“Burroughs gave it to me. It’s the two hundred and fifty we were talking about for so long. I knew in the end you’d never go near him and ask for it, so I went to him myself—last night right after you left the house. He handed it over willingly, without a word. I tried to tell you that this morning, but you wouldn’t let me mention his name . . .”

COOL, CALM AND DETECTED

MRS. RYDER'S VOICE WAS A THIN factory-whistle wail from the doorway of the house. "Har-veeee!" She waved something indistinguishable in her hand, as she called out again.

Ryder, midway down the tree-lined street, turned and started back. This was not an unusual occurrence by any means. It was almost a part of his daily routine. The unusual occurrence would have been if that bleat of reminder failed to sound after him whenever he left the house in the morning.

She started part way down the street toward him, in order to save time. She handed him a billfold containing his expense money for the day, his book of transportation tickets, and various other necessary items. She shook her head hopelessly.

"Could you start out or come back from anywhere *once* without leaving something behind you? It's not a failing with you any more, Harvey, it's a disease! I didn't realize anyone *could* be that absent-minded. I thought they just made it up in jokes, about the absent-minded professor."

"I have a thousand things on my mind," he excused himself brusquely.

He lied—he had only one thing on his mind. Murder. Day and night—murder.

The man's name was Kirk Billings. He lived in the same suburb with the Ryders, but at the other end of it. They'd

known each other half their lives. They'd even been partners in business, formerly. They weren't now.

The original cause had been a bankruptcy. Billings, at the time, had claimed it was unavoidable. On their books it had seemed so. But books have been known to be doctored. Ryder had afterwards become convinced it was faked, trumped-up to squeeze him out, defraud him of his original capital investment and all the accrued profits he'd had a right to expect. Certainly, the results seemed to prove his suspicions. The bankruptcy had left him penniless, down-and-out. He'd had to sell his house, move with his wife into a miserable furnished room, start all over again.

But he noticed Billings *didn't* have to start over, didn't have to give up his home or any of the rest of it. In fact, Billings didn't have to go ahead working at all—he'd retired, then and there. An unexpected bequest from some relative, he'd claimed.

Ryder had his own ideas about that.

That started the slow red wheels grinding in his mind. A determined lawsuit would have probably taken the dynamite out of the situation. But he knew it was hopeless—Billings was too clever to leave any proof around that could be uncovered. Besides, lawyers cost money, and he couldn't afford one. After a while, he found that he preferred the idea of wreaking personal vengeance on Billings. It had grown on him. He'd nursed the thing along, watered it as tenderly as a delicate plant, hour by hour, day by day.

So for a long time past, Billings had been walking around as good as dead. Ryder hadn't said a word, given a sign. Outwardly he'd just dropped Billings in a cold, sullen hostility. He was biding his time. Everything was going to be just the way he wanted it. He was going to be good and ready before he lifted a finger.

There was not only the question of timing, of misdirected suspicion, of everything else that he felt should enter into a successfully committed murder, but Ryder had had to wait

for a feasible means to come along. He wasn't going to go out and buy some easily traced poison, or brain him with an iron poker and get all smirched up—not if he had to wait forever to do it. And finally, as sometimes happens, the means had presented itself ready-made.

In a safe hiding place known only to himself, back in his house at this very moment, there was a gun, well-hidden even from Mrs. Ryder's all-seeing eye. Now, the gun did not belong to him. He had been out walking his dog one evening when the latter turned aside, reared up on its hind paws, began to nose into an ashcan standing out before a flat, waiting to be emptied.

In pulling the dog away, Ryder glimpsed a protruding wedge of half-buried metal, glinting dully through the surface of the ash. He pulled it the rest of the way out and it was a gun, in good working order, and half wrapped in a piece of bloodied rag. It was probably this that had attracted his dog's nose.

He let the rag drop with a fastidious fling of his hand and examined the gun, blowing the film of ash off it. While he was not an expert with guns, he knew how to handle them and break them open. He saw that two shots had been fired from it; the rest of the chambers were still fully loaded.

It must have been only recently discarded, perhaps within the past hour, perhaps even less. A number of things showed that. The stains on the cloth around it hadn't even dried yet, and they had almost certainly come from its last user. The gun itself obviously hadn't come from inside the house, but had been thrust down into the ashes by someone in hasty passage. It was in perfect, well-oiled condition, all but the outer film of ash. It showed no rust or signs of exposure to the elements.

He gave it a preliminary wiping with his handkerchief—it scarcely needed more than that—put it in the deep inside pocket of his coat, and continued down the street after his dog.

Less than two blocks away he had come upon two men, one a policeman and one in civilian clothes, rummaging in a row of similar ashcans before another set of flats. It was easy to guess what they were looking for. They were working their way back toward the point he had already passed.

He even slowed down momentarily and half reached toward the coat pocket he was carrying it in, to bring it out and hand it over to them. Then he changed his mind. It could come in handy. Why throw away a heavensent opportunity like this? There might never be another like it. He continued on his way, and they didn't even look up and try to question him.

"He said he chucked it along here some place, if he's telling the truth," he heard one of them grunt discouragedly, just before he moved on out of earshot.

He went home and didn't mention it to his wife. So he was in the clear, as far as possession of it went. Next day he read a brief item in the papers about an armed hold-up man who had been pursued by the police, had exchanged shots with them and been wounded in the hand during the course of the chase, had finally been overtaken and captured. No mention was made of the unsuccessful search for the missing gun, probably because they had the bandit himself and that was the most important thing.

In any case, all that mattered to Harvey Ryder, murderer-to-be, was that when this same gun was next found, it could have no possible connection with him, couldn't be traced to his ownership or possession in any shape, form or manner.

But just because he had gotten his hands on a gun didn't mean he was going to rush right out and use it the very first thing. A crime committed in a hurry and without proper preparation was simply asking for discovery. That was where most people made their mistake—and paid dearly for it. Everything had to be taken into consideration. Every step, every move, had to be carefully thought out ahead,

mentally rehearsed, gone over again and again. The petty details were as important as the main ones, maybe even more so, for it was they, usually, that tripped up the perpetrator.

Naturally, this aberration of his, this affliction of leaving trivial personal objects behind him wherever and whenever he went, had entered into his calculations. Not to take that into account would have been foolhardy in the extreme. He admitted it was a failing of his, but he refused to agree it was as serious as his wife would have him believe.

In any case, the precaution he intended taking against it was a quite simple one. Since the trivia he habitually left behind were always loose, detached objects, the preventive was simply not to take anything like that with him to start with—to make sure that the only separate, detached thing apart from his body and the clothing on it was what he intended to leave on the scene of the crime anyway—namely, the gun.

If you have nothing on you that *can* be left behind, how are you to leave anything?

Now all this had been undergoing a process of slow gestation over a period of not only weeks but months, and he had finally arrived at the point of readiness. He wanted complete privacy—as what murderer doesn't? Plenty of elbow-room. If he was nervous immediately afterwards, thoughtful or abstracted, he didn't want anyone to see it. He didn't want to be hampered by the time of night he might have to choose, nor have his coming and going questioned because of the unusualncss of the hour. So he selected the next occasion of his wife's regular twice-yearly visit to her mother as the time for the murder to happen.

He didn't even make the tactical error of urging her to go, or asking when she was going, or showing any interest in it at all. He just bided his time and let it come by itself, unforced.

It finally did, and she told him of her own accord she was leaving in three days' time. He didn't say anything, pro or con. And when he saw her off, the last thing she said to him, plaintively, was: "Harvey, I feel so conscience-stricken about leaving you like this. I don't know what you're going to do without me."

I'm going to get a murder off my chest without you, Ryder thought grimly.

"Please, dear," she went on, "*try* not to ride past your own station when you come home evenings. And Harvey, unless it's raining, maybe you'd better not wear any hat at all until I get back. You've lost three this season, already."

Far from weakening his resolve, this well-meant cautioning from one who knew him so well only strengthened it. He was sure there would be no slip-ups of that sort, because he'd found the remedy. Just don't take any superfluous belongings with you, and you won't leave any behind. Of course, you couldn't carry out such a system very readily in going about your daily business; but you could in going about a murder.

The requisite elbow-room having been obtained by his wife's departure, the event was now at hand. Nothing remained but the last-minute details. She was going to be away three nights. He chose the middle one of the three for two very good reasons. One was, that would give him one whole night and a day to regain his composure before he next faced her, in case there were any possible after-effects. The other reason was, the middle night of the three happened to fall on the second Thursday of the month. Now, the second Thursday of every month, for years back, had been Billings's lodge night. He hadn't missed attending one since he'd first become a member. Nothing could keep him away, neither rain nor snow nor illness nor even a broken leg. He always came back with a little under his belt—Ryder remembered that well, from of old.

But that wasn’t it. It was that Billings had a peculiar habit, which had once been accidentally revealed to Ryder. When Billings went out on those monthly Thursday nights, he always hid his door-key on a string inside the mail-slot of his front door.

He had once lost his door-key during the course of an hilarious evening and had had to stay out all night—his housekeeper only came by the day. He’d never forgotten that. And then one night when they were still friendly, Ryder had remembered something he wanted to say to him right after seeing him to his door, and coming back unobserved, had been just in time to witness him dredging up the key from inside the slot.

Ryder had stored up that bit of information for future use.

The whole point was: on the second Thursday of the month, Ryder could get into the house *ahead* of Billings and take his time getting set before he returned. On the other 29 or 30 nights he would have to let Billings admit him, and muster up the courage to go through with it under Billings’s cold-sober, suspicious eyes. There was too much room for a slip-up there. There’s nothing like having the inside track when you’re committing murder.

As for an alibi, he intended doing without one altogether. They were more often dangerous than helpful.

He was home asleep in bed. He couldn’t prove that? All right, then let them try to disprove it. Not that it would come to that, because there was no reason why he should enter into their investigation at all. But it was a darned sight safer to rely on your own unsupported word than to have to drag in other people to prove you were seen at a certain place at a certain time, when you hadn’t been there at all. Why rig up a whole elaborate structure of interlocking lies that might collapse at a touch? Then where were you?

The first night of his wife’s absence passed as uneventfully as it had every other time she was away. He

ate down at the “village,” came home, read a book, and went to bed about his usual time, at 11130.

The second night was different. After his evening meal he stopped in at a movie. This was not by way of alibi, this was just to take up the slack. There was no use holing up in Billings’s empty house that far ahead of time. When the picture had got around again to the point at which he had come in, he got up and went home, as anyone normally would have.

He locked the door, went upstairs to the second floor, and pulled down the shades. He took out the long-waiting gun, inspected it closely, made sure it was ready and wouldn’t let him down. He telephoned Billings’s house and there was no answer. Billings hadn’t missed his lodge night. Ryder hadn’t thought he would. He cleaned the surface of the gun thoroughly and slipped on a little “holder” he’d made himself, of an old pair of gloves, over the butt, to keep all further prints off. He intended gloving his own hands, in addition, to keep the doorknobs and whatever other objects he might touch free from his prints.

And now came that important business about his leaving things behind. He admitted that it was important, but it was going to be all right because this was the guarantee he was taking against it right now. He stripped himself, and then re-dressed. Each separate garment, before he put it on again, got an exhaustive going-over that a customs official or health inspector would have envied.

Anything and everything loose that he came across in his pockets, he took out and piled neatly on the bed. From his shirt there was nothing to remove but a loosened button dangling at the end of its thread. He snapped that off then and there, to prevent its loss later at the scene of the crime. Buttons could be traced. From his soft collar he removed the gilt collar-clasp he habitually wore, even though it had a patented fastening. He even took the ring off his finger,

though it fitted snugly and he was going to wear gloves over it anyway.

He retained just one single detached object, and even that he didn't leave in a disconnected state. His own latchkey, which he needed to get back home again, he removed from his key-holder and fastened firmly to the underside of his vest, with a safety-pin run through the little hole in the key-head.

And then when he was all through, just to do things up brown, he deliberately went over his whole person a second time, thumbed into every pocket, every cranny, every seam of the garments he now had on, tapped himself all over, riffled through the stuff on the bed to make sure nothing was left out. A sort of double check-up.

Beyond that, human ingenuity and forethought couldn't go. It was now simply impossible for him to leave anything at the scene of the crime. The only detached article that was now on him, from head to foot, was what was in his pocket—the gun belonging to a convicted hold-up man who was at this minute in a prison far up the river.

He set out on foot, coat collar up around his face, hat-brim down, unseen, unrecognized, by a single person.

Kirk Billings's house was lightless when he came in sight of it. Billings was too stingy even to leave a hall-light burning during his absence. It was the sort of house that is lucky if it avoids harboring at least one murder during the span of its existence—isolated from its neighbors, beyond sound or sight of the nearest dwelling. It was set back from the roadway and there were trees around three sides of it, partly hiding the upper part.

Ryder didn't slink or sidle in toward it. If anyone had happened to glimpse him doing that, even from a distance, it would only have excited suspicion. If no one did, then it didn't matter how openly he went up to it. And no one had, he was sure of that—there was no one around. His familiarity with Billings's habits gave him a peculiar kind of

confidence that was far safer than timidity would have been. It was the same principle as when you try to cross a creaky floor unheard: if you strike out quickly, boldly, get it over with, you are far less likely to make noise than if you pick your way, hesitating where to plant your foot at each step.

He went straight up the walk and the blackness of the small porch swallowed him. He waited there a moment, motionless, to make doubly sure there was no one stirring in the immediate neighborhood. No one came by, nothing broke the silence.

He found the crevice of the letter-slot, dipped two fingers through one end of it as he had seen Billings do that unforgotten time years before. (Murder is so slow in hatching!) Nothing there. For the first time since the undertaking had gotten under way, his confidence failed him, and he had a numbing sense of frustration. But it was only momentary. He shifted to the other end of the crevice. His probing fingers found a string, weighted with something, tied around a small nail-head just below the slot. It was hard drawing it up—he wasn't as practiced at it as Billings—but finally the door-key dropped into his waiting palm,

A moment later he was standing in the hall, the door was closed once more, and the key had been placed where it had originally dangled on the inside.

He didn't even have to light the lights, he knew the house so well. It was like entering his own, even though it had been some time since he'd last been over here. It all came back to him—the position of every chair, every doorway. Billings was a slave to habit, nothing ever changed. That can be a destructive, as well as a beneficial, trait.

This was going to be the perfect crime—this had everything in its favor.

He reached the second floor and made his way to Billings's bedroom by his sense of direction alone. He

discovered the bed with his knees, and sat down on the edge of it, to let himself get used to the dark.

It was all over, now, all over but the shooting.

Things could still go wrong, of course. Billings could overstep his usual limit, be taken ill instead of just getting drunk, and have to be helped in by his fellow lodge-members instead of coming in alone. In which case Ryder would be found waiting there, and all chances of undetected murder would be gone.

Somehow he didn't think it would be that way. He had that *feel* of perfect rightness that comes at times to every gambler, every plunger. Tonight was the night for it. It was going to work out like velvet. Every nerve in his body told him so.

When his eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom and the room was more visible to him, he got up from the bed, pulled a chair over to one side of the window, and sat there, where he could command a view of the front walk. It was a peculiar technique, maybe, to sit waiting in full sight, unhidden, in a man's bedroom—waiting for him to come home. But just because it hadn't been used before, in cases of premeditated murder, didn't mean it wasn't a good one. This was going to be a work of art, not a hack job.

After a wait that hadn't seemed as long as he might have expected, the stillness of the thoroughfare outside was shattered by the arrival and braking of a car, full of men. Their voices, raised in convivial hilarity, reached him so distinctly that he could even catch various things they were saying out there.

"Can you make it all right, Kirk, or you want one of us to help you in?"

"Shay, lishen, you talk like I was drunk. You think I can't walk into my own house without help?"

And then laughter, and a babble of leave-takings. "Good night, Kirk! We'll be seeing you!"

Goodbye, you mean, Ryder thought grimly. You'll never see him alive again, any of you. Better take a good look at him now.

The car drove off and Billings came up the front walk alone, just a little unsteady but not helplessly so. There was a wait while he fished for his key. He was deft enough about pulling it out through the slot, he'd been doing it for so long. He came in and the door slammed vibratingly after him. The hall downstairs lit up and a faint yellow reflection of it reached the floor above. Ryder stayed where he was, only he took the precaution of reaching behind the curtain and pulling down the window-shade; this room was going to be lighted up in a few minutes, and he didn't want any stray passerby to have a chance to glance into it from the street and sight a second person inside. Little mischances like that could defeat the best-laid plans, he knew.

Billings hung up his hat and coat, blacked out the lower hall, and was coming slowly up the stairs now. He yawned once, on the way up, and it made a funny sound in the dark.

You won't be bored very much longer, Ryder promised him silently. For his part, he didn't feel the least bit of tension, even yet. He felt as relaxed as though this wasn't going to end up in violent death. And that was highly important, he realized. Half the danger in these things came from losing your head, not keeping cool enough and in perfect control of yourself the whole time. He got up quietly.

Billings stopped off in the bathroom down the hall and sketchily brushed his teeth. Ryder could hear the rasp of the toothbrush bristles. You could save yourself that trouble, he addressed the doomed man unheard.

Then Billings came out, entered the bedroom doorway, and poked on the light.

He was surprised, but not frightened. There was enough liquor in him to blunt his sense of caution. He didn't even notice the gun in Ryder's hand. Billings said: "Well I'll be—

Look who's here! It's about time you came around, you stubborn cuss!" The alcoholic glow that filled him blanked out all recollection of the bad blood between them. He evidently had forgotten it altogether for the moment, had been carried back to the days of their previous cordiality. He even came across the room with his hand outstretched. "Why didn't you put on the lights—couldn't you find the switch?"

Ryder slipped the gun back into his coat pocket, evaded the offered hand, said tonelessly: "Never mind shaking."

Billings said: "Whatsa matter, you got something against me?"

"Nothing that can't be fixed up," Ryder said. He eyed Billings impassively for a moment or two. "You go ahead and get ready for bed, I'm going to leave soon."

Billings hesitated for a moment, not because of any apprehension but with some vague ideas of hospitality in the back of his befuddled mind.

"Go ahead, you don't have to stand on ceremony with me," Ryder encouraged. "Make yourself comfortable." He went back to his chair by the window.

Sober, the strangeness of this visit would have penetrated Billings's awareness, sounded some sort of a warning. He was just drunk enough for it not to. He went ahead undressing. He was starting to use this former friend's given name again, from old habit. "Why don't you stay over, Harve?"

"No," Ryder said as matter-of-factly as though the invitation was to be expected. "I don't think I'd enjoy it."

"Why not? There's room enough."

"Sure there's room enough," Ryder agreed, "but I wouldn't care to spend the night in the same bed with a dead guy. Thanks just the same."

"What dead guy? There's no dead guy here."

"There's going to be," Ryder remarked, as unexcited as ever. "You." Billings gave a roar of appreciative laughter.

Then he broke off short because he saw that Ryder wasn't laughing with him. He scratched his forehead, as one does when the point of a good joke escapes him.

"Finish buttoning your pajama-top," Ryder suggested. "It looks like hell gaping open that way." Billings fumbled with a button, lost his hold on it. He was starting to get sober. It showed in his eyes first.

"What're you getting nervous about?" Ryder inquired coolly. "What're you getting so thick-fingered about? You button up those pajamas every night."

Billings said, with sudden, strident tension: "I don't like the way you're talking. Get out of here!"

"I told you I was going pretty soon."

"Get out of here *now!*"

"All right, have it now then. You're not going to see me go. You know that, don't you?" He uncrossed his legs, unclasped his hands from behind his head. He stood up, reached inside his coat for the gun, took it out. The whole thing was carried out at the casual tempo of reaching for a cigarette. "Turn this way."

Billings's face got a bright white, the sort of white that gleams.

Ryder said impatiently, as though he were posing him for a portrait-photograph: "Don't back away. Stand still. Backing away isn't going to help you any. The closer you are, the less you'll feel it."

"You can't do this! Man—it's—it's murder!"

Ryder nodded in judicious agreement. "Sure it's murder."

The first shot punctuated the question. Billings creased across the middle, as though he were built in sections. Ryder aimed higher the second time. He could almost hear the bullet hit the bony structure of the breastbone. At least, he could tell by the jar Billings's whole body gave that it had hit bone and not plowed into flesh.

Billings caught at the crossbar at the foot of the bed and went draggingly down alongside it, one knee staying

grotesquely up. It was slanted inward toward the bed, didn't have room to unbend. Ryder stepped over, crouched, and gave him one more into the side of the head. He heard it strike wood, so it must have gone through his skull into the flooring beneath. Then he nodded, spoke aloud to him in grim satisfaction, as though Billings could still hear him. "That about does the trick, my friend."

He went over to the dead man's coat, found his wallet, took it out. He stripped the money out of it and threw the wallet down on the floor, where it couldn't be missed. He tucked the bills into his own pocket for the time being. He didn't want the money. He wasn't going to keep it. But the police had to have their motive, and it was better to give them one ready-made than to make them dig around for one. It would keep them further away from the truth.

He crossed to the bedroom doorway, stood there a minute surveying the scene, to make sure everything was the way he wanted it. Then he punched out the light, closed the door after him, and trundled briskly down the stairs. His thoughts would have stood the hair of a demon on end: *I feel better after that. That sure did me good!*

He paused for a moment inside the house-door. Should he leave the gun behind him or discard it somwhere in the open? Outside, he decided. It would look too much like a deliberate plant if he left it inside. He opened the door, looked out into the surrounding darkness before proceeding. Streets empty, not a soul around.

Shots not even heard. He'd known it I was going to be like that—he'd known it was going to be a push-over.

He closed the door after him, descended the walk to the street at a normal-appearing gait, turned down it in the direction he'd come from. He waited until he'd passed beyond the bounds of Billings's plot of ground, threw the gun away into a vacant lot, first carefully removing the print-guard and stowing that in his pocket for later disposal. The weapon fell into a clump of weeds, made just a

disturbed rustle in landing. They'd find it in a day or two. He wanted them to.

And now it was over.

Or was it?

Is it ever?

Ten minutes later he was back in his own house. The first thing he did was go down to the cellar and rake up the furnace a little, make sure there was enough coal to last the night. But he did that other nights too, even when he hadn't committed a murder. Into the blazing fire went the guard he'd used around the gun-butt, the cotton gloves he'd worn on his own hands, and the $30 or $40 he'd just taken out of Billings's wallet.

Then he went upstairs and replaced all the things he'd taken out of his pockets before starting out—in order to be ready to start without delay in the morning. And finally he undressed and went to bed.

He slept. Actually *slept.* Not right away, of course. Not even he could have fallen asleep right away, after a thing like that. But he lay there in the dark, and after a half hour or so, he dozed off.

He woke up with a start and wondered what had awakened him. He hadn't even been dreaming of the thing. He chuckled to himself in the silence of his room. Imagine, sleeping soundly right on top of committing a murder! The psychiatrists would have been interested. It was still dark out. He looked at the radium dial of the clock and it was only 3:30. About an hour and a half since the thing had happened.

He turned over and tried to go back to sleep again. It wouldn't work. Suddenly the stream of his thoughts, as tranquil as a mill-pond until then, struck a snag. They

wouldn’t flow on past that certain point any more. They began to dam up, as at an obstruction.

He hated to face this submerged reef, where all had been smooth sailing until now, but he had to. He dredged it up, looked at it in the face, and it was sheer horror. It was this curdling thought: *I don’t remember clipping that silver pencil into my pocket*, the one his wife had given him last Christmas with his name—both names—engraved on it!

He sat up like a shot and the whole bedframe shook under him. That was because he was shaking on top of it.

It must be there, he tried to quiet himself. You put it back, you put everything back when you came home.

He left the bed, put on the light, pawed his inner coat-pocket. His wallet was back in it, everything else was back in it. But the pencil wasn’t clamped where he usually carried it. The mark of its clip was plainly visible—*but the pencil wasn’t there now!*

He dropped the coat, got down on hands and knees, scanned the floor, went over every inch of it. He pulled all the bedding off the bed, to make sure it hadn’t rolled in among it. He flung open all the drawers in the bureau.

He tried to reason with himself. Now listen, don’t get frightened. You didn’t take it with you. You didn’t take *anything* with you. You went over yourself twice, as if with a vacuum cleaner.

All right, he was willing to accept that premise. But then, in its place, he demanded an answer to the alternative. Then where is it? If I didn’t take it with me, so why isn’t it here?

While he continued the fruitless search, his mind kept shrieking: It’s got to be here! I remember seeing it earlier in the evening, when I first came back from work. So it can only be in one of two places, here or there. And if it isn’t here, that means I *did* take it over there! It’s got to be here, it’s got to!

But it wasn’t.

Now doubts crept in, began to riddle what had been 100 per cent certainty until then. The pencil hadn't been detached, strictly speaking. It had been hooked to his pocket. Maybe that was why it had slipped his notice.

Or maybe his very thoroughness had defeated itself. Perhaps that second check-up, after he had everything out, had canceled out the efficacy of the first. He had put it back in out of sheer habit and absent-mindedly gone out with it on him.

With every minute came further confirmation. I was fiddling with something in my hands over there, while I was sitting in the dark, waiting for him to come back. What was it? It wasn't the gun, because I took that out of my pocket just before I shot him. It must have been *that!* I absent-mindedly took it out and fooled with it, twisted the barrel around and around in my hands. I've caught myself doing that a hundred times, whenever I'm waiting with nothing to do. And then the car drove up unexpectedly outside, caught me offguard, and I hastily put it down, *left it lying there in the room*, instead of clipping it back into my pocket!

He was distracted. He ran down to the lower floor, barefooted, and set up a frantic search down there. But he already knew it would be unavailing. It was. Drops of sweat flew off his face and he plowed harassed fingers through his hair. Both names on it, lengthwise, in capitals. *Harvey Ryder.* Damn that novelty shop that had offered that additional feature gratis as bait to prospective purchasers! All his carefully thought-out preparations gone for nothing. His treasuring of the gun for months past. He might just as well have walked up to Billings in full sight of the entire membership of his lodge and shot him down!

He ran back upstairs again, searched hectically through his other suits in the closet. It wouldn't be in any of them. He used it daily—he hadn't been a day without it since his wife had first given it to him. It was no earthly use. If it had been around here at all he would have found it by now.

His face was gray and shining with sweat. He looked at the clock. A little after 4. Wait—he still had a slim chance left of repairing the damage. It wouldn't get light for another 40 or 50 minutes yet. If he hustled, he might still be able to get over there and back under cover of darkness, retrieve it before anyone else found it. It was dangerous, but he had no choice. But every minute he delayed increased the hazard against him.

He plunged into his preparation for the return visit, not coolly, calculatingly, as he had the first time, but recklessly, desperately. He had never dressed so fast in his life before. He swung out of his house and headed for Billings's through the waning night almost at a jog-trot. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into an outright run, but he might have been seen by some night-bound patrolman or prowl car, so he forced himself down to a fast walk.

He arrived in sight of the house panting, but as much from fear as exertion. He stopped and reconnoitered from a safe distance away. Still dark, lifeless in the before-dawn gloom.

No lighted windows, no figures bustling in and out, no white-roofed car standing out in front of it. It hadn't given up its secret yet.

He closed in, found himself up on the porch again. He'd never intended coming near here again in his life, and here he was back again less than two hours later. He fished through the letter-slot for the key with trembling fingers that defeated themselves again and again by their very nervousness. He kept looking around over his shoulder the whole time.

Finally he got it, pulled it up, got in. He padded up the stairs in the dark, found the closed door of the deathchamber, opened it. You could still smell the stale gunpowder from his three shots. Dare he put on the lights? Someone passing by outside might think it strange at this

hour, knowing Billings's regularity of habit. But he had to, if he hoped to find what he'd come back for.

He thumbed the switch and his misdeed flashed back in view, making his skin crawl in spite of himself. He moved swiftly by the corpse to the chair near the window he had occupied, bent over it. He pulled out the padded seat, looked below that. He got down and looked on the floor under it. He even tipped the bottom of the curtain, looked along the inside window-sill. No pencil.

He went back to the bed where he remembered having first sat. He could still see the depression from his own body on it. He looked all over it, and under it, and between the bed clothes.

Nothing. Nowhere to be found. He didn't know whether to be relieved or more uneasy than ever. Obviously he hadn't left it here, for no one had been in this room since he had, or the alarm would have been raised by now. But then where had he left it?

He tried to pump air into his deflated self-confidence. As long as it wasn't here, what was the difference where it was? He'd better get out of here fast, that was one sure thing. Do his heavy thinking somewhere else.

He tried one more place. Conquering his aversion, he bent down over the body, raised it slightly, and looked under it. The missing object might have been lying unnoticed on the floor and Billings might have fallen on top of it. That wasn't entirely beyond the bounds of possibility.

No, it wasn't there either. He let the inert burden fall flat again.

The touch of it sent horror coursing up his skin. The blood was dry and caked, but he had a sticky feeling of having smeared some on his fingertips. It was probably only his own clammy perspiration, but he took his handkerchief and rubbed his fingertips fiercely.

Then he straightened up, retreated to the door, darkened the room once more, and fled down the stairs.

He had a narrow escape at the front door. It was already getting a little light out, lighter than it was indoors. Just as he reached out to grasp the doorknob and pull it open, a looming shadow, as of someone straightening up from a bending position, blurred the curtained glass inset in the upper half of the door.

Ryder nearly died before the familiar plunk of bottle-glass had time to reach him and reassure him. It was only the milkman, on his before dawn rounds. But if Ryder had been a fraction of a second sooner, he would have opened the door and gone tumbling over the other's bent back in an inadvertent sort of leapfrog.

He shrank back to one side, crouched there holding his breath, waiting for the milkman to go away. He heard his step leave the porch, but he had to peer cautiously out of the lower corner of the pane to make certain when the delivery-wagon had moved on.

Luckily, there were no other houses on this block for the milkman to make deliveries to, otherwise he would have been held up in there longer. He gave the wagon time enough to round the corner, then opened the door, arched his foot carefully over the bottle of milk that Billings would never drink, closed the door after him, and hurried down the front walk and away.

It was already too light out for comfort, although it still wasn't full daylight. But his luck held up. He got back to his own house without having passed a solitary being along the whole way. Two round-trips in one night without being seen —that was pretty good.

But he derived no real consolation from the thought. That damned pencil! Why had she given it to him in the first place? Or why hadn't he lost it long ago, if he was going to lose it at all, so that it would have been safely gone and forgotten? It had marred what would have otherwise been a perfectly planned and perfectly executed crime. He knew he wasn't going to know a minute's peace from now on.

He didn’t.

He couldn’t sleep any more that night. He kept worrying about it, trying to trace it. True, he hadn’t found it over there in the same room with Billings, but that was no guarantee. If he’d dropped it along the street anywhere near there, that could be just as dangerous. Suggest his name to them, if nothing else. He’d been afraid to linger and scan the sidewalks on his way back—someone might have spotted him in the growing daylight. Or maybe, in some inexplicable way, it had gotten tangled with the gun, and when he’d thrown the latter into that clump of weeds, the pencil had gone with it. That thought made his hair stand on end. After all his pains about picking up someone else’s gun from an ashcan and guarding it against prints, to leave a pencil with his full name engraved on it alongside it! He should have looked in those weeds on his way back. He hadn’t had the courage to go near them—you leave so many unsuspected traces as soon as you step off hard pavement.

He got up finally, haggard and unslept, and went to his work. He kept hoping that he’d notice it sticking out of someone’s vest-pocket down there. It had been borrowed from him once or twice. But he didn’t see it and he was afraid to ask, afraid if the answer turned out to be no, he’d be attracting attention to the fact that he had lost it. And then too, he distinctly remembered it *after* he’d left here and reached home last night, so he knew he’d taken it with him.

He went home at the end of the day, ate, tried to read a book to take his mind off it. But it didn’t work—he just couldn’t stop thinking about it. He paced restlessly, suffering agonies of apprehension. When the time came for him to rake the furnace for the night, he even put the fire out, emptied out the ashes, sifted through them, to make

sure he hadn’t thrown it in by mistake, along with the gloves and gun-guard. It would have showed up if he had, and it didn’t.

He went to bed finally. He was suffering the exact pangs of mortal terror, the homicidal hangover, that he’d tried all along to avoid by careful planning and precision. A little tube of metal, maybe six inches long, had let him in for all this.

Next day when he got up, he saw that he was beginning to look like the very thing he’d tried so hard not to look like —a murderer haunted by fears of discovery. He not only didn’t like the idea of his wife seeing him this way, but if the police should haul him in for even a routine questioning, it wouldn’t help his chances.

At work they were beginning to notice it, too. Someone asked him jokingly: “What’ve you been up to?” He gave a nervous start—and didn’t answer.

His wife must have taken an earlier train back than he’d expected her to. He’d just reached home and was getting ready to go over to the station and meet her when her ring at the doorbell sounded. He looked himself over carefully in the mirror to see if he could pass muster, if she could detect anything by looking at him. He’d tell her that—

She was tired after her long trip, in a hurry to get in, and she could probably tell by the light in his bedroom window that he was home—she rang again, louder than the first time. He hurried downstairs to open the door for her, as scared as if it had been the police themselves. But then she’d always been so smart at guessing things about him. “Gee, I didn’t expect you back until—” he started to say breathlessly, as he flung the door back.

The man standing motionless out there had suddenly wedged the door with his foot. “Your name Harvey Ryder?” he said, tight-lipped.

“Yes,” Ryder faltered. The cold realization drenched him that this was it—now, already. Less than forty-eight hours

after. That infernal pencil!

A hand reached out for his, and he was already handcuffed before he'd even seen the thing go on.

The detective said: "We think you murdered Kirk Billings around two o'clock night before last. You'd better come quietly, Ryder. I've got a man at the back door."

He knew the game was up. He knew this wasn't just for questioning, or they wouldn't have used a manacle. He knew this was the axe. They must be pretty sure of their facts or they wouldn't have come here after him like this. Something deep down inside him told him he'd never get out of it again.

He didn't admit anything. All he said was: "Let's clear out of here quickly. I expect my wife back from the station, and I'd rather not face her."

They had gotten halfway down the street, walking along side by side so you couldn't notice the handcuff, when one of those usual hails of reminder reached Ryder. Only this time it wasn't a thin falsetto—it was a man's voice, from the other side of the street.

A man who had been strolling by with his wife left her for a moment and came hurrying over. Ryder just had time to murmur under his breath to the detective. "Don't let on, will you? This is one of the neighbors."

The detective pressed up closer alongside him, blotting out the handcuff.

The newcomer said: "I was just on my way over to your house to give this back to you, when I saw you leave. You got up so suddenly at the bazaar the other night, when I borrowed it to fill out my Bingo card, that you'd gone before I noticed I still had it. Luckily it had your name on it, and my missus is acquainted with yours—

Ryder looked down and saw the silver pencil resting in the palm of his free hand. The detective gave him a slight tug and they set out again. All the way down the street he kept looking at it as if hypnotized. Finally he blurted out:

“So it wasn’t this. What was it you found over there that made you connect me with it?”

The detective said: “You left one of your pocket handkerchiefs lying right *on top* of the corpse. Must have taken it out to wipe your hands or something, and forgotten to put it back in your excitement. It had different initials from Billings’s on it, and we traced it by the laundry mark. It was only a twenty-four-hour job.”

“And I didn’t even have it on me the first time I went over there,” Ryder murmured to himself . . .

MARIHUANA

The bell rang at about eight that night, and it was a couple of King Turner's friends, Bill Evans and Wash Gordon, come to take him out. "To get him away from himself," as they would have put it. They had a girl with them whom they introduced simply as Vinnie.

That he mightn't want to go out, or if he did, that he mightn't want to go out with them, didn't enter into their calculations at all. They couldn't imagine anyone not wanting to go out with them, especially when they went to all that trouble just to brace him up.

Turner opened the door and just looked at them when he saw who it was. He didn't say "Come in" or anything. He didn't have to with them. They parted in the middle, the girl and Evans pushed past on one side of him, Gordon on the other, and all of a sudden his apartment was full of noise. The radio was going at three-quarters tone, the girl named Vinnie was experimenting with a cocktail-shaker that played a tune, and Evans was busily slapping the lids of boxes up and down looking for a cigarette. This came under the general heading of camaraderie. Turner had experienced a lot of it since his wife had left him and he'd been living alone. As long as the fort had already been taken over, he went ahead and closed the door; but with a rueful look, as if he would rather have done it while they were still out there in front of him.

Evans spread his hands astonishedly, said: “Well, come on, get your things, what’re you waiting for?”

“Know where we’re taking you?” Wash Gordon added. “To a ranch. To a ranch to blaze weed.”

“What’s a ranch?” Turner asked. “And what’s weed?”

The three of them exchanged a pitying look among themselves, as if to say “Isn’t he corny? Doesn’t know anything, does he?”

“Marihuana. The ranch is the flat where you smoke it. We just found it ourselves.”

Turner sliced his hand at them in rejection, turned away.

“No, he’d rather stick around here and brood down his shirt-collar all evening. Brood about Eleanor.”

“It’s just for you,” Evans urged. “It’ll make you think you’ve got her back.” He dropped one eyelid toward the other two.

The girl had found a picture, was studying it. “I don’t see so much to brood about,” she said felinely.

Turner came over and hitched it away from her, turned it face-down.

“Not on that subject,” Gordon warned her in an undertone. “Can’t take it.”

“Well, are we going or aren’t we?” she wanted to know sulkily.

“Sure we’re going.” Evans found Turner’s hat, flattened it down on his head, slapped his topcoat lengthwise around his neck like a scarf. “So is he.” He caught him by one arm and pulled him, Gordon by the other. “We know what’s good for him, don’t we, Wash?”

“I don’t think it’ll be much fun taking him along,” the girl commented under her breath to Gordon.

“Sure it will, watch. He’s never tried it before; he’ll hit the ceiling. You should always have an amateur along on this kind of a party, for comic relief.”

After they’d finally hauled him across the threshold, Turner quit trying to dig his heels in.

The girl came out last and closed the door after her, after sticking out her tongue at Eleanor's photograph. "You'll thank us for this," she promised Turner pertly. "It'll put a little life in you, Old Faithful."

"I left my latchkey in there," Turner protested. "I won't be able to get in again when I come home."

"It'll be so long before you come home," Gordon jeered, "the building'll probably be condemned and torn down from old age."

* * * *

They got into a cab and drove west to Tenth Avenue, then up that into the lower Sixties, the Hell's Kitchen district, without giving any exact address.

"We ought to get a rebate for bringing a new customer," the girl said breezily.

Evans motioned to his lips and jerked a cautioning thumb toward the driver. "Wait'll we get outside again," he warned.

They got out at a blind street corner, apparently chosen at random, stood for a moment in the ghostly pall of a street light until the cab's taillight had winked out ahead. "We'll walk it from here," Evans said. "Driving right up to the door in a cab, in this neighborhood, is a tipoff something's doing inside. The neighborhood grapevine would finally get word to the cops."

They crossed over toward Eleventh, went up a side street on that side on foot. Turner's reluctance to accompany them, even this late in the proceedings, was plainly visible on his face, but they ignored it.

They stopped finally outside one of the moldering Civil War era tenements that, interspersed with billboards and lofts, lined the dismal thoroughfare. Turner tried to extricate himself for the last time, as if assailed by some intangible premonition. "I'm going to call it off. I got a

feeling something's going to go wrong if I go up there. I got a feeling something's going to happen."

"Aw, don't be yellow," Gordon snarled. Turner could see by their expressions that they didn't really like him, there was no real friendship there; they wanted him to come along simply to have a good time at his expense, to make him the butt of a joke, laugh at his inexperience.

They looked at him scornfully, and the girl said contemptuously, "Oh, let him go. Don't make him come up if he's afraid."

It was the sort of challenge that usually works, against all reason and logic, with almost anyone. It did this time too. Turner turned toward the tenement entrance without another word, followed them in. If the girl's elbow nudged Evans' ribs in the gloom ahead, he failed to see it.

"Don't make any noise now," Gordon cautioned in the murky depths of the entrance-hallway. "They don't want the other tenants in the building to get wise."

There were stairs ahead, lit—or rather hinted at—by a single bead of gaslight, the size of a yellow pea, hovering over a jet sticking out of the wall. They tiptoed up them Indian-file. They had to go that way, the rickety case was too narrow to take two of them abreast.

"Once you get in it's not so bad," Evans tried to hearten Turner in a stage whisper over his shoulder. "They've got it fixed up pretty nice, out of the profits they make."

"Aren't they taking a chance on the law?" Turner asked, tailing the rest of them around a creaky landing and up another flight.

"If the dicks do bust in, what evidence have they got? How can they prove these people aren't just having a few personal friends in for a sociable evening? How long does it take to get rid of a few dozen reefers down the air shaft?"

They climbed the rest of the way in silence until they had reached the top floor of the sinister place, stood huddled there for a moment getting their breaths back. There was a

peculiar, insidious trace of something in the air up here, very hard to identify—a ghostlike pungency that prickled the nostrils. Turner had never met with it before, couldn't tell what it was. But he had his suspicions.

"Well, here goes." Evans took a tug at his necktie, strode forward, knocked at a door fronting the top-floor hall. The others moved after him, stood grouped there as if for mutual protection.

There was a single, muffled footfall somewhere on other side of the door. The backing of a handmade peephole, bored through the woodwork with an awl, was removed, and an orange-lidded eye presented itself. That was because the light was on the eye's side, the hall where they stood held simply a pin-point of gas.

Evans made himself their spokesman. "Charlie and Joe," he offered. "Remember us? We brought a friend back with us this time." Girls evidently didn't count in this little subdivision of the underworld; a miscalculation many a shady character has made.

The eye blacked out and a chain dropped with a clunk. Then the door opened narrowly. So narrowly they couldn't see who was behind it. The invitation to enter, however was implicit. It reminded Turner inescapably of the old-time Prohibition gin-flats, only it purveyed something a good deal worse.

Evans, as ringleader, squeezed himself in first. The girl went next, with a shiver of thrilled anticipation. Gordon went next, and Turner came last. Somebody's hairy, sleeve-rolled arm dropped behind him like an ax, to close the door.

They were standing at the end of a long "railway" hall that seemed to go on indefinitely into the distance. A solitary electric light bulb overhead was made even dimmer with a jacket of crepe-paper. A man was standing there beside them with one hand held at a receptive level, as if waiting for something. He squinted at Turner, the newcomer, said: "This guy all right?"

“Perfect,” Evans assured him. He got out money, said to Gordon: “I’m paying for Vinnie, you take care of Turner.” There was evidently a flat admission-rate, with as many cigarettes supplied as the customer asked for. The doorkeeper had produced an ordinary white stationery envelope, was doling them out as they passed him.

“I’ve got money here—” Turner objected, used to the etiquette of the upper world. But vice is never stingy when it comes to roping a neophyte in.

“You’re our guest,” Gordon overrode him, pushing his hand down. “Just one for him, he’s green,” he said patronizingly to the man in shirt sleeves. The latter handed Turner a cigarette that looked like an ordinary cigarette, only the fill was a little darker and coarser. Turner didn’t know what to do with it, stuck it upright in his breast pocket.

“Use it right here, don’t carry it out with you,” the man warned. “We got a house rule against that.”

“He’ll blaze it right away,” Gordon promised.

They went down the long hall single file, the way they’d come in. The man who had admitted them followed at Turner’s heels only as far as the first open doorway they passed. Then he turned aside and went in there. It was a barren sort of a kitchen. Turner glimpsed a bare wooden table and chair as he went by, placed lengthwise so that they could command a view of the hallway and anyone who went by outside. A deck of greasy cards was spread out in solitaire formation on the table.

The “paying guests” had continued on down the hall by themselves, so Turner went after them. The operators of the place evidently left their callers to entertain themselves as best they could. Turner followed the hall past several more doors until it had emerged into a depressing sort of front parlor, provided with a radio, a divan and several easy chairs. Two windows on one side that overlooked the street had dark shades tightly nailed down all around their

frames. A third that looked out on an air shaft was wide open top and bottom, and in addition there was an electric fan facing it from floor level across the room, to help dissipate the tell-tale fumes.

The way they made themselves at home they might have been, as Evans had suggested, just company dropping in for a friendly visit. Except that they kept their hats and coats on, as if finding it advisable to be ready to leave in a hurry if they had to.

They were the only customers at the moment. There was a man in there already, but he seemed to belong to the place. He was in shirt sleeves, with a vest dangling open over some kind of a strap, a little too slantwise to be a suspender-loop. He was reading a newspaper when they came in; just looked up briefly, then dipped into it again without paying them any further attention.

They made themselves comfortable. Vinnie pre-empted the sofa and patted it for Gordon to sit down next to her. Evans strolled across the room to change the wave length on the radio. Turner, after a momentary indecision, sat down in an easy chair in the corner, a little withdrawn from everyone else.

Gordon had struck a match for Vinnie and himself. He blew it out, dropped it tidily in an ashtray beside them. If it hadn't been for what they had said at his own place, Turner wouldn't have been able to tell what they were doing. The whole procedure, so far, was perfectly casual, innocent-looking.

"Here we go again, gang," Vinnie giggled.

They all turned to look at Turner expectantly, watching to see what he'd do. He didn't do anything. Evans came over to him finally. A thread of smoke was looping around his wrist now too. "I'll steer you how to do it," he said affably.

Turner said in a low, discontented voice: "I don't want to do this. I gotta feeling this night's going to end up bad."

Evans took it out of his breast pocket for him, aimed it at his lips. “Aw, don’t be a wet blanket. If it was a drink you wouldn’t refuse. So what? It’s just an aerial drink.” He’d clicked a pocket-lighter before Turner could swerve his head away. A sharp pain like a knife slashed down Turner’s windpipe into his lungs. “Hold it,” Evans coached. He pressed the flat of his hand across Turner’s mouth for a minute, preventing him from exhaling. Then he picked up the fallen reefer, handed it back to him.

Then he stood a minute watching. “Take another drag,” he said finally. Slowly Turner’s hand rose to his mouth. Almost against his will, but it rose. The pain wasn’t nearly as sharp this time.

Evans turned away, did something with his left eyelid for the benefit of the other two. “It’s got him,” he smirked. “He’s tuned-in from now on.”

Time started to slow up and act crazy. Minutes took much longer to pass than they had before. It was hard for him to adjust himself to the new ratio, he got all balled-up. When it seemed like half an hour had gone by, the radio would still be playing only the first chorus of the same selection that had begun a good thirty minutes before. Vinnie was doing a good deal of muffled giggling over there on the divan. The stranger who had been reading the paper got up, yawned, and strolled out into the hall, with a muttered, “Happy landing!” He didn’t come back again anymore.

Turner looked down one time and a quarter of an inch of charred paper was all that was left between his fingers. Then the next time he looked there was a full-length cigarette again.

There was evidently a sort of sketchy buffet included in the admission charge. Or else Evans, who wasn’t a bashful type person, had gone out and helped himself. He came back into the room after a brief absence holding a loaf of white bread tucked under one arm and hacking thick chunks off it with a bright-bladed jack-knife that he must

have borrowed from one of the proprietors. The three of them, even the girl, wolfed at the thick slabs. “Find something to spread on it,” Turner heard her suggest.

Evans had been standing before Turner. He put the knife down on the arm of his easy chair, turned and went out again. Turner stared bemusedly down at the shimmering blade, as though the gleam it cast half hypnotized him.

From far away he heard the girl’s whispered comment to Gordon: “Look at Rain-in-the-face. I told you not to bring him with us, he’s a total loss.”

“Somebody ought to light a firecracker under him,” Gordon agreed.

He didn’t connect it with himself. It came from so far away, it wasn’t as though they were talking about him at all. He started running the tip of his finger absently up and down the razorlike blade-edge of the knife Evans had left on the arm of his chair.

Evans came back in the room and he heard him say: “How’s this? It’s all I could find out there.”

The girl said, “Ugh”, in a nauseated voice.

Turner didn’t look over to see what it was. He didn’t pay any more attention to them from then on. Something much more important was happening. Eleanor had showed up in the place. His Eleanor! The perfect lady that never could have been persuaded to set foot in such a . . . First came her music, from the radio, that tune that he and she had danced to so many times in the past.

“After you’ve gone

And left me crying—”

Then came the thought of her. Then she herself. She was crouched down, trying to hide herself there behind the console, so that he wouldn’t catch her in such a place. She peeped over at him, then ducked her head down. It wasn’t just a private hallucination of his own brought on by the reefers, either; the others saw her too, he could tell by the way they spoke. Evans called over to him: “Hey, Turner,

isn’t that your wife across the room there? Better find out what she’s doing here.”

She stood up and came forward when she saw that they’d spotted her. She was trying to keep her face covered with a gauzy sort of handkerchief, and get over to the hall door and out, before they could stop her.

Turner jolted to his feet, headed her off, got in front of her. He caught her by the shoulders, tried to turn her toward him. “Eleanor! Who brought you to such a place? I’ll punch them in the jaw!”

She writhed in stubborn silence, trying to get away from him.

“You got no right being here! You’ll get yourself talked about. Come on, let me get you out, before somebody recognizes you—”

She wrenched herself free, turned and ran back to the opposite end of the room, away from him. He went after her.

It must have seemed funny to those other fools. They were laughing their heads off around him, instead of trying to help him. He heard Evans call out to him: “You’ll never catch her that way. Here, pin her down with this.”

And then a muffled cry of alarm from Vinnie, the other girl, “*Don’t*! Don’t give him that, you fool!”

It came too late. Something went wrong. She turned midway in full flight, when he wasn’t expecting her to, and they collided front to front. The recoil sent him back a step. She stood there perfectly still, only wavering to and fro a little as though the current of the electric fan on the floor was too strong for her. She was holding her hands clasped at one side of her bosom, as though something there hurt her a little . . . Then as he stood there facing her, a hideous thing happened. Red peered through the crevices of her intertwined fingers. His eyes dilated and he held her hands protestingly toward her, as if to warn her of her danger . . . Suddenly she was gone and the blank wall across the room

was all that met his uncomprehending gaze. He looked down, and she was flat upon the floor, almost at his feet. Her hands had separated now, and on the place they'd clasped there was a blotch of red that kept on growing . . . But more than that happened to her. In the fall, she seemed to have disintegrated into a flux of light-particles. Then they cohered again, into her face and form, but she wasn't Eleanor anymore, she was . . . Vinnie, that girl that had come here with them.

He glanced behind him, to make sure, and all he met were Gordon's and Evans' frightened faces, livid with paralyzed horror.

One of them jumped forward, crouched over her, said in a choked voice: "Help me get her on the sofa."

Turner missed seeing what they did next; he was staring in dazed consternation down his own arm, at the knife-blade protruding from his folded-over fingers. No longer glistening cleanly but ruddied now. "How'd it get there?" he groaned, mystified. He opened his fingers and it popped on the floor.

They both had their backs to him, they were bending over her on the sofa, in frantic, furtive attempts at first aid. Evans had pulled the tail of his shirt out from under his belt, was trying to do something to her with it. "Gotta find some way to stop the bleeding—"

"That's no good. Hurry up, we better send out for a doctor!"

"They wouldn't let one in here; they're afraid of being reported."

"What'll we do? We can't just let her lie here bleeding to death—"

One of them glanced around remorsefully at him, then turned back again. "She shouldn't have teased him. I told her to lay off that subject—"

Turner's foot edged forward along the floor, pointing toward the hall doorway and escape. His body followed it.

He was leaning forward above the waist in crafty, narcotized stealth. They kept their backs turned toward him, absorbed in their befuddled attempts to revive the inert figure on the divan.

He had already gained the doorway unnoticed, was looking back from the semi-sanctuary of the hall, when he saw one of their heads dip down lower over her. Heard the horror-smothered exclamation that followed. “Bill . . . oh my God, she’s gone! I can’t hear her breathing anymore. It must have grazed the heart—”

He went wavering down the interminable reaches of the hall, rocking from side to side like someone breasting a ship’s corridor in a high sea.

Before he was out of earshot one last exclamation reached him. One of them must have looked around and missed him. “Where’d he go? Get hold of him! He can’t run out and leave us with her on our hands, we’re all in this together!”

And then the reassuring answer, “He probably just went to the bathroom, to be sick. He won’t get out without us, don’t worry; the door’s all chained up.”

Oh, won’t I? he thought craftily. He kept going, panic simmering deep within him; ready to boil over into a tide of destruction engulfing anyone who stood in his way. The hallway seemed to be of elastic; the more of it he covered, the more of it was stretched away before him. And the seconds went by so slow. He’d been under way, trying to get to that far front door, for fully fifteen or twenty minutes now. They’d come after him soon, they wouldn’t wait back there much longer for him to return.

The first of the side doorways that lined the hall came creeping toward him at last. It had been left narrowly ajar. He stopped. The light was on in the room behind it. He crept forward, paying out his hands along the wall as he went, for balance. He found the crack of the door, peered through it. He saw a slice of an iron bedframe, a motionless

hand. Emboldened, he advanced to the other side of the doorway, where the gap was. He looked in through that.

One of the two owners, the man who had been sitting in the front room, was stretched out in there asleep, one hand backed against his eyes to ward off the light. He'd taken off his vest and shoes, and that strap that wasn't straight enough to be a suspender-strap was dangling now around one of the knobs at the foot of the bed. It ended in a holster, with a black slab of metal protruding from it. Turner couldn't take his eyes off it, while the long seconds that to him were minutes toiled by.

That meant out, that black slab, more surely than any door. More than that, it meant a continuance of out, for so long as he had it. And he wanted out with all the desperate longing of all trapped things, blindly clawing their way through a maze to the open. To the open where the equal chance is.

He widened the door, until the gap had become entry. He felt his way across the room toward it, using his feet on the floor the way the hands are usually used across an unknown surface, testing for unevennesses that might cause sound, avoiding them where they seemed to lurk. He kept his eyes on the sleeper's half-shielded face; he knew the danger would come from there first, if there was going to be any.

He'd reached it finally. He tilted the bottom of the holster out, to keep it from striking the iron bed-frame. He knew all the right things to do. All the tricks of stealth seemed to come to him instinctively. Or maybe the self-protective facets of his mind had been made keener. Dangerously so.

He drew the gun up until its snub nose had come clear. Then he let the holster down again. He stood there wavering slightly, but with his perceptions diamond-clear. "I've got a gun now. If this town tries to stop me, that'll be this town's hard luck!"

He moved backwards for the room door, in order to keep his gaze on the sleeper's face. Only, now there was a

difference: if that face awoke, that face would go to sleep for good. Halfway across, a worn floorboard creaked treacherously, and he flexed his knees and crouched. The sleeper's hand slid down from his eyes to his mouth. But his eyes didn't open.

He went on. The door sill nudged his heel, and he was over and out in the hall. He eased the door back to its original width, and started sidling along shoulder to wall, toward the next doorway down, behind which the card-playing lookout was.

He stopped just short of it and held his breath. He'd never known before that cards, a game of solitaire, could be heard so clearly. He heard: *snap*! and then a long wait, and then *snap*! again, as the unseen player laid them down one by one.

And then, just as he was starting to inch the gun muzzle past the frame of the doorway, preparatory to swerving it around and training it into the room, there was a catastrophic interruption. A sudden knocking on wood sounded, so close by it almost seemed to hit him in the face. A chair scraped back, and the card player cut out into the hall less than a foot ahead of him, so close his back almost grazed the gun point. The doorkeeper turned toward the front without looking back the other way, or he would have seen him there immediately behind him. Turner saw the light blur of his shirt sleeves recede into the shadowy haze of the hall just ahead.

He took a furtive step after him, his intention to champ the gun into his spine as soon as the chains were let down and overawe his way out. Again something happened to freeze his inflamed blood to new lows of panic.

The lookout had stopped before the panel, head tilted to the peephole. "Who are you?" Turner heard him ask gruffly.

A blurred voice answered something indistinguishable from outside. Turner couldn't catch it directly, was too far

back, but he got it—or thought he did—indirectly, through the lookout's abbreviated repetition.

"Dicks?" he heard him say clearly.

Dicks! Detectives had already been summoned, were at the door to arrest him. Evans and Gordon must have betrayed him, must have gotten word out in some way, perhaps through the windows overlooking the street, or perhaps by some telephone he had failed to notice, as soon as he'd left the death chamber.

The reaction of the lookout in the face of this situation should have had some meaning, but it failed to register on his jangled faculties. The lookout didn't seem unduly perturbed, he started unlacing the chains without trying to warn those in the front of the flat. Perhaps the password he had heard was: "A friend of Dick's" and not "Dicks!" Turner was never to know.

To retreat was simply to return to the scene of his crime. To step aside into the kitchen was simply to be discovered by the lookout within the next moment or two. To carry out his original idea of weaponing his way out gun-first was now suicide; detectives were a different matter.

Then his eyes focused on this closet door, down ahead but on the opposite side of the hall from the kitchen . . . and the other doorways. It must have been there all along, but it only now peered through to his taut consciousness. It was so close to the end of the hall it formed nearly a right angle with the front door. It meant almost treading on the lookout's heels to sidle in through it.

There was no time to weigh chances. He crept up behind the lookout, knifed his hand behind the refuge-door—it hadn't been shut tight into its frame—drew it out and slid in in back of it. Then he reversed it to about where it had been before, to avoid the risk of the latch tongue clicking home.

He was in darkness. He could feel something soft hanging beside him, like an old sweater. Whatever noise there had been had blended with the opening of the other door. He

heard feet shuffle by outside his hiding-place, and a voice said: “Straight down the hall, gentlemen.” That convinced him of who the newcomers were and what they were here for; it sounded like the sort of grudging permission that might be given to detectives forcing their way in. The chains had gone up again. A follow-up tread went by, after the others. The silence fell again.

He couldn’t linger. He had to get out, now more than ever. He widened the door, looked out, gun still bare in death’s-head fist. Their retreating tread was still vibrating at the upper end of the interminable hall. The lookout seemed to be accompanying them to the front—further evidence, to him, that they were punitive agents—he could see the receding blur of his white shirt dwindling in the gloom.

He was at the door by now, palsied hand to chain. He had to pocket the gun, for the first time since he’d had it, to free both hands. He got one off the groove with little more than a faint clash. Someone gave a hoarse cry of alarm down at the other end—that meant they’d finally discovered her. Then a great welter, a hubbub, of voices sounded. There was a lurking note of the crazed laughter of marihuana somewhere in the bedlam.

The remaining chain swung down, he wrenched the door out, and he was free. The last thing he heard behind him was the oncoming stomp of running feet.

Now began flight, that excruciating accompaniment to both the sleep-dream and the drug-dream as well. Down endless flights of stairs that seemed to have increased decimally since he had come up them so many days before. Round and round he went, hand slapping at the worn guardrail only at the turns to keep from bulleting head-on into the wall each time. The clamor had come out onto a landing high above him now; a thin voice came shouting down the stair-well, “There he is!” raising the hue and cry to the rest of the pack. Footsteps started cannonading down

after him. They only added wings to his effortless, almost cascading waterlike flight.

Like a drunk, he was incapable of hurting himself. At one turning he went off his feet and rippled down the whole succeeding flight of stair-ribs like a wriggling snake. Then he got up again and plunged ahead, without consciousness of pain or smart. The whole staircase-structure seemed to hitch crazily from side to side with the velocity of his descent, but it was really he that was hitching. But behind him the oncoming thunder kept gaining.

Then suddenly, after they'd kept on for hours, the stairs ended. He tore out through a square of blackness at the end of the entrance-hall, and the kindly night took him to itself—along with countless other things that stalk and kill and are dangerous if crossed.

He had no knowledge of where he was; if he'd ever had, he'd lost it long ago. The drums of pursuit were still beating a rolling tattoo inside the tenement. He chose a direction at random, fled down the deserted street, the wand of light from a wan street-lamp flicking him in passing, so fast did he scurry by beneath it.

A corner opened out before him, and he went skidding around it on the sides of his shoes. He was on an avenue now, where there was more light, and instinct warned him not to go so fast for he was automatically inviting pursuit and seizure by whatever passers-by he encountered. A man coming out of a saloon stepped back just in time to avoid being hurled down, and hollered maudlin imprecations after him, any one of which might have elicited sudden lead-spattering death for an answer, had he but known it.

Another corner, and he'd put two bends in the line of direct vision between himself and his pursuers. But he couldn't keep up this pace much longer; his breath was clogging and his heart felt as if it was swelling up like a balloon. He had to put some kind of a barrier around

himself, no matter how flimsy, behind which to gain a breathing-spell.

He saw a little candy shop ahead, the kind that the neighborhood kids patronize with their pennies, casting a weak swath of light across the sidewalk through its glass front. He tottered past the first time; he would have preferred a doorway or a basement areaway. But then he couldn't go on any further; his breath clogged up entirely, and he had to flounder to a stop against the wall. He turned back and made his way in by a process of rolling his shoulders along the plate-glass front.

There was only one person in it, a stout woman in a sweater, evidently the shopkeeper. She was sitting with elbows propped on the soft-drink counter, reading a newspaper. He had wavered past her toward the back before she had had time to look up. She was the kind of shopkeeper who finishes the paragraph she is reading before waiting on a customer. Then by the time she had he was abreast of the telephone booth in the rear. She took that to be his errand and lowered her head again.

A bulb went on dimly over him as he spread the folding glass panel to muffle his asphyxiated breathing. He clawed at it, hectically twisted it until he had gotten kindly, sheltering darkness around him again. The booth had a little, inadequate seat, little better than a corner-bracket. That supported him for awhile. Then he let himself go floundering down to the floor, back upright against the booth wall, one knee reared before him, the other folded under him.

Reprieve for a little while. But the night was so long, the drug was so strong. Everyone's hand was against him, every face was an enemy's.

* * * *

"All right, one at a time," the Lieutenant glowered. He didn't like either one of them, after what they'd just finished

telling him. He had them typed at a glance. No-good bums. Dressed up, and with jobs, and money in their pockets, but bums just the same.

They were both on the verge of hysteria, faces like chalk at the horrendous consequences unleashed by their own thoughtlessness. Gordon kept whining over and over, uncontrollably, “We didn’t mean no harm . . . We didn’t mean no harm . . .” He had a black eye from one of the cops.

“Shut up!” thundered the Lieutenant, pounding a fist down on the desk top. “You say that once more, and I’ll let you have one across the snoot! Speak up now—where else is he likely to go? Any place you know of? Any close friends he’s liable to turn to?”

They both shook their heads dazedly. Evans was still clutching a flimsy bit of woman’s scarf. A scarf that had belonged to the girl named Vinnie. “We two were about his best friends,” he faltered, “I don’t know of anyone else he —”

“His *best* friends! Hagh!” The Lieutenant flipped the lever on a desk transmitter. “Send Spillane in here.” Then he backed an arm toward the two cringing objects before him. “Take ‘em out!” he rasped.

A lean, springily-knit individual thumped the already open door in passing, came striding in twenty inches to the stride while they were being hustled out.

“Spillane—” said the Lieutenant. Then he dropped his voice confidentially, while the detective hand-heeled the corners of his desk. It rose again toward the end, as he finished giving the instructions, consulted the memoranda he’d taken down. “His name’s King Turner. He’s twenty-five, medium build, light-brown hair, he’s got a peculiarly thin face that you can’t miss, cheeks sort of hollowed-in. He’s wearing a pepper-and-salt suit, a telescope-crown gray hat, a belted gray topcoat that he may or may not still have with him. His own address is 22 East Fifth, between Lexington and Third. You may be able to head him off there, but I’ve

got my doubts he'll go back there. The point is he's roaming the streets right now, a menace, a living death, to anyone that happens to cross his path. For all practical purposes he's a maniac, he's all hopped-up with marihuana. He broke out of there armed. He's got a Luger packed with six bullets on him at this minute—I'm sending out a general alarm on him, but I'm giving you this special assignment in addition. You've got to catch up with him before it's too late and—"

The cop that had taken Gordon and Evans out thumped the door, stuck his head in. "One of them two birds just remembered another place he thinks he might go, Lieutenant," he interrupted.

"Let's have it," said the Lieutenant alertly.

Evans' pasty face was thrust in, with the cop's hand guiding it at the back of the neck like a terrier's scruff. "His former wife, he's still crazy about her," he said disconnectedly. "That brought on the whole thing, over at the ranch . . . They're separated, and she's living at the Continental, on 49th Street, under her own name, Eleanor Philips . . ."

The Lieutenant turned back to Spillane. "He's liable to go there, to change his clothes or try to borrow enough money to get out of town on. Try for him there too—and you'd better warn her she's in danger, not to let him in. To communicate with us immediately if he shows up or she hears from him in any way. And whatever you do . . ."

Spillane hung back for a minute at the threshold, turned his head, ". . . see that that guy is overtaken and stopped *before this night's over*, or there's going to be some killing like there never was before!"

* * * *

He was still coiled there in the unlighted depths of the phone booth. His breathing was a little less harassed now. The only sound had been an occasional crackle as the woman up front turned a page of the paper she was poring

over. She must have lost track of him, forgotten that he was still there . . . Suddenly a tread on the wooden flooring at the shop entrance, heavy, authoritative, inward-bound. Then a voice, resonant, masculine, ominous: “Ye know who I’m looking for, don’t ye? Ye know who it is I’m after?” And a chuckle. But a grim chuckle.

The woman’s betrayal was instant, almost indifferent.

“He’s back there, where do you suppuz? Go and get him yusself!”

Turner’s heart spiraled frantically up, dropped down again where it belonged only because it couldn’t burst out of his chest cavity. The gun came out almost by reflex action. He rose cobra-like within the narrow confines of his hiding-place. He edged the slide back a fraction of an inch—they were both out of range of the pane itself—peered laterally out, with two eyes on a vertical axis. One, his own; the other, the gun-bore, six inches lower.

A lowering uniformed cop, a big bull of a man, was standing up there, opposite the soft drink counter that ensconced the woman. But his head was turned down Turner’s way, and there was a knowing glint to his slitted eyes.

Turner flung his own head back so violently the other way it struck the inner wall of the booth. He didn’t even feel the impact, and his hat, crushed, deadened the sound of it. He dropped down again, to the lower rim of the glass eyes just above it, gun-mouth just above it. If he came toward him, if he came down this way . . . A heavy preliminary footfall sounded. Then a second. Then a third. The cop’s blue uniform-front impinged on the edge of the glass. Turner sighted the gun, centered it directly over his shield.

He took one more step forward and he stopped right outside the booth, blurring the pane. He didn’t seem to be looking in, he craftily kept his profile turned toward it, as if unaware of it. But Turner saw his shoulder shift position,

slope downward. That meant his arm was reaching back, that meant he was drawing.

His fear-inflamed mind sent the control-signal to his finger-joint to fold back. The trigger sliced back. The blast seemed to lift the booth clear off the floor, drop it down again. A pin-wheel of vacancy appeared in the glass, flinging off shards and slivers.

The cop's profile went down without turning full-face even at the very end, stunned unawareness of what had hit him written on it. Turner slapped back the remaining lower section of the panel, revealed it once more. On the floor, already dead. But still surprised. He took a step out, found himself facing a table of three rigid figures, only two of them still breathing.

There was a little runty man standing there, just past the booth in the other direction, as though he had been coming forward to meet the cop from the rear of the store, holding a numbers-slip in his extended hand. Still clutched in the cop's nerveless hand on the floor was, not a gun, but a dollar bill, freshly withdrawn from his back pocket.

The tableau held for a frozen minute. Neither of them, the woman nor her husband, seemed able to realize what had happened to him. Then as Turner stepped forward into their line of vision, smoking gun out before him, the woman's slack jaw tautened for a scream. He dialed the gun her way and the scream suffocated to death in her larynx.

"In back, the two of you!" It was the berserk yowl of an enraged tomcat on a back fence.

It was impossible for her to escape from the counter that walled her in on three sides, in any direction but toward him. She was afraid to go toward him. They were ignoramuses, but they could tell they were up against something that wasn't normal, they could tell by his eyes.

The little man, gums white, quavered: "Please, Momma, don't argue; you heard him."

She wrung her hands, whined: “Please, mister, just let me go by, I only want to get on the other side of you, like you said; don’t do nothing—” and scurried by, head and shoulders defensively lowered as though he were an overhanging branch.

He shepherded them into the little back room the man had come out of, looked around to make sure there was no other way out, changed the key to the outside of the door and locked the two of them in, with a hissing, “Keep quiet now, or I’ll come back and—”

The shop entrance was still clear, no inquisitive figures blocking it. Facing it, and the prospect of further flight, he raked distracted fingers through his hair. That dislodged his hat. He saw it, but left it lying where it had fallen. There was no time for anything but to keep going—until he dropped.

Outside in the dark again, a sinister afterthought caught up with him, just too late. “I shouldn’t have left them alive. They’ll tell who it was, what I looked like.” But there was no turning back again, either, on this satanic treadmill that had caught him up, that was wearing out his body, mind and soul.

He hurried along furtively, hugging the building-line, a shadow that progressed by fits and starts, from doorway to doorway, crevice to crevice. A shadow looking for a home. Wasn’t there any which way he could turn, wasn’t there anyone in town who would . . . She came this time without the help of music. She was never very far removed from his thoughts, Eleanor. She was golden letters lighting up the frightened darkness of his mind. She’d help him. She was the only one he could’ trust. She’d once loved him. All that love couldn’t be completely gone, there must be a little of it left.

But where was she? He couldn’t remember, he couldn’t remember that name. Some hotel, but he couldn’t remember the name.

Sometimes it seemed almost to come to the tip of his tongue, then it receded again. Commodore? No. Concord? No. Con-? Con-?

He dogtrotted along through the dark, whimpering disjointedly: “Eleanor! Eleanor! I’ve got to find her.”

* * * *

A cop from a radio-car had just let them out of the back room when Spillane got there. Half the neighborhood had come crowding into the store, was milling around inside it. The crowd hid the dead cop on the floor from Spillane’s sight for a minute. He nearly tripped over him when it gave way unexpectedly at his pressure.

The storekeeper’s wife made straight for the fountain, wrenched at one of the spigots, gulped a mouthful of soda water from the hollow of her hand. Then she darted to the cash register, shut the drawer, hastily clawed at its contents. She gave a bleat of relief. “It’s ull right, Poppa! Dolla ninety-seven! He didn’t take nothing!”

“For no rizzon,” the little storekeeper panted amazedly.

“Like gless, his eyes!” the woman shuddered.

Spillane had picked up the much-trodden-on hat. “K. T.” he read from the sweatband. “Yeah, I think I know who he was,” he said gloomily.

“For no rizzon,” the shopkeeper heaved again. “Ufficer O’Kiff didn’t even know he was in there. I didn’t myself! Did you, Momma?”

“Sure, but I forgat.”

Spillane eyed the glass-littered booth. Then he reached in and from its furthermost recesses picked up a dislodged “Out of Order” placard, that must have fallen unnoticed long hours before Turner had ever sought refuge in it.

“Yeah, that was him,” he repeated. He questioned them on his appearance. They told him. They told him copiously, nearly breaking their necks nodding in confirmation.

He started out toward the locked store entrance, beyond which the shoals of excluded onlookers now stood peering in.

They didn't understand what he meant when they heard him mutter troubledly: "Now it *is* too late . . . Now there's only one language to speak . . ."

* * * *

The key to memory had been a simple one after all; simple but effective. An unguarded telephone directory, this time hanging on the wall, almost at the entrance of a long narrow, all-night lunchroom, with a dozing vagrant or two nodding in the one-armed chairs. The huddled entrance, the book snaked from the hook and cowered-over in the corner with back turned, the vibrating finger tracing the classified list of hotels, recognition—like striking a match on sandpaper—when his nail struck the name. *The Continental*.

And now, the Continental itself.

* * * *

She stepped out of the car in a peach-colored wrap, and she was beautiful enough to have caused even death to relent and pass her by. The man who loved her was standing beside her, holding her hand, and she was right under the lighted marquee of the hotel she lived in; how could anything happen to her. There was nothing waiting for her but sleep, upstairs.

"Goodnight and thanks, Matt. I enjoyed the evening tremendously."

"Won't you let me come up for a minute?"

She smiled disarmingly. "It's late and I'm tired. Call me from your office tomorrow, instead."

"Well, at least let me take you in as far as the elevator."

This time she laughed outright. "You don't have to be so formal. You'd better run along home and get some sleep

yourself. No one will kidnap me between here and the lobby."

"Well, may I call you back in ten or fifteen minutes, just to say goodnight? It's hard to say it the way I'd like to, down here in the middle of the street."

There was another machine, blocked off from the entrance by his, trying to reach it and discharge its occupants. It had already sounded its horn querulously a couple of times. He had to get in and drive off without waiting to hear whether he had her permission or refusal for the last request.

She waved and turned away. On the bottommost entrance-step she dropped her handkerchief or something. She had to stop a minute to pick it up. Otherwise perhaps . . . That was when the whisper reached her, from the outer darkness beyond the marquee. "Eleanor! Eleanor!" She turned and looked that way, uncertain she had actually heard anything, and a blurred form seemed to draw still further back into the gloom. There were a line of shrubs, growing in tubs, ranged on each side of the entrance, and it seemed to sidle in between two of them.

She hesitated, stepped toward the border of the light. The whisper came again, clearer now. "Eleanor. Come out of the light, I gotta speak to you—" She could make out a crescent of pale face looming there between the shrubs.

The darkness fell over her peach cloak like a gray curtain as she advanced a step further in that direction. The crescent-face enlarged to full. "King!" she gasped in sibilant astonishment.

"I have to see you. I have to see you right away. I called your room from the outside, and they said—"

"I'm always glad to see you any time, King. Come on up a minute then."

"I'm afraid to go in there with you. Somebody might see me—"

She could make out his harassed, disheveled condition, misunderstood the cause of it. “You’ve been drinking again,” she reproved forgivingly. “Never mind, come on up and I’ll straighten you out.”

“But I’m afraid to let them see me—”

“There’s an all-night drugstore down at the lower corner there. From the back of it you can go directly into the hotel; without having to pass in front of the desk. Suppose we go in that way.”

Even before they’d reached it, a surge of cold fear drenched him. Could he trust her? Should he take a chance and go up? Once he was up there, escape might be cut off. Then the reassuring thought came: she didn’t know what he’d done yet, so there was no reason for her to give him away.

There was no one in sight in the drugstore, only a night clerk busied behind a partition filling a prescription. They I passed through completely unseen. A passageway to the rear of it, leading to the hotel coffee-shop, was serviced by the elevators. She brought one down and they got on. She had the moral courage of utter respectability. “Straight up, Harry; don’t stop at the main floor.”

“Yes, Miss Philips.” She got the respect due utter respectability. Though he’d seen the man step into the car after her, he kept his eyes straight front, didn’t leer around over his shoulder. He kept on living, because of that. Turner’s hand was on his back pocket the whole way up.

The main floor passed with a blurred flash of black-and-white tiled floor. The desk was off side out of sight somewhere; even if it hadn’t been, no one could have focused the car’s occupants as it shot up past the opening.

They got out, and she made a turn, keyed a door, threw it open. She lighted up the room beyond. Then she turned and said, “Now, King, what’s all this great-?”

He said, “Close the door, first. Hurry up, come inside, first.”

She did. By that time he was already over at the first of the two other doors it contained, looking into a closet. Then at the next one, looking into a bath. He said, “Are you alone? You sure you’re alone?”

“Come here, King,” she said soothingly. “Sit down in this chair. You’re all unstrung. I don’t like the way you’re acting. What is it?”

“Eleanor, if I told you something, could I trust you not to give me away?”

She smiled rebukingly. “Have I ever let you down?”

“But this is something different. Once I’ve told you, I’m wide open, I’m at your mercy.”

She said with charming ruefulness. “If you think I could take advantage of you, then maybe you’d better not tell me.”

“But I have to. I’m all choked up with it.” He tore open his vest with both hands and a button popped off. “And I need your help, I’m cut off, surrounded!”

“Tell it, then. I think you can count on me.” She had forgiven him in advance; a bad check, a mess with a girl, no matter what it was.

He sat down at last. He let his hands dangle limp over his knees. “Eleanor, I killed a girl over in a place where I was.”

He saw her go down out of her depth for a minute. He saw the blue-gray tinge of shock course through her skin, mottling it, as from an immersion. She hadn’t been thinking along those lines. This was finis. “Are you sure?” That was just a cover-up, to gain time while she was fighting for self-mastery. She kept her voice steady. The end of the last word shook a little, that was all. She knew he must be sure; he wouldn’t have come to her if he hadn’t been.

“I saw them pick her up. I heard them say she wasn’t breathing any more. I was holding the knife in my hands, all red.”

He was a thing apart now; one of those things you read about in the papers, but didn’t have a right in the same

room with you. But still she tried to help him; she was that kind. “It’s ghastly, but the only thing to do is to go to them and—”

“But you don’t understand. There was a second one. A policeman, in a candy-store. He came in and . . . I did that one purposely.”

She took a step back. Then another one. The peach cloak dropped in a puddle. Her voice was thin and still, he could hardly hear her.

“What is it? What’s acting on you? What’s the matter with your eyes? It’s not drink, I can tell that—”

“Marihuana.”

She looked down at the floor. Something made her shiver. He could see her doing it quite plainly. Something made her feel cold.

A spark kindled in the room. A spark of suspicion in his mind. Once lit, there was no way of reaching it to put it out again. Everything she did from now on simply fanned it brighter.

“Who was that man, in the car down at the door?”

“A friend.”

“Is he coming back? Is he coming up here?”

“No, no.” Her voice was shaking now beyond control. Only her demeanor was still steady, her facial expression. She was so used to peace and safety, it hadn’t cracked yet. “Don’t you want to lie down on the bed, King? It might help you—get over it, wear it off . . .”

He glanced over at it longingly, as if worn out; almost seemed to incline the upper part of his body toward it. Then he checked himself, drew back. The spark glowed bright, and he darted her a suspicious sidelong glance.

She drew slowly back across the room, without turning her back on him; the way a person does who is already in mortal terror, but trying not to give offense.

Presently he pointed to the bath door. “Can I go in there a minute?”

“Yes, surely.”

He closed the mirrored door after him. Instantly it flashed open again. “What were you reaching for? I saw your hand go out.”

Horror showed in her eyes, but she overcame it. “I was only reaching down for a cigarette. Here they are. See them?”

“But you’re standing nearer the outside door than you were a minute ago.” He came out into the room, stayed out, on guard.

The cords at the side of her neck were pulled taut. She tried to smile waveringly at him, re-establish a normal atmosphere. “Here, I’ll sit all the way over here; I promise you I won’t move—”

He sat back in his original chair, nearer the door. He never took his eyes off her for a single instant. She faced him, eyes steady by sheer will power alone in a face calcium-white with tension, while the minutes seemed to explode around them like popcorn. Once she broke, heeled hands to her eyes as if overcome. “Don’t! You’re torturing me. My nerves are tearing. That devilish drug—”

He slitted his eyes at her. “You’re scared of me,” he said accusingly. “That must be because you—”

“Only because you’re making me so. You’re acting so unpredictable.” She was twining and untwining her fingers desperately. “Lie down for only a minute, give me a chance to pull myself together. I’ve just experienced a shock, I need time to adjust myself. Then, in five minutes from now, we’ll be more used to each other, not so jump—”

“In five minutes you could be all the way down in the lobby—” He stopped short, blinked puzzledly. “What were we talking about just then?”

She clawed at her lips, forced back a scream. She quickly recovered, smiled at him again with dearly-bought composure. “For my own sake and yours, let me try to clear it out of your mind. What’s good for it? Please lie down. I’ll

sit beside you; you'll hold my hand if you want; you'll tie my wrist to yours—"

She seemed on the point of winning him over. He looked yearningly toward the bed. She could sense that he was about to give in, relax this deathwatch, if only for a moment. And once his eyes dropped close . . . The telephone shrilled out janglingly in the coffin-silent room. She gave a spasmodic start, that was almost a leap in air. Instantly he was on his feet, hovering watchfully between her and it.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know; how can I tell, until I answer?"

"Don't touch it or I'll—!"

She had made an inadvertent little gesture toward it; she quickly whipped her hand back again, as if it had been burned. She shivered, stroked her own upper arms as if she were unbearably cold. Help—that was so near and yet so far.

Both their gazes were fixed on it, the inanimate instrument, now; his in hair trigger menace, hers in swooning helpless frustration. If she could only knock it off the edge of the . . . "*Keep your elbow down*! I saw it move —" His own hitched up.

"But it may be Matt, the man you saw bring me home. He knows I'm up here. If I don't answer, it'll be worse than if I do. I'll tell him I'm in bed, I'll tell him not to bother me—"

The continued ringing was an irritant, perhaps that helped. "Go ahead," he gritted. "Get rid of him." But the gun had come out now, was pressed into the soft flesh of her throat, just under the chin.

Her hand crept out toward the transmitter, cautiously, as if fearful of bringing on calamity if it betrayed too much eagerness. One of the breaks in the ringing had just occurred.

It didn't end! It stretched . . . it stretched . . . Silence. The call was killed. He flicked her futilely-extended hand back with the point of the gun.

Her head dropped down on her chest with a swinging roll. He tilted it back with his free hand. Moisture squeezed out of her eyes.

"What're you crying for?" he scowled viciously. "You musta wanted to talk to him bad? You musta wanted to—"

She didn't make any answer. You don't reason with a hooded cobra or a hydrophobic dog or a time bomb. You can't. There was only silence in the room, waiting silence . . . and the three of them.

There were three of them in the room now, where only two had first come in. Death was in the room with the two of them.

* * * *

Spillane touched the requisitioned passkey gingerly to the door, gun unlimbered in his right hand and standing well off to one side of the opening. He sent the freed door back with a stub of his toe and followed his gun in like a compass.

Darkness and silence.

The place swallowed him up. There was a wait. Then the snap of a wall switch and a gush of light. He came back again to the outside doorway, hitched his head at the empty hallway, and a lurking auxiliary materialized around a bend in it, almost as if by mind reading.

"Not here," Spillane breathed when he had approached. They both went in and he closed the door after the two of them.

Eleanor's picture was still where Turner had put it down after last looking at it.

"Pick your spit while we can still see," Spillane cautioned. "I'm going to kill the lights as soon as I try to get hold of her once more. He may show up from one minute to the next—"

He lifted Turner's phone, slotted the dial.

A voice said, "Good evening, Continental."

He asked without any introductory explanation, "Did she come in yet?"

The answer was given with immediate understanding, as though this was only the latest of many such calls, repeated at short intervals. “I’ll try once more, but I don’t think she has or I would have seen her.” Then a period of vacant humming. The voice returned. “No, Miss Philips hasn’t come back yet, her room doesn’t answer—”

“Hold her downstairs at the desk with you, if she does!”

He hung up, eyed the picture somberly.

“I’d better get over there myself—and fast,” he said. “She’s got to be tipped off the minute she comes in!”

The other man had disappeared by now, though the room was still fully lighted. A low voice from behind a reversed wing chair said, “I’m set. Give it the gun.”

The wall switch snapped a second time, and they both disappeared.

“You sit tight here, we’ll work both ends at once. He’s still likely to come back here—if he can remember to locate it. If he does, don’t take any chances—he’s dynamite!”

“That’s all right,” the voice from behind the wing chair said dryly, “I used to be foreman of a blasting crew before I joined the outfit.”

The outside door opened and closed again.

Darkness and silence.

* * * *

She was a rag doll now, a scarecrow in a stringy, silver dress, the beautiful thing that had alighted under the marquee downstairs so short a while before. But the will to live was left, continually seeking new outlets, groping, cajoling, tempting, keeping her on her feet when her flagging, beaten down spirit wanted to let her down in an inert heap at his feet.

“. . . and they put mayonnaise on them, and they toast the bread if you want them to; I’ve often had one sent up late at night . . .”

“Yes,” he assented eagerly. “I haven’t eaten since Tuesday night, before I went to that . . . But how do I know you won’t try to give me away?”

“You’ll hear me, you’ll be right beside me—I’ll just give the order—not a syllable more.”

“But when he comes up with it?”

“I’ll have him leave it on the floor outside the door.”

The hempseeds create a false, insatiable appetite, as well as distorting the time sense. He couldn’t resist the picture she had so temptingly drawn for him. “All right, go ahead,” he said truculently, and poised two fingers of his free hand directly over the transmission hook, ready to press down as on a telegraph key.

“But not into my cheek like that,” she pleaded subduedly. “I can’t speak clearly, it distorts my mouth—” He withdrew the gun a little, just beyond contact point.

She had it in her hand at last, at her ear; a skull that was still alive, sending down for sandwiches. She swallowed twice, to lubricate her strained throat. She was not going to try anything so foolhardy as to—that was not the plan. The will to live was too strong for that.

“Coffee-shop, please.” His breath was coming down her forehead from above in a hot stream.

After a wait that seemed eternal, a voice answered.

She said: “Send up two sandwiches, double-decked and toasted—” Something wet fell on her forehead. “And coffee in a container, to 815.” And she added, with quiet urgency, “*Just like the other night*. I can’t seem to sleep.”

The voice at the other end said, with sudden understanding: “Oh, you mean you want some of that sleeping-stuff I got from the drugstore for you to put into it again, Miss Philips?”

“A lot,” she answered. “A lot—” And then as the connection broke, “—of mayonnaise.” She replaced the transmitter as though its weight had broken her arm.

“What was that, just like the other night?” he demanded suspiciously.

“Not too sweet, I don’t like the coffee too sweet.”

“How do I know who you were really talking to just then?”

“But you heard me.”

“How long will it take to get up here?”

“Oh, about five minutes,” she said incautiously.

“Yeah? Well, we’ll see. If no sandwiches have come in five minutes, I’ll know you put something over on me, gave me away—”

This time her face turned ashen; more stricken than it had yet been since they’d come into the room. “No! Don’t . . . you can’t do that? That stuff has damaged your time conception—you think Tuesday night was a long time ago, and it’s still only Tuesday night! You won’t be able to tell—!”

He gave her a grim smile. “You seem frightened, Eleanor. If you just phoned down for sandwiches, why are you looking so white?”

“Let me call back, tell them to hurry it—”

He moved toward her with catlike agility. “You’re not touching that thing again tonight! I was a fool to let you do it the first time!” He gave a foreshortened tug of rabid violence, and the phone cord dangled loose in his hands.

She ran a distracted hand through her hair. “Then in fairness to me, look at the clock over there? Set the time at which I made my call. Twenty-five minutes past four. See?”

He turned and glanced at it, but his face didn’t change.

“Let me have a cigarette, in mercy’s name,” she breathed huskily.

He flung one at her. He began taking quick turns back and forth, directly in front of the room door. Every so often he’d stop and listen intently. There was silence inside and out. Only the sound her breathing made, and his velvety tread on the carpet.

The gun had stayed out. Presently his eyes stabbed over at her. “It’s taking a long time—” he said threateningly.

She dropped the cigarette, as though it were top-heavy between her fingers. “But King, you’re loading the dice against me,” she moaned. “His coffee-maker may be out of order, he may have gotten off at the wrong door—any little thing like that, and you’re penalizing me for it!”

“You didn’t phone for any room service!” He had stopped pacing now. This was the showdown, at long last. She cringed back against the wall. “You gave way on me to the dicks, and they’re probably on their way over right now—”

“But you *heard* me—”

“I can’t remember what I heard any more. I can’t think straight and you know it, you’re trying to kid me . . . I know how they close in on someone they’re after; they sneak up and surround the place first. That’s what’s taking them so long. It’s over half-an-hour already!”

Her head rolled dismayedly from side to side against the wall. “It isn’t—it’s only a little over three minutes! Look at the clock!”

She held out her arm, pointing, but this time he wouldn’t turn. “You set it back. It’s long ago you called down. I know how it *feels*!”

She only had one more dodge left. One more, and then the struggle for life was out of her. “Our song. Wait! I have it here—” She floundered across to a turntable, began shuffling through records with a furtive haste. One dropped, broke; another, a third; she didn’t even stop to look at them.

She found one, fitted it on, set the needle-arm. Then she turned to face him, at last gasp. Already more dead than alive. He had already killed her, all but her body. Life wasn’t worth this price, anyway.

The music came from behind her, seemed to well up out of nowhere in the room.

“King! Do you remember our first Christmas together? That little house in New Rochelle. The tree we put up. *Don’t come any nearer*. The clock! It’s only six minutes; he’ll be here any—”

“Why did you have to give way on me? All I asked was to stay here in your room until the heat cooled.”

“*Don’t point it this way*! *Don’t tighten your arm*! I’m going to get married again next month! I was going to be happy again, until you came here tonight! Don’t take it away from me—!”

“Now I’m sure you squealed on me.”

It crashed out like thunder, making the room seem smaller and lower-ceilinged than it was. She went down saying two things: “The clock!” and “I’m Eleanor!” Then she said one thing more, spoke a name he didn’t know: “Matt!” Then she died on the floor.

“*After you’ve gone, after you’ve gone a-wa-a-a-ay*.”

The record whined off into silence. The smoke thinned into invisibility. The knock on the door came just as the minute hand on the disregarded clock behind him nicked twenty-five minutes to five in the morning—ten minutes after she had telephoned down to the coffee-shop. A lifetime. A deathtime.

He pivoted, then stood there tense, without moving, gun ready again. The knob turned and it opened slowly. An aluminum tray covered with a napkin came in first, alone, as if suspended in mid-air. A voice came second, cheerfully unaware. ”Here y’are. How’s ‘at for quick service.” A waiter’s face came last, hitched back, smirking proudly.

He hadn’t heard the shot. He must have been still coming up in the car shaft when it sounded. He looked in past Turner and gun, saw her there, like a rumpled silver flag lowered in defeat. His face turned flour-white. The tray slowly upended, somersaulted, went down flat with a crash.

The rest happened fast, while people behind other doors up and down the hall must have been still rearing

uncertainly upright in their beds or trying to report over an unanswered telephone: “I thought I heard a shot up here somewhere.”

Turner said, “In! In all the way!” and locked the bath door on the palsied waiter. Then he shoved the tray litter aside with his foot and closed the room door. Then he sprinted down the hall and around the turn and skidded to a stop on the rubber matting before the twin elevator-panels. He gouged a thumb into the push button.

There was a dial over each to indicate each car’s position. An uncanny, an unbelievable synchronization, that might never have occurred again in ten years of nights, had taken place just as he arrived. The two cars were proportionately distant from him, one a floor below, one a floor above. The latter (evidently the same one that had discharged the waiter on its way up just now) coming down, the former coming up.

He shifted toward the dial whose indicator was descending toward “8.” The effect of the fumes was beginning to wear off and perhaps he reasoned that a descending car would continue downward, while an ascending one would most likely continue upward, trapping him hopelessly in the building’s upper reaches. In that slight step to the left lay eight or ten months’ life, lay the difference between legal death and death by violence.

Both cars arrived simultaneously. The two slides slid back so in unison that it made one continuous motion toward the right—with just the interruption of a mail-chute in between.

The back of Turner’s heel lifted into the one opening just as the hub of Spillane’s toe preceded him out of the other.

The panel cut him off again, put bronze between them before there had been time for a full bodily glimpse, and Turner was soldering his gun like a blowtorch into the operator’s spine. “All the way down—basement, and no stops!”

Again a blurred flash of black-and-white tiled lobby, too quick to focus, and then he tomahawked the back of the operator's head with his gun-heft, stepped out of the car. Someone was discontentedly bouncing a half-dollar on the counter in the deserted coffee-shop and snarling: "Where's that damn counterman?"

That damn counterman was nine floors up, locked in the bath of a murdered woman's apartment. Turner went out the other way through the drugstore.

* * * *

The sight of his own inscrutable door, twenty minutes and a wild taxi ride later, fingertips outstretched to it helplessly, reminded him of something from that night weeks ago, that night from another lifetime when he had left here: he'd left his key inside, he couldn't get in without rousing the night doorman, whom he had sidled by without awakening just now.

The fumes were all gone now—too late. He'd killed the thing he loved best. He'd still go through the motions of escape, because the life spark glimmers on to the last; of going in there, getting money, packing a bag, and trying to make one of the bus or railway stations. But it was just reflex now, momentum; the way a chicken keeps going after its head is cut off. His heart had died during the night.

There was another way in. His quarters were so high up he never locked his windows. There was a ledge, a slim coping running along the face of the building flush with them. He went down the hall, turned into an indentation, threw open the ventilating window backing it.

He climbed out on the narrow place and stood up, turned inward to the wall. Then he started to shuffle his feet along —he couldn't intercross them—and pat his hands along the stone like suction cups. It was starting to get light-blue in the east, but the streets were still dark chasms fifteen stories below. First came his tiny bath window, higher than

the others and too small to go in through. He passed it, after resting a moment on the steadier grip its sill gave his hands, went on.

The main, full-sized window came inching up alongside him, and he'd made the harebrained passage, was gripping the edge of the stone window-trim, looking in. His room was still darker than the sky out behind him, but a pale oval stood out against the reflected light. It moved and he identified it. Suddenly a waiting man had reared from his wing-backed chair, screened from the door, was drawing.

Turner drew faster, fired through the glass and all. What felt like sand stung his forehead, and an intolerable pain shot from his eyeball. He slapped a hand to it—the other he needed to stay up on the ledge—and his gun went sailing down into oblivion.

He'd missed. Through the blinding smoke and with only one eye, he saw the man still on his feet, coming toward the window, gun sighted at him. Heard him say: "Don't move! Stay where you are!"

He knew the man wouldn't fire. He started inching back along the lip of stone the way he'd come, one hand patting a little red along the stonework now. He was back out of reach by the time the man had thrown up the shattered pane, was looking out at him, still trying to overawe him with his gun. "Come in here or I'll fire!"

Turner jeered, "Come out and get me!" kept sidling back. He was past the bath window now. The man got to it too late, found when he'd raised it it wouldn't have done him any good anyway, was too high up. There was a longer space between it and the hall window.

Far down below he heard sirens hooting up, and shouts reached him dimly, and though he didn't turn to look down (knew better!) he could imagine the white roofs of the two or three patrol cars peering up like overturned rowboats.

A head thrust out of the hall window ahead, sighted over at him. Spillane's head, although he didn't know him. They

looked at one another squarely for the first time, although one had been chasing the other all night. Spillane tried to intimidate him with a gun too. Turner didn't even bother looking at it. He knew they wouldn't shoot him in cold blood while he was out here, for some reason, now that he was unarmed himself. If he'd still been in full flight on the streets below . . . He looked down the other way. The first man had gone back to the living room window again. He was cut off. He'd stopped moving now, just stayed there where he was, equidistant from the two. All right, they had him. Let them come and get him then. He hated everyone in the world, now that Eleanor was gone. He'd take whoever came out after him, off with him.

He just stood there waiting for the end, face turned toward the blank wall, conscious of a great humming crowd far down below; deaf alike to their threats at gun-point, their cajoleries, their hidden conferences and maneuvers back out of sight of the windows.

The hall window had been vacant for a while. Now Spillane came back again. Not only his face this time, his knee, his thigh, then his whole body. So he was coming out after him, was he? He'd muffed an assignment and he was going to atone for it by playing the hero.

"You're going to die if you come out here," Turner warned him with deadly quietness.

Spillane stood up, full-height now against the wall like he was. Turner didn't begin edging away as he advanced. This had to end sooner or later; it may as well end now.

He didn't even bother answering the detective's ingratiating patter, half-heard it. "Look, I have no gun, Turner . . . Come inside with me and let's talk it over . . . Listen, I'll make a deal with you . . ."

He only spoke once—when the detective had reached the half-way mark. "This is your last chance, whoever you are. If you've got someone you love, don't be a sucker, go back."

He thought he saw the other man's face whiten a little, but he never hesitated, came slowly on.

They were a yard from each other now. "All right," Turner said clippedly. He took both hands off the wall, turned shoulders and waist toward him, started leaning, arms in hook position; then as gravity caught at him, plunged at him, wrapped him in a death-grip, and the two of them went off into space.

Someone screamed thinly, most likely Turner, and a horrified moan went up from the street.

The rope that Spillane had had wound about his waist jerked taut at about the third floor down, and the commingled bodies dangled there with a shudder for a moment. Turner's grip had broken in the fall. Spillane had him by the slack of the coat and the collar and could no longer risk shifting his hold without losing him altogether.

In the frozen silence the scores of upturned faces could see the coat part as its buttons went with the strain. Then Turner's arms started to pull out of the sleeves with hideous slowness. Spillane writhed frantically, trying to grasp him by the body itself. They shot apart, and he was alone there with an empty coat.

The net they had spread in the street might still have saved Turner, but his body didn't go out far enough, it broke across a projection at second-story height, stayed partly on and partly off.

When they had hauled Spillane up again to safety, he hung his head, had very little to say, like a man who feels he has been frustrated through no fault of his own.

"Don't feel that way," they tried to tell him, patting him on the back. "You did your best, all that anyone can do."

He kept shaking his head. "If I could only have caught up with him in time, before he dropped that first cop in the candy-store! After that it was too late. But in the beginning, all I was sent out after him for was to tell him . . ."

* * * *

The other girl was assailed by misgivings. She tried to join in the unrestrained hilarity when Vinnie finished telling it. But she couldn't. Finally she asked: "But what was so funny about it?"

Vinnie was almost incoherent with laughter, she could hardly articulate at all. "If you coulda seen the look on his face," she strangled, "when he saw me lying there on the floor, squeezing out his gob of bread with ketchup on it against my side! And the careful way the boys picked me up and laid me on the sofa, as if I were dead! I bet he's still running! I must ring up and find out whether the boys have seen or heard from him since. It was worth the price of admission, alone! I tell you, never a dull moment when I'm around!"

The other girl dutifully chortled a little in accompaniment to Vinnie's guffaws. But she still had her doubts. "It was kind of a mean trick to play on anyone, though."

Vinnie shrugged. "Oh, well—what harm was there in it?"

"There's someone at the door. I'll answer it for you." The friend came back and reported: "There's a man out there waiting to see you, and I don't like the look on his face. It spells trouble to me. He's either a bill collector or a plainclothesman . . ." and with unconscious prophecy she added ". . . or maybe a little of both."

THE FATAL FOOTLIGHTS

HE SAW VILMA FIRST. SHE was the dark one. Then he saw Gilda. She was the golden one. He didn't see the man at all, that first night. He didn't know any of their names. He didn't want to. He'd just gone to a show on his night off.

He had an aisle seat, alongside the runway. He'd told the ticket seller he wanted to see more than just their baby-blue eyes. The ticket seller had said, "You will." He'd been right, it turned out.

It was, of course, simply burlesque under a different name, to evade the licensing restrictions of the last few years. But at the moment Benson took his seat, there wasn't anything going on that a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl couldn't have watched with perfect propriety. A black-haired singer in a flowing, full-length dress was rendering *Mighty Lak a Rose*. And she was good, too.

But this was his night off and he felt kind of cheated. "Did I walk in on a funeral?" he asked himself. He shouldn't have asked that, maybe. The mocking little gods of circumstances were only too willing to arrange it for him.

The singer walked off, the orchestra gave out with an introductory flourish, and the proceedings snapped back into character. The curtains parted to reveal a "living statue" group—five or six nymphs enameled a chalky white, their torsos veiled by wisps of cheesecloth, presided over by

a central “statue” poised on a pedestal in their midst. This was Gilda, the main attraction.

Gilda stood there, head thrown back, seemingly in the act of nibbling at a dangling cluster of grapes. Whether she was as innocent of vesture as she seemed was beside the point; her body was coated with a thick layer of scintillant golden paint which was certainly far more protective than any ordinary clothes would have been. But that didn’t dampen the general enthusiasm any. It was just the principle of the thing that mattered. Good clean fun, so to speak. She got a tremendous hand without doing a thing—just for art’s sake.

The curtains coyly came together again, veiling the tableau. There was a teasing pause, maintained just long enough to whet the audience’s appetite for more, then they parted once more and the “statuary” had assumed a different position. Gilda was now shading her eyes with one hand, one leg poised behind her, and staring yearningly toward the horizon—or more strictly speaking, a fire door at the side of the auditorium.

Benson caught the spirit of the thing along with everyone else and whacked his hands. The curtains met, parted once more, and again the tableau had altered. This time Gilda was up on tiptoes on her pedestal, her body arched over as though she was looking at her own reflection in a pool.

Just before the curtains obliterated her, Benson thought he saw her waver a little, as if having difficulty maintaining her balance. Or maybe it was simply faulty timing. She had prepared to change positions a little too soon, before the curtains entirely concealed her from view. That slight flaw didn’t discourage the applause any. It had reached the pitch of a bombardment. The audience wasn’t a critical one; it didn’t care about complete muscular control as long as it got complete undress. Or the illusion of it, through gold-plating.

The pause was a little longer this time, as though there had been a slight hitch. Benson wondered where the dancing came in. They had billed her out front as “The Golden Dancer,” he remembered, and he wanted his money’s worth. He didn’t have long to wait. The footlights along the runway, unused until now, gushed up, the curtains parted, and Gilda was down on the stage floor now, and in motion.

She was coming out on the runway to dance over their heads. For this additional intimacy, she had provided herself with a protective mantle of gauzy black—just in case some of the Commissioner’s men happened to be in the audience.

She wasn’t any great shakes as a dancer; nobody expected her to be, nobody cared. It was mostly a matter of waving her arms, turning this way and that, and flourishing the mantle around her, a little bit like a bullfighter does his cape. She managed, while continually promising revealing gaps in it, to keep it all around her at all times, in a sort of black haze, like smoke. It was simply the striptease in a newer variation.

But indifferent as her dancing ability was to begin with, a noticeable hesitation began to creep into its posturing after she had been on the runway a few moments. She seemed to keep forgetting what to do next.

“They hardly have time to rehearse at all,” Benson thought leniently.

Her motions had slowed down like a clock that needs winding. He saw her cast a look over her shoulders at the unoccupied main stage, as if in search of help. The lesser nymphs hadn’t come out with her this last time, were probably doing a quick change for the next number.

For a moment she stood there perfectly still, no longer moving a muscle. The swirling black gauze deflated about her, fell limp. Benson’s grin of approval dimmed and died while he craned his neck up at her. Suddenly she started to go off-balance, to fall.

He only had time to throw up his arms instinctively, half to ward her off, half to catch her and break her fall. Her looming body blurred the runway lights for an instant, and then she had landed across him, one foot still up there on the runway behind her. The black stuff of her mantle came down after her, like a parachute, and half-smothered him. He had to claw at it to free his head.

Those in the rows farther back, who hadn't been close enough to notice the break in her performance that had come just before the fall, started to applaud and even laugh. They seemed to think it was still part of her routine, or that she had actually missed her footing and tumbled down on him, and either way it struck them as the funniest thing they had ever seen.

Benson already knew better, by the inert way her head and shoulders lay across his knees. "Take it easy. I've got you," he whispered reassuringly, trying to hold her as she started to slide to the floor between the rows of seats.

Bier eyes rolled unseeingly up at him, showing all whites, but some memory of where she was and what she had been doing still Angered in the darkness rolling over her.

"I'm so sorry. Did I hurt you, mister?" she breathed. "Guess I've spoiled the show—" It ended with a long-drawn sigh—and she was still.

The laughter and handclapping was dying down, because her head didn't bob up again at the place where she had disappeared from view, and they were catching on that something was wrong. A hairy-armed man in rolled blue shirt-sleeves popped partly out of the wings, not caring if he was seen or not, and wigwagged frantically to the band leader, then jumped back again where he'd come from. The droopy music they'd been playing for her broke off short and a rackety rumba took its place. A long line of chorus girls came spilling out on the stage, most of them out of step and desperately working to get their shoulder straps adjusted.

Benson was already struggling tip the aisle with his inert golden burden. A couple of ushers came hustling down to help him, but he elbowed them aside. “You quiet the house down. I can get her back there by myself.”

A man with a cigar sticking flat out of his mouth like a tusk met him at the back, threw open a door marked *Manager*. “Bring her in here to my office, until I can send for a doctor—” Before closing it after the three of them, he stopped to scan the subsiding ripples of excitement in the audience. “How they taking it? All right, keep ’em down in their seats, usher. No refunds, understand?” He closed the door and came in.

Benson had to put her in the manager’s swivel chair; there wasn’t even a couch or sofa in the place. Even with the shaded desk light on, the place stayed dim and shadowy. Her body gleamed weirdly in the gloom, like a shiny mermaid.

“Thanks a lot, bud,” the manager said to him crisply. “You don’t have to wait; the doctor’ll be here in a minute—”

“The tin says stick around.” Benson reburied the badge in his pocket.

The manager widened his eyes. “That’s a hot one. You’re probably the only headquarters man out there tonight, and she keels over into your lap.”

“That’s the kind of luck I always have,” Benson said, bending over the girl. “I can’t even see a show once a year, without my job horning in.”

The manager took another squint outside the door to see how his house was getting along. “Forgotten all about it already,” he reported contentedly. He turned back. “How’s she coming?”

“She’s dead,” Benson said muffledly, from below one arm, ear to the girl’s gold brassiere.

The manager gave a sharp intake of breath, but his reaction was a purely professional one. “Gee, who’ll I get to

fill in for her on such short notice? What the hell happened to her? She was all right at the matinee!”

“What’d you expect her to do,” Benson said short-temperedly, “come and inform you she was going to die in the middle of her act tonight, so you’d have time to get a substitute?” He lifted one of the golden eyelids to try for optical reflex; there wasn’t any.

The hastily summoned doctor had paused outside the door, trying to take in as much of the show free as he could before he had to attend to business. He came in still looking fascinatedly behind him. “You’re too late,” the manager scowled. “This headquarters man says she’s dead already.”

Benson was on the desk phone by now with his back to the two of them. A big belly-laugh rolled in from outside before they could get the door closed, and drowned out what he was saying. He covered the mouthpiece until he could go ahead. “Forty-second Street, just off Broadway. Okay.” He hung up. “The examiner’s office is sending a man over. We’ll hear what he says.”

The doctor smiled. “Well, he can’t say any more than I can. She’s dead and that’s that.”

“He can say why,” Benson countered, dipping four fingers of each hand into his coat pockets and wiggling his thumbs.

The doctor closed the door after him.

“Now he’s going to stand and chisel the rest of the show free, just because he was called in,” the manager predicted sourly.

“He can have my seat,” Benson remarked. “I won’t be using it any more tonight.”

He brushed a fleck of gold paint off the front of his coat, then another off the cuff of his coat sleeve. “Let’s get the arithmetic down.” He took out a black notebook, poised a worn-down pencil stub over the topmost ruled line of a

blank page. The pages that had gone before—and many had gone before—were all closely scrawled over with names, addresses, and other data. Then, one by one, wavy downward lines were scored through them. That meant: case closed.

The manager opened a drawer in his desk, took out a ledger, sought a pertinent page, traced a sausage-like thumb down a list of payroll names. “Here she is. Real name, Annie Willis. ‘Gilda’ was just her—”

Benson jotted. “I know.”

He gave the address on West 135th. “There’s a phone number to go with it, too.”

Benson jotted. He looked up, said, “Oh, hello, Jacobson,” as the man from the examiner’s office came in, went back to his note-taking again.

Outside, 300-odd people sat watching a line-up of girls dance. Inside, the business of documenting a human death went on, with low-voiced diligence.

Benson repeated: “Nearest of kin, Frank Willis, husband —”

The examining assistant groused softly to himself: “I can’t get anything out of it at all, especially through all this gilt. It mighta been a heart attack; it mighta been acute indigestion. All I can give you for sure, until we get downtown, is she’s dead, good and dead—”

The manager was getting peevish at this protracted invasion of his privacy. “That makes three times she’s been dead, already. I’m willing to believe it, if no one else is.”

Benson murmured, “This is the part I hate worst,” and began to dial with his pencil stub.

An usher sidled in, asked: “What’ll we do about the marquee, boss? She’s still up on it, and it’s gotta be changed now for tomorrow’s matinee.”

“Just take down the ‘G’ from ‘Gilda’, see? Then stick in an ‘H’ instead, make it ‘Hilda.’ That saves the trouble of changing the whole—”

“But who’s Hilda, boss?”

“I don’t know myself! If the customers don’t see anyone called Hilda, that’ll teach them not to believe in signs!”

Benson was saying quietly: “Is this Frank Willis? Are you the husband of Annie Willis, working at the New Rotterdam Theater? . . . All right, now take it easy. She died during the performance this evening . . . Yeah, onstage about half an hour ago . . . No, you won’t find her here by the time you get down. You’ll be notified when the body’s released by the medical examiner’s office. They want to perform an autopsy . . . Now don’t get frightened, that’s just a matter of form, they always do that. It just means an examination . . . You can claim her at the city morgue when they’re through with her.”

He hung up, murmured under his breath: “Funny how a strange word they don’t understand, like ‘autopsy,’ always throws a scare into them when they first hear it.” He eyed the manager’s swivel chair. It was empty now, except for a swath of gold-paint flecks down the middle of the back, like a sunset reflection. He grimaced discontentedly. “I shoulda stayed home tonight altogether. Then somebody else would have had to handle the blamed thing! Never saw it to fail yet. Every time I try to see a show—”

Next day at 11 a cop handed Benson a typewritten autopsy report.

Benson didn’t place the name for a minute. Then: “Oh yeah, that girl in the show last night—Gilda.” He glanced down at his own form with rueful recollection. “It’s going to cost me two bucks to have the front of that other suit dry-cleaned. Okay, thanks. I’ll take it into the lieutenant.”

He scanned it cursorily himself first, before doing so. Then he stopped short, frowned, went back and read one or two of the passages more carefully.

". . . Death caused by sealing of the pores over nearly the entire body surface for a protracted period. This substance is deleterious when kept on for longer than an hour or two at the most. It is composed of infinitesimal particles of gold leaf which adhere to the pores, blocking them. This produces a form of bodily suffocation, as fatal in the end, if less immediate than stoppage of the breathing passage. The symptoms are delayed, then strike with cumulative suddenness, resulting in weakness, dizziness, collapse, and finally death. Otherwise the subject was perfectly sound organically in every way. There can be no doubt that this application of theatrical pigment and failure to remove it in time was the sole cause of mortality—"

He tapped a couple of nails on the desk undecidedly a minute or two. Finally he picked up the phone and got the manager of the New Rotterdam Theater. He hadn't come in yet, but they switched the call to his home. "This is Benson, headquarters man that was in your office last night. How long had this Gilda—Annie Willis, you know—been doing this gilt act?"

"Oh, quite some time—five or six months now."

"Then she wasn't green at it; she wasn't just breaking it in."

"No, no, she was an old hand at it."

He hung up, tapped his nails some more. "Funny she didn't know enough by this time to take it off before it had a chance to smother her," he murmured half under his breath.

The report should have gone into his lieutenant, and that should have ended it. Accidental death due to carelessness, that was all. She'd been too lazy or too rushed to remove the harmful substance between shows, and had paid the penalty.

But a good detective is five-sixths hard work and one-sixth blind, spontaneous "hunches." Benson wasn't a bad detective. And his one-sixth had come uppermost just then.

He folded the examiner's report, put it in his pocket, and didn't take it into his lieutenant. He went back to the New Rotterdam Theater on 42nd Street, instead.

It was open even this early, although the stage show didn't go on yet. A handful of sidewalk beachcombers were drifting in, to get in out of the sun. The manager had evidently thought better of his marquee shortchange of the night before. The canopy still misleadingly proclaimed "Gilda, the Golden Dancer," but below it there was now affixed a small placard, so tiny it was invisible unless you got up on a ladder to scan it: "Next Week."

The manager acted anything but glad to see him back so soon. "I knew that wasn't the end of it! With you fellows these things go on forever. Listen, she keeled over in front of everybody in the theater. People are dropping dead on the streets like that every minute of the day, here, there, everywhere. What's there to find out about? Something gave out inside. It was her time to go, and there you are."

Benson wasn't an argumentative sort of person. "Sure," he agreed unruffledly. "And now it's my time to come nosing around about it—and there *you* are. Who shared her dressing room with her—or did she have one to herself?"

The manager shrugged disdainfully. "These aren't the days when the Ziegfeld Follies played this house. She split it with Vilma Lyons—that's the show's ballad singer, you know, the only full-dressed girl in the company—and June McKee. She leads the chorus in a couple of numbers."

"Are her belongings still in it?"

"They must be. Nobody's called for them yet, as far as I know."

"Let's go back there," Benson suggested.

"Listen, the show's cooking to go on—"

"I won't get in its way," Benson assured him.

They came out of the office, went down a side aisle skirting the orchestra, with scattered spectators already lounging here and there. A seven-year-old talking picture,

with Morse Code dots and dashes running up it all the time, was clouding the screen at the moment. They climbed onto the stage at the side, went in behind the screen, through the wings, and down a short, damp, feebly lighted passage, humming with feminine voices coming from behind doors that kept opening and closing as girls came in from the alley at the other end of the passage, in twos and threes.

The manager thumped one of the doors, turned the knob, and opened it with one and the same gesture—and a perfect indifference to the consequences. “Put on something, kids. There’s a detective coming in.”

“What’s the matter, isn’t he over twenty-one?” one of them jeered.

The manager stood aside to let Benson pass, then went back along the passageway toward his office with the warning: “Don’t gum them up now. This show hits fast once it gets going.”

There were two girls in there, working away at opposite ends of a three-paneled mirror. The middle space and chair were vacant. Benson’s face appeared in all three of the mirrors at once, as he came in and closed the door after him. One girl clutched at a wrapper, flung it around her shoulders. The other calmly went ahead applying make-up, leaving her undraped backbone exposed to view down to her waist.

“You two have been sharing the same dressing room with Annie Willis,” he said. “Did she usually leave this shiny junk on between shows, or take it off each time?”

The chorus leader, the one the manager had called June McKee, answered, in high-pitched derogation at such denseness. “Whadd’ye think, she could go out and cat between show’s with her face all gold like that? She woulda had a crowd following her along the street! Sure she took it off.”

They looked at one another with a sudden flash of enlightened curiosity. The McKee girl, a strawberry blonde,

turned around toward him. “Sa-ay, is that what killed her, that gold stuff?” she asked in a husky whisper.

Benson overrode that. “Did she take it off yesterday or did she leave it on?”

“She left it on.” She turned to her bench mate, the brunette ballad singer, for corroboration. “Didn’t she, Vilma? Remember?”

“Where is this gold stuff? I’d like to see it.”

“It must be here with the rest of her stuff.” The McKee girl reached over, pulled out the middle of the three table drawers, left it open for him to help himself. “Look in there.” It was in pulverized form, in a small jar. It had a greenish tinge to it that way. He read the label. It was put up by a reputable cosmetic manufacturing company. There were directions for application and removal, and then an explicit warning: “Do not allow to remain on any longer than necessary after each performance.” She must have read that a dozen times in the course of using the stuff. She couldn’t have failed to see it.

“You say she left it on yesterday. Why? Have you any idea?”

Again it was the McKee girl who answered, spading her palms at him. “Because she mislaid the cleanser, the stuff that came with it to remove it. They both come together. You can’t buy one without the other. It’s a special preparation that sort of curls it up and *peels* it off clean and even. Nothing else works as well or as quick. You can’t use cold cream, and even alcohol isn’t much good. You can scrub your head off and it just makes a mess of your skin—”

“And yesterday it disappeared?”

“Right after the finale, she started to holler: ‘Who took my paint remover? Anybody seen my paint remover?’ Well, between the three of us, we turned the room inside out, and no sign of it. She emptied her whole drawer out. Everything else was there but that. She even went into a couple of the other dressing rooms to find out if anybody had it in there. I

told her nobody else would want it. She was the only one in the company who used that gilt junk. It wouldn't have been any good to anyone else. It never turned up."

"Finish telling me."

"Finally Vilma and me had to go out and eat. Time was getting short. Other nights, the three of us always ate together. We told her if she found it in time to hurry up after us. We'd keep a place for her at our table. She never showed up. When we got back for the night show, sure enough, she was still in her electroplating. She told us she'd had to send Jimmy the handyman out for something and had eaten right in the dressing room."

Benson cocked his head slightly, as when one looks downward into a narrow space. "Are you sure this bottle of remover couldn't have been in the drawer and she missed seeing it?"

"That was the first place we cased. We had everything out. I remember holding it up in my hand empty and thumping the bottom of it just for luck!"

His wrist shot out of his cuff, hitched back into it again, like some sort of a hydraulic brake. "Then what's it doing in there now?" He was holding a small bottle, mate to the first, except that its contents were liquid and there was a small sponge attached to its neck.

It got quiet in the dressing room, deathly quiet. So quiet you could even hear the sound track from the screen out front.

The McKee girl's lower lip was trembling. "It was put back—*after!*

Somebody *wanted* her to die like that! With us right here in the same room with her!" She took a deep breath, threw open her own drawer, and with a defiant look at Benson, as if to say, "Try and stop me," tilted a small, flat gin bottle to her mouth.

The ballet singer, Vilma Lyons, suddenly dropped her head into her folded arms on the littered dressing table and

began to sob.

The stage manager bopped a fist on the door and called in: “The customers are waiting to see your operations. If that dick’s still questioning you in there, tell him to put on a girdle and follow you out on the runway!”

“Yes, sir, boss, I’m Jimmy, the handyman.” He put down his bucket, followed Benson out into the alley, where they wouldn’t be in the way of the girls hustling in and out on quick changes. “Yes, sir, Miss Gilda sent me out last night between shows to try to get her another bottle of that there stuff, which took off the gold paint.”

“Why didn’t you get it?”

“I couldn’t! I went to the big theatrical drugstore on Eighth where she told me. It’s the only place around here where you can get it and even there they don’t keep much on hand, never get much call for it. The drugstore man told me somebody else just beat me to it. He told me he just got through selling the last bottle he had in stock, before I got there.”

“Keep on,” Benson said curtly.

“That’s about all. The drugstore man promised to order another bottle for her right away from his company’s warehouse or the wholesaler that puts it up, and see that it’s in first thing in the morning. So I went back and told her. Then she sent me across the street to the cafeteria to bring her a sandwich. When I came back the second time, she was sitting there acting kind of low, holding her head. She said, ‘Jimmy, I’m sorry I ordered that bite, after all. I don’t feel well. I hope nothing happens to me from leaving this stuff on too long.’ ”

All Benson said was: “You come along and point out that druggist to me.”

“Come in, Benson.”

“Lieutenant, I’ve got a problem. I’ve got a report here from Jacobson that I haven’t turned in to you yet. I’ve been keeping it until I know what to do about it.”

“What’s the hitch?”

“Lieutenant, is there such a thing as a *negative* murder? By that I mean, when not a finger is lifted against the victim, not a hair of her head is actually touched. But the murder is accomplished by *withholding* something, so that death is caused by an absence or lack.”

The lieutenant was quick on the trigger. “Certainly! If a man locks another man up in a room, and withholds food from him until the guy has starved to death, you’d call that murder, wouldn’t you? Even though the guy that caused his death never touched him with a ten-foot pole, never stepped in past the locked door at all.”

Benson plucked doubtfully at the cord of skin between his throat and chin. “But what do you do when you have no proof of *intention?* I mean, when you’ve got evidence that the act of withholding or removal was committed, but no proof that the intention was murderous. And how you gonna get proof of intention, anyway? It’s something inside the mind, isn’t it?”

The lieutenant glowered, said: “What do you do? I’ll tell you what you do. You bring your bird in and you keep him until you get the intention *out* of his mind and down in typewriting! That’s what you do!”

The man was alone when he started down the three flights of stairs in the shoddy walk-up apartment on West 135th. He was still alone when he got down to the bottom of them. And then somehow, between the foot of the stairs and the street door, he wasn’t alone any more. Benson was walking along beside him, as soundlessly as though his own

shadow had crept forward and overtaken him along the poorly lit passage.

He shied sideways and came to a dead stop against the wall, the apparition was so unexpected.

Benson said quietly: “Come on, what’re you stopping for? You were leaving the house, weren’t you, Willis? Well, you’re still leaving the house, what’s the difference?”

They walked on as far as the street entrance. Benson just kept one fingertip touching the other’s elbow, in a sort of mockery of guidance. Willis said, “What am I pinched for?”

“Who said you were pinched? Do *you* know of anything you should be pinched for?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then you’re not pinched. Simple enough, isn’t it?”

Willis didn’t say another word after that. Benson only said two things more himself, one to his charge, the other to a cab driver. He remarked: “Come on, we’ll ride it. I’m no piker.” And when a cab had sidled up to his signal, he named a precinct police station.

They rode the whole way in stony silence, Willis staring straight ahead in morbid reverie, Benson with his eyes toward the cab window—but on the shadowy reflection of Willis’s face given back by the glass, not the street outside.

They got out and Benson took him in and left him waiting in a room at the back for a few minutes, while he went off to attend to something else. This wasn’t accidental; it was the psychological build-up—or rather, breakdown—preceding the grill. It had been known to work wonders.

It didn’t this time. Willis didn’t break. A sense of innocence can sometimes lend moral support; but so can a sense of having outwitted justice.

“The guy must be innocent,” another dick remarked.

“He knows we can’t get him. There’s nothing more in his actions to be uncovered, don’t you see? We’ve got everything there is to get on him, and it isn’t enough. And we can’t get at his intentions. They got to come out through

his own mouth. All he has to do is hold out. It's easy to keep a single, simple idea like that in your mind.

"What breaks down most of them is the uncertainty of something they did wrong, something they didn't cover up right, something cropping up and tripping them—an exploded alibi, a surprise identification by a material witness. He has none of that uncertainty to buck. All he has to do is to sit tight inside his own skin."

To his lieutenant, the next day, Benson said, "I'm morally certain he killed her. What are the three things that count in every crime? Motive, opportunity, and method. He rings the bell on each count. Motive? Well, the oldest one in the world between men and women. He'd lost his head about someone else, and didn't know how else to get rid of her. She was in the way in more than just one sense. She was a deterrent, because of the other woman's sense of loyalty. It wouldn't have done any good if he walked out on her or divorced her; the other woman wouldn't have had him unless he was free, and he knew it.

"It so happens the other woman was a lifelong friend of the wife. She even lived with them, up at the 135th Street place, for a while after they were first married. Then she got out, maybe because she realized a set-up like that was only asking for trouble."

"Have you found out who this other woman is?"

"Sure. Vilma Lyons, the ballad singer in the same show with the wife. I went up to the theater yesterday afternoon. I questioned the two girls who shared Annie Willis's dressing room with her. One of them talked a blue streak. The other one didn't open her mouth; I don't recall her making a single remark during the entire interview. She was too busy *thinking back.* She knew; her intuition must have already told her who had done it. At the end, she suddenly buried her face in her arms and cried. I didn't say a word. I let her take her own time. I let her think it over. I knew she'd come to me of her own accord sooner or later.

She did, after curtain time last night, down here at the station house. Weren't we going to *get* the person who had done that to her friend, she wanted to know? Wasn't he going to be punished for it? Was he going to get away with it scot-free?"

"Did she accuse him?"

"She had nothing to accuse him of. He hadn't said anything to her. He hadn't even shown her by the look on his face. And then little by little I caught on, by reading between the lines of what she said, that he'd liked her a little too well."

He shrugged. "She can't help us—she admitted it herself. Because he started giving her these long, haunting looks when he thought she wasn't noticing, and acting discontented and restless, that isn't evidence he killed his wife. But she *knows*, in her own mind, just as I *know* in mine, who hid that remover from Annie Willis, and with what object, and why. She hates him like poison now. I could read it on her face. He's taken her friend from her. They'd chummed together since they were both in pigtails, at the same orphanage."

"All right. What about Opportunity, your second factor?"

"He rings the bell there, too. And again it doesn't do us any good. Sure, he admits he was sitting out front at the matinee day before yesterday. But so was he a dozen times before. Sure, he admits he went backstage to her dressing room, after she'd gone back to it alone and while the other two were still onstage. But so had he a dozen times before. He claims it was already missing then. She told him so, and asked him to go out and get her another bottle. But who's to prove that? She's not alive, and neither of the two other girls had come off the stage yet."

"Well, what happened to the second bottle that would have saved her life?"

"He paid for it. The clerk wrapped it for him. He started out holding it in his hand. And at the drug store entrance he

collided with someone coming in. It was jarred out of his hand and shattered on the floor!”

And as if he could sense what the lieutenant was going to say, he hurriedly added: “There were witnesses galore to the incident; the clerk himself, the soda jerk, the cashier. I questioned every one of them. Not one could say for sure that it wasn’t a genuine accident. Not one could swear that he’d seen Willis actually relax his hand and let it fall, or deliberately get in this other party’s way.”

“Then why didn’t he go back and tell her? Why did he leave her there like that with this stuff killing her, so that she had to send the handyman out to see if he could get hold of any for her?”

“We can’t get anything on him for that, either. He did the natural thing; he went scouting around for it in other places—the way a man would, who was ashamed to come back and tell her he’d just smashed the one bottle they had left in stock.” And through thinned lips he added acidly, “Everything he did was so natural. That’s why we can’t get him!”

The lieutenant said, “There’s an important little point in that smashed-bottle angle. Did he know it was the last bottle on hand *before* he dropped it, or did he only find out after he stepped back to the counter and tried to get another?”

Benson nodded. “I bore down heavy on that with the drug clerk. Unless Willis was deaf, dumb, and blind, he knew that that was the last bottle in the store before he started away from the counter with it. The clerk not only had a hard time finding it, but when lie finally located it, he remarked, “‘This is the last one we’ve got left.’ ”

“Then that accident was no accident.”

“Can you *prove* it?” was all Benson said.

The lieutenant answered that by discarding it. “Go ahead,” he said sourly.

“I checked with every one of the other places he told me he’d been to after leaving there, and he *had* asked for it in each one. They corroborated him. He wasn’t in much danger of coming across it anywhere else and he knew it! The drug clerk had not only forewarned him that he didn’t think he’d find it anywhere else, but his wife must have told him the same thing before she sent him out.” And screwing his mouth up, Benson said, “But it looked good for the record, and it kept him away from the theater—while she was dying by inches from cellular asphyxiation!”

“Didn’t he go back at all? Did he stay out from then on?”

“No one saw him come back, not a soul. I made sure of that before I put it up to him.” Benson smiled bleakly. “I know what you’re thinking, and I thought of that, too. If he didn’t go back at all, then he wasn’t responsible for making the remover disappear in the first place. Because it was back in the drawer before the next matinee—I found it there myself.

“Now get the point involved: He had a choice between the natural thing and the completely exonerating thing. But the exonerating thing would have meant behaving a little oddly. The natural thing for a man sent out on an errand by his wife is to return eventually, even it it’s an hour later, even if it’s only to report that he was unsuccessful. The exonerating thing, in this case, was for him to stay out for good. All he had to do was claim he never went back, and he was absolutely in the clear, absolutely eliminated.”

“Well?” The lieutenant could hardly wait for the answer.

“He played it straight all the way through. He admitted, of his own accord and without having been seen by anybody, that he stopped back for a minute to tell her he hadn’t been able to get it, after chasing all over the Forties for the stuff. And that, of course, is when the missing bottle got back into the drawer.”

The lieutenant was almost goggle-eyed. “Well I’ll be—! She was still alive, the murder hadn’t even been completed

yet, and he was already removing the traces of it by replacing the bottle!”

“The timing of her act guaranteed that she was already as good as dead, even with the bottle back within her reach. She couldn’t take the gilt off now for another three hours. Using it continuously had already lowered her resistance. That brief breathing spell she should have had between shows spelled the difference between life and death. In other words, Lieutenant, he left her alive, with fifty people around her who talked to her, rubbed shoulders with her in the wings, after he’d gone. And later she even danced onstage before a couple hundred more. *But he’d already murdered her!”*

“But you say he didn’t have to admit he stopped back at the theater, and yet he did.”

“Sure, but to me that doesn’t prove his innocence, that only proves his guilt and infernal cleverness. By avoiding the slightest lie, the slightest deviation in his account of his actual movements, he’s much safer than by grasping at a chance of automatic, complete vindication. Somebody just *might* have seen him come back; he couldn’t be sure.”

Benson took a deep breath. “There it all is, Lieutenant: motive, opportunity, and method. And it don’t do us much good, does it? There isn’t any more evidence to be had. There never will be. There’s nothing more to uncover—because it all *is* uncovered already. We couldn’t get him on a disorderly conduct charge on all of it put together, much less for murder. What do I do with him now?” The lieutenant took a long time answering, as though he hated to have to. Finally he did. “We’ll have to turn him loose; we can’t hold him indefinitely.”

“I hate to see him walk out of here free,” Benson said.

“There’s no use busting your brains about it. It’s a freak that only happens maybe once in a thousand times—but it happened this time.”

Later that same morning Benson walked out to the entrance of the precinct house with Willis, after the formalities of release had been gone through. Benson stopped short at the top of the entrance steps, marking the end of his authority. He smiled. “Well, if we couldn’t get anything out of you in there last night, I didn’t expect to get anything out of you out here right now.” His mouth thinned. “Here’s the street. Beat it.”

Willis went down the steps, walked on a short distance alone and unhindered. Then he decided to cross over to the opposite side of the street. When he had reached it, he stopped a minute and looked back.

Benson was still standing there on the police station steps, looking after him. Their stares met. Benson couldn’t read his look, whether it conveyed mockery or relief or just casual indifference. But for that matter, Willis couldn’t read Benson’s either; whether it conveyed regret or philosophic acceptance of defeat or held a vague promise that things between them weren’t over yet. And it wasn’t because of the distance that separated them; it was because the thoughts of both were locked up in their minds.

There was a brittle quality of long-smoldering rancor about her, even when she first opened the door, even before she’d had time to see who was standing there. She must have just got home from the show. She still had her coat and hat on. But she was already holding a little jigger glass of colorless liquid between two of her fingers, as if trying to cauterize the inner resentment that was continually gnawing at her. Her eyes traveled over his form from head to foot and back again.

“Been letting any more killers go since I saw you last?” she said sultrily.

“You’ve taken that pretty much to heart, haven’t you?” Benson answered levelly.

“Why wouldn’t I? Her ghost powders its nose on the bench next to me twice a day! A couple performances ago I caught myself turning around and saying: ‘Did you get paid this week—’ before I stopped to think.” She emptied the jigger. “And do you know what keeps the soreness from healing? Because the person that did it is still around, untouched, unpunished. Because he got away with it. You know who I mean or do I have to break out with a name?”

“You can’t prove it, any more than we could, so why bring up a name?”

“Prove it! *Prove* it! You make me sick.” She refilled the jigger. “You’re the police! Why weren’t you able to get him?”

“You talk like a fool,” he said patiently. “You talk like we let him go purposely. D’you think I enjoyed watching him walk out scot-free under my nose? And that ain’t all. I’ve been passed over on the promotion list, on account of it. They didn’t *say* it was that; they didn’t say it was anything. They didn’t have to. I can figure it out for myself. It’s the first blank I’ve drawn in six years. It’s eating at my insides, too, like yours.”

She relented at the sign of a bitterness that matched her own. “Misery likes company, I guess. Come on in, as long as you’re here. Have a stab,” she said grudgingly, and pushed the gin slightly toward him.

They sat in brooding silence for several minutes, two frustrated people. Finally she spoke again. “He had the nerve to put his flowers on her grave! Imagine, flowers from the killer to the one he killed! I found them there when I went there myself, before the matinee today, to leave some roses of my own. The caretaker told me whose they were. I tore them in a thousand pieces when he wasn’t looking.”

“I know,” he said. “He goes up twice a week, leaves fresh flowers each time. I’ve been casing him night and day. The hypocritical rat! All the way through from the beginning, he’s done the natural thing. He does it whether he thinks anyone’s watching or not, and that’s the safe way for him to do it.”

He refilled his own jigger without asking permission. He laughed harshly. “But he’s not pining away. I cased his flat while he was out today, and I found enough evidence to show there’s some blonde been hanging around to console him. Gilt hairpins on the kitchen floor, a double set of dirty dishes — two of everything — in the sink.”

She lidded her eyes, touched a hand to her own jet-black hair. “I’m not surprised,” she said huskily. “That would be about his speed. Maybe you can still get something on him through her.”

He shook his head. “He can go around with ten blondes if he feels like it. He’s within his rights. We can’t hold him just for that—”

“What’s the matter with the laws these days?” she said almost savagely. “Here we are, you and I, sitting here in this room. We both know he killed Annie Willis. You’re drawing pay from the police department, and he’s moving around fancy-free only a couple of blocks away from us!”

He nodded as though he agreed with her. “They fail you every once in a while,” he admitted gloomily, “the statutes as they are written down on the books. They slip a cog and let someone fall through—’ Then he went on: “But there’s an older law than the statutes we work under. I don’t know if you ever heard of it or not. It’s called the Mosaic Law. ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ And when the modern set-up goes back on you, that one never does. It’s short and sweet, got no amendments, dodges, or habeas corpuses to clutter it up. ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ ”

“I like the way that sounds better,” she said. “But more important still, *I hear the words you’re not saying*.”

He just looked at her, and she looked at him. They were like two fencers, warily circling around each other to find an opening. She got up, moved over to the window, stared grimly out toward the traffic intersection at the corner ahead. “Green light,” she reported. Then she turned toward him with a bitter, puckered smile. “Green light. That means go ahead—doesn’t it?”

“Green light,” he murmured. “That means go ahead—if you care to. The man that throws the switch in the deathhouse at Sing Sing, what makes him a legal executioner and not a murderer? The modern statutes. The Mosaic Code can have its legal executioners, too, who are also not murderers.”

She had come over close to him.

“But never,” he went on, looking straight up at her, “exceed or distort its short, simple teachings. Never repay the gun with the knife, or the knife with the club. Then that’s murder, no longer the Mosaic Code. In the same way, if the State executioner shot the condemned man on his way to the chair, or poisoned him in his cell, then he wouldn’t be a legal executioner any more, he’d be a murderer himself.” And he repeated it again for her slowly. “ ‘An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.’ Annie Willis met her death by having something withheld from her that her safety depended on. No weapon was used on Annie Willis, remember.”

“Yes,” she said, “and I know where there’s a trunk that belongs to me, down in a basement storage room, seldom entered, seldom used. One of these big theatrical trunks, roomy enough to carry around the props for a whole act. I left it behind when I moved out. I was going to send for it but—” She paused. “And if I came to you, for instance, and said: ‘What’s been bothering you and me has been taken

care of,' how would you receive me—as a criminal under the modern law or a legal executioner under the old one?"

He looked straight up at her with piercing directness. "The modern law failed you and me, didn't it? Then how could I judge you by it?"

She murmured half audibly, as if testing him: "Then why not you? Why me?"

"The injury was done to you, not me. A friend is a personal belonging, a professional disappointment isn't. Nothing was done to me personally. Under the Mosaic Law, a frustrated job can only be repaid by another frustrated job, by making the person who injured you suffer a like disappointment in *his* work."

She laughed dangerously. "I can do better than that," she said softly.

She kept shaking her head, looking at him from time to time as if she still found the situation almost past belief. "The strangest things never get down on the record books! They wouldn't be believed if they did! Here you are, sitting in my room, a man drawing pay from the police department —" She didn't finish it.

"We haven't been talking," he said, getting up.

She held the door open for him. "No," she smiled, "we haven't been talking. You weren't here tonight, and nothing was said."

The door closed and Detective Benson went down the stairs with an impassive face.

What followed was even more incredible. Or, at least, the surroundings it occurred in were. A cop came in to him, at the precinct house three nights later, and said, "There's a lady out there asking for you, Benson. Won't state her business."

Benson said, “I think I know who you mean. Look, Corrigan, you know that little end room on the left, at the back of the hall? Is there anyone in there right now?”

The cop said, “Naw, there’s never anyone in there.”

“Take her back there, will you?” He got there ahead of her. She stood outlined in the open doorway first, watching the cop return along the hall, before she’d come in.

He didn’t pretend to be going over papers or anything like that. It was one of those blind spots that even the most bustling, overcrowded buildings occasionally have, unused, avoided the greater part of the time by the personnel. He acted slightly frightened. He kept pacing nervously back and forth, waiting for her to enter the room.

When she finally came in and closed the door after her, he said, “Couldn’t you have waited until I dropped over to see you?”

“How did I know when you’d be around again? I felt like I couldn’t wait another half hour to get it off my chest.” There was something almost gloating in the way she looked at him. “Is it safe to talk here?”

He went over to the door, opened it, looked along the passageway outside, closed it again. “It’s all right.” She said, half-mockingly, with that intimacy of one conspirator for another: “No dictaphones around?”

He was too on edge to share her bantering mood. “Don’t be stupid,” he snapped. “This is the last place I ever expected you to—”

She lit a cigarette, preened herself. “You think you’re looking at a cheap ballad singer on a burlesque circuit, don’t you?”

“What am I looking at?”

“You’re looking at a legal executioner, under the Mosaic Code. I have a case of Biblical justice to report. I had a friend I valued very highly, and she was caused to die by having the skin of her body deprived of air. Now the man who did that to her is going to die sometime during the

night, if he hasn't already, by having the skin of *his* body—and his lungs and his heart—deprived of air in the same way."

He lit a cigarette to match hers. His hands were so steady—too steady, rigid almost—that you could tell they weren't really. He was forcing them to be that way. His color was paler than it had been when he first came in.

"What have you got to say to that?" She clasped her own sides in a parody of macabre delight.

"I'll tell you in a minute." He went over to the door, opened it, and looked out again, as if to make sure there was no one out there to overhear. He'd dropped his cigarette on the way over to it.

She misunderstood. "Don't be so jittery—" she began scornfully.

He'd raised his voice suddenly, before she knew what to expect. It went booming down the desolate hallway. "Corrigan! C'mere a minute!" A blue-suited figure had joined him before she knew what was happening. He pointed in toward her.

"Arrest this woman for murder! Hold her here in this room until I get back! I'm making you personally responsible for her!"

A bleat of smothered fury ripped from her. "Why, you dirty, doublecrossing—The guy ain't even dead yet—

"I'm not arresting you for the murder of Frank Willis. I'm arresting you for the murder of his wife, Annie Willis, over a month and a half ago at the New Rotterdam Theater!"

The greater part of it came winging back from the far end of the hallway, along which he was moving fast on his way to try to save a man's life.

They came trooping down single file, fast, into the gloom. White poker chips of light glanced off the damp brick walls

from their torches. The janitor was in the lead. He poked at a switch by his sense of memory alone, and a feeble parody of electricity illuminated part of the ceiling and the floor immediately under it, nothing else.

“I ain’t seen him since yesterday noon,” he told them in a frightened voice. “I seen him going out then. That was the last I seen of him. Here it is over here, gents. This door.” They fanned out around it in a half circle. All the separate poker chips of torchlight came to a head in one big wagon wheel. The door was fireproof; nail-studded iron, rusty but stout. But it was fastened simply by a padlock clasping two thick staples.

“I remember now, my wife said something about his asking her for the key to here, earlier in the evening while I was out,” the janitor said. “So he was still all right then.”

“Yes, he was still all right *then,*” Benson agreed shortly. “Get that thing off. Hurry up!” A crowbar was inserted behind the padlock; two of the men started to pry. Something snapped. The unopened lock bounced up, and they swung the storage-space door out with a grating sound.

The torch beams converged inside and lit it up. It was small and cramped, the air musty and unfit to breathe. All the discarded paraphernalia of forgotten tenants over the years choked it. Cartons, empty packing cases, a dismantled iron bed frame, even a kid’s sled with one runner missing. But there was a clear space between the entrance and the one large trunk that loomed up, like a towering headstone on a tomb.

It stood there silent, inscrutable. On the floor before it lay, in eloquent meaning, a single large lump of coal brought from the outside part of the basement and discarded after it had served its purpose.

“A blow on the head with that would daze anyone long enough to—” Benson scuffed it out of the way. “Hurry up, fellows. She’d only just left here when she looked me up.

It’s not a full hour yet. The scams may be warped with age, there’s still a slim chance—”

They pushed the scared, white-lipped janitor out of their way. Axe blades began to slash around the rusted snaplock. “Not too deep,” Benson warned. “Give it flat strokes from the side, or you’re liable to cut in and—Got that pulmotor ready?”

The axes held off at his signal and he pulled the dangling lock off the splintered seams with his bare hands. They all jumped in, began pulling in opposite directions. The trunk split open vertically. A face stared sightlessly into the focused torchbcams, a contorted mask of strangulation and unconsciousness that had been pressed despairingly up against the seam as close as it could get, to drink in the last precious molecule of air.

Willis’s body, looking shrunken, tumbled out into their arms. They carried him out into the more open part of the basement, one hand with mangled nails trailing inertly after him. An oxygen tank was hooked up, and a silent, grim struggle for life began in the eerie light of the shadowy basement.

Twice they wanted to quit, and Benson wouldn’t let them. “If he goes, that makes a murderer out of me! And I won’t be made a murderer out of! We’re going to bring him back, if we stay here until tomorrow night!”

And then, in the middle of the interminable silence, a simple, quiet announcement from the man in charge of the squad: “He’s back, Benson. He’s going again!”

Somebody let out a long, whistling breath of relief. It was a detective who had just escaped being made into a murderer.

The lieutenant came in, holding the confession in his hands. Benson followed.

“She put away?”

“Yes, sir.”

The lieutenant went ahead, reading the confession. Benson waited in silence until he’d finished. The lieutenant looked up finally. “This’ll do. You got results, but I don’t get it. What was this business of her coming here and confiding in you that she’d made an attempt on Willis’s life tonight, and how does that tie in with the murder of Annie Willis? You hit the nail on the head, but I miss the connecting links.”

Benson said, “Here was the original equation. A wife in the middle, a man and a woman on the ends. She was in the way, but of which one of them? Vilma Lyons claimed it was Willis who had a pash on her. Willis didn’t claim anything; the man as a rule won’t.

“I watched them to see which would approach the other. Neither one did.

“I still couldn’t tell which was which—although my money was still on Willis, up to the very end.

“Here was the technique. When I saw neither of them was going to tip a hand, I tipped it, instead. There’s nothing like a shot of good, scalding jealousy in the arm for tipping the hand. I went to *both* of them alike, gave them the same build-up treatment. I was bitter and sore, because I’d muffed the job. It was a mark against me on my record, and so on. In Willis’s case, because we’d already held him for it once, I had to vary it a little, make him think I’d changed my mind, now thought it was Vilma, but couldn’t get her for it.

“In other words, I gave them both the same unofficial all-clear to go ahead and exact retribution personally. And I lit the same spark to both their fuses. I told Willis that Vilma had taken up with some other guy; I told her he had taken up with some other girl.

“One fuse fizzled out. The other flared and exploded. One of them didn’t give a damn, because he never had. The other, having already committed murder to gain the object

of her affections, saw red, would have rather seen him dead than have somebody else get him.

“You see, Lieutenant, murder always comes easier the second time than the first. Given equal provocation, whichever one of those two had committed the murder the first time wouldn’t hesitate to commit it a second time. Willis had loved his wife. He smoldered with hate when I told him we had evidence Vilma had killed her, but he didn’t act on the hints I gave him. It never occurred to him to.

“Only one took advantage of the leeway I seemed to be giving them, and went ahead. That one was the real murderer.

“It’s true,” he conceded, “that’s not evidence that would have done us much good in trying to prove the other case. But what it did manage to do was make a dent in the murderer’s armor. All we had to do was keep hacking away and she finally crumbled. Being caught in the act the second time weakened her self-confidence, gave us a psychological upper-hand over her. She finally came through.” He indicated the confession the lieutenant held.

“Well,” pondered the lieutenant, stroking his chin, “it’s not a technique that I’d care to have you men make a habit of using very frequently. In fact, it’s a damn dangerous one to monkey around with, but it got results this time, and that’s the proof of any pudding.”

MURDER AT MOTHER’S KNEE

Miss Prince knew all the signs that meant homework hadn’t been done. The hangdog look, the guiltily lowered head. She stood there by the Gaines boy’s desk, one hand extended. “Well, I’m waiting, Johnny.”

The culprit squirmed uncomfortably to his feet. “I—I couldn’t do it, teacher.”

“Why not?”

“I—I didn’t know what to write about.”

“That’s no excuse,” Miss Prince said firmly. “I gave the class the simplest kind of theme this time. I said to write about something you know, something that really happened, either at home or elsewhere. If the others were able to, why weren’t you?”

“I couldn’t think of anything that happened.”

Miss Prince turned away. “Well, you’ll stay in and sit there until you do. When I give out homework I expect it to be done!” She returned to her desk; stacked the collected creative efforts to one side, and took up the day’s lesson.

Three o’clock struck and the seats before her emptied like magic in one headlong, scampering rush for the door. All but the second one back on the outside aisle.

“You can begin now, Johnny,” said Miss Prince relentlessly. “Take a clean sheet of paper and quit staring out the window.”

Although the boy probably wouldn’t have believed it, she didn’t enjoy this any more than he did. He was keeping her

in just as much as she was keeping him in. But discipline had to be maintained.

The would-be-author seemed to be suffering from an acute lack of inspiration. He chewed the rubber of his pencil, fidgeted, stared at the blackboard, and nothing happened.

“You’re not trying, Johnny!” she said severely, at last.

“I can’t think of anything,” he lamented.

“Yes, you can. Stop saying that. Write about your dog or cat, if you can’t think of anything else.”

“I haven’t any.”

She went back to her papers. He raised his hand finally, to gain her attention. “Is it all right to write about a dream?”

“I suppose so, if that’s the best you can do,” she acquiesced. It seemed to be the only way out of the predicament. “But I wanted you to write something that really happened. This was to test your powers of observation and description.”

“This was part-true and only part a dream,” he assured her.

He bent diligently to the desk, to make up for time lost. At the end of fifteen minutes he stood before her with the effort completed. “All right, you can go home now,” she consented wearily. “And the next time you come to school without your homework—” But the door had already closed behind him.

She smiled slightly to herself, with a sympathetic understanding he wouldn’t have given her credit for, and placed the latest masterpiece on top of the others, to take home with her. As she did so, her eye, glancing idly along the opening sentences, was caught by something. She lingered on, reading, forgetting her original intention of rising from her desk and going out to the cloakroom to get her hat.

The epistle before her, in laborious straight up-and-down, childish handwriting, read:

Johnny Gaines
English Comp. 2

Something that happened in our house . . .

One night I wasn't sleeping so good on account of something I eat, and I dreamed I was out in a boat and the water was rough and rocking me up and down a lot. So then I woke up and the floor in my room was shaking kind of and so was my bed and everything. And I even heard a table and chair fall down, downstairs. So I got kind of scared and I sneaked downstairs to see what was the matter. But by that time it stopped again and everything was quiet.

My mother was in the kitchen straitening things up again, and she didn't want me to come near there when she first saw me. But I looked in anyway. Then she closed the outside door and she told me some kind of a varmint got in the house from outside, and my pa had a hard time getting it and killing it, and that was why everything fell over. It sure must have been a bad kind of one, because it scared her a lot, she was still shaking all the time. She was standing still, but she was all out of breath. I asked her where it was and she said he carried it outside with him to get rid of it far away from the house.

Then I saw where his hat got to when he was having all that trouble catching it, and he never even missed it. It fell through the stove onto the ashes. So she picked it up out of there when I showed her, and the ashes made it look even cleaner than before when he had it on. Almost like new.

Then she got some water and a brush and started to scrub the kitchen floor where she said the varmint got it dirtied up. But I couldn't see where it was because she got in the way. And she wouldn't let me stay and watch, she made me go upstairs again.

So that was all that happened.

When she had finished, Miss Prince turned her head abruptly toward the door as if to recall the author of the composition.

She sat on there for a while, tapping her pencil thoughtfully against the edge of her teeth.

Miss Prince settled herself uneasily on one of the straight-backed chairs against the wall that the desk-sergeant had indicated to her, and waited, fiddling with her handbag.

She felt out of place in a police station anteroom, and wondered what had made her come like this.

A pair of thick-soled brogues came walloping out, stopped short before her, and she looked up. She'd never been face to face with a professional detective before. This one didn't look like one at all. He looked more like a businessman who had dropped into the police station to report his car stolen, or something.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"It's—it's just something that I felt I ought to bring to your attention," she faltered. "I'm Emily Prince of the English Department at the Benjamin Harrison Public School." She fumbled for the composition, extended it toward him. "One of my pupils handed this to me yesterday afternoon."

He read it over, handed it back to her. "I don't get it," he grinned. "You want me to pinch the kid that wrote this for murdering the King's English?"

She flashed him an impatient look. "I think it's obvious that this child witnessed an act of violence, a crime of some sort, without realizing its full implication," she said coldly. "You can read between the lines. I believe that a murder has taken place in that house, and gone undiscovered. I think the matter should be investigated."

She stopped short. He had begun to act in a most unaccountable manner. The lower part of his face began to twitch, and a dull-red flush overspread it. "Excuse me a minute," he said in a choked voice, stood up abruptly, and walked away from her. She noticed him holding his hand against the side of his face, as if to shield it from view. He stopped a minute at the other end of the room, stood there with his shoulders shaking, then turned and came back. He coughed a couple of times on the way over.

"If there's anything funny about this, I fail to see it!"

"I'm sorry," he said, sitting down again. "It hit me so sudden, I couldn't help it. A kid writes a composition, the

first thing that comes into his head, just so he can get it over with and go out and play, and you come here and ask us to investigate. Aw, now listen, lady—”

She surveyed him with eyes that were not exactly lanterns of esteem. “I cross-questioned the youngster. Today, after class. Before coming here. He insists it was not made up—that it’s true.”

“Naturally he would. The detail—I mean the assignment, was for them to write about something true, wasn’t it? He was afraid he’d have to do it over if he admitted it was imaginary.”

“Just a minute, Mr.—”

“Kendall,” he supplied.

“May I ask what your duties are?”

“I’m a detective attached to the Homicide Squad. That’s what you asked for.”

It was now her turn to get in a dirty lick. “I just wanted to make sure,” she said dryly. “There’s been no way of telling since I’ve been talking to you.”

“Ouch!” he murmured.

“There are certain details given here,” she went on, flourishing the composition at him, “that are not within the scope of a child’s imagination. Here’s one: his mother was standing still, but she was all out of breath. Here’s another: a hat lying in just such and such a place. Here’s the most pertinent of the lot: her scrubbing of the kitchen floor at that hour of the night. It’s full of little touches like that. It wouldn’t occur to a child to make up things like that. They’re too realistic. A child’s flights of fancy would incline toward more fantastic things. Shadows and spooks and faces at the window. I deal in children—I know how their minds work.”

“Well,” he let her know stubbornly, “I deal in murders. And I don’t run out making a fool of myself on the strength of a composition written by a kid in school!”

She stood up so suddenly her chair skittered back into the wall. “Sorry if I’ve wasted your time. I’ll know better in the future!”

“It’s not mine you’ve wasted,” he countered. “It’s your own, I’m afraid.”

A few minutes after her class had been dismissed the next day, a “monitor,” one of the older children used to carry messages about the building, knocked on her door. “There’s a man outside would like to talk to you, Miss Prince.”

She stepped out into the hall. The man, Detective Kendall of the Homicide Squad, was tossing a piece of chalk up and down in the hollow of his hand.

“Thought you might like to know,” he said, “that I stopped that Gaines youngster on his way to school this morning and asked him a few questions. It’s just like I told you yesterday. The first words out of his mouth were that he made the whole thing up. He couldn’t think of anything, and it was nearly 4 o’clock, so he scribbled down the first thing that came into his head.”

If he thought this would force her to capitulate, he was sadly mistaken. “Of course he’d deny it—to you. That’s about as valid as a confession extracted from an adult by third-degree methods. The mere fact that you stopped to question him about it frightened him into thinking he’d done something wrong. He wasn’t sure just what, but he’d played safe by saying he’d made it up.”

He thrust his jaw forward. “You know what I think is the matter with you?” he told her bluntly. “I think you’re looking for trouble!”

“Thank you for your cooperation, it’s been overwhelming!” she said, snatching something from him as she turned away. “And will you kindly refrain from marking

the walls with that piece of chalk! Pupils are punished when they do it!”

She returned stormily to the classroom. The Gaines boy sat hunched forlornly, looking very small in the sea of empty seats. “I’ve found out it wasn’t your fault for being late, Johnny,” she relented. “You can go now, and I’ll make it up to you by letting you out earlier tomorrow.”

He scuttled for the door.

“Johnny, just a minute. I’d like to ask you something.”

His face clouded as he came back slowly.

“Was that composition of yours true or made up?”

“Made up, Miss Prince,” he mumbled, scuffling his feet.

Which only proved to her that he was more afraid of the anonymous man with a badge than of his own teacher.

“Johnny, do you live in a large house?”

“Yes’m, pretty big,” he admitted.

“Well, er—do you think your mother would care to rent out a room to me? I have to leave where lam living now, and I’m trying to find another place.”

He swallowed. “You mean move into our house and live with us?” Obviously his child’s mind didn’t regard having a teacher at such close quarters as a blessing.

She smiled reassuringly. “I won’t interfere with you in your spare time, Johnny. I think I’ll walk home with you now —I’d like to know as soon as possible.”

“We’ll have to take the bus, Miss Prince, it’s pretty far out,” he told her.

It was even farther than she had expected it to be, a weather-beaten, rather depressing-looking farm-type of building, well beyond the last straggling suburbs, in full open country. It was set back from the road, and the whole area around it had an air of desolation and neglect. Its

unpainted shutters hung askew, and the porch roof was warped and threatened to topple over at one end.

Something could have happened out here quite easily, she thought, judging by the looks of the place alone.

A toilworn, timid-looking woman came forward to meet them as they neared the door, wiping her hands on an apron. “Mom, this is my teacher, Miss Prince,” Johnny introduced.

At once the woman’s expression became even more harassed and intimidated. “You been doing something you shouldn’t again? Johnny, why can’t you be a good boy?”

“No, this has nothing to do with Johnny’s conduct,” Emily Prince hastened to explain. She repeated the request for lodging she had already made to the boy.

It was obvious, at a glance, that the suggestion frightened the woman. “I dunno,” she kept saying. “I dunno what Mr. Mason will say about it. He ain’t in right now.”

Johnny was registered at school under the name of Gaines. Mr. Mason must be the boy’s stepfather then. It was easy to see that the poor woman before her was completely dominated by him, whoever he was. That, in itself, from Miss Prince’s angle, was a very suggestive factor. She made up her mind to get inside this house if she had to coax, bribe, or browbeat her way in.

She opened her purse, took out a’ large-size bill, and allowed it to be seen in her hand, in readiness to seal the bargain.

The boy’s mother was obviously swayed by the sight of it but was still being held back by fear of something. “We could use the money, of course,” she wavered. “But—but wouldn’t it be too far out for you, here?”

Miss Prince faked a slight cough. “Not at all. The country air would be good for me. Couldn’t I at least see one of the rooms?” she coaxed. “There wouldn’t be any harm in that, would there?”

“N-no, I suppose not,” Mrs. Mason faltered.

She led the way up a badly creaking inner staircase. “There’s really only one room fit for anybody,” she apologized.

“I’d only want it temporarily,” Miss Prince assured her. “Maybe a week or two at the most.”

She looked around. It really wasn’t as bad as she had been led to expect by the appearance of the house from the outside. In other words, it was the masculine share of the work, the painting and external repairing, that was remiss. The feminine share, the interior cleaning, was being kept up to the best of Mrs. Mason’s ability. There was another little suggestive sidelight in that, thought Miss Prince.

She struck while the iron was hot. “I’ll take it,” she said firmly, and thrust the money she had been holding into the other’s undecided hand before she had time to put forward any further objections.

That did the trick.

“I—I guess it’s all right,” Mrs. Mason breathed, guiltily wringing her hands in the apron. “I’ll tell Mr. Mason it’s just for the time being.” She tried to smile to make amends for her own trepidation. “He’s not partial to having strangers in with us—”

“Why?” Miss Prince asked in her own mind, with a flinty question mark.

“But you being Johnny’s teacher—when will you be wanting to move in with us?”

Miss Prince had no intention of relinquishing her tactical advantage. “I may as well stay, now that I’m out here,” she said. “I can have my things sent out.”

She closed the door of her new quarters and sat down to think.

The sun was already starting to go down when she heard an approaching tread coming up the neglected dirt track that

led to the door. She edged over to the window and peered cautiously down. Mason, if that was he, was singularly unprepossessing, even villainous-looking at first glance, much more so than she had expected him to be. He was thick-set, strong as a steer in body, with bushy black brows and small, alert eyes. He had removed a disreputable, shapeless hat just as he passed below her window, and was wiping his completely bald head with a soiled bandanna. The skin of his scalp was sunburned, and ridged like dried leather.

She left the window and hastened across the room to gain the doorway and overhear his first reaction to the news of her being there. She strained her ears. This first moment or two was going to offer an insight that was never likely to repeat itself, no matter how long she stayed in this house.

“Where’s Ed?” she heard him grunt unsociably. This was the first inkling she had had that there was still another member of the household.

“Still over in town, I guess,” she heard Mrs. Mason answer. She was obviously in mortal terror as she nerved herself to make the unwelcome announcement—the listener above could tell by the very ring of her voice. “Johnny’s teacher come to stay with us—a little while.”

There was suppressed savagery in his rejoinder. “What’d you do that for?” And then a sound followed that Emily Prince couldn’t identify for a second. A sort of quick, staggering footfall. A moment later she realized what it must have been. He had given the woman a violent push to express his disapproval.

She heard her whimper: “She’s up there right now, Dirk.”

“Get rid of her!” was the snarling answer.

“I can’t, Dirk, she already give me the money, and—and she ain’t going to be here but a short spell anyway.”

She heard him come out stealthily below her, trying to listen up just as she was trying to listen down. An unnatural

silence fell, then prolonged itself unnaturally. It was like a grotesque catand-mouse play, one of them directly above the other, both reconnoitering at once.

He turned and went back again at last, when she was about ready to keel over from the long strain of holding herself motionless. She crept back inside her room and drew a long breath.

If that hadn't been a guilty reaction, what was? But still it wasn't evidence by any means.

The porch floor throbbed again, and someone else had come in. This must be the Ed she had heard them talk about. She didn't try to listen this time. There would never be a second opportunity quite like that first. Whatever was said to him would be in a careful undertone. Mrs. Mason came out shortly after, called up: "Miss Prince, like to come down to supper?"

The teacher steeled herself, opened the door and stepped out. This was going to be a battle of wits. On their side they had an animal-like craftiness. On hers she had intellect, a trained mind, and self-control.

She felt she was really better equipped than they for warfare of this sort. She went down to enter the first skirmish.

They were at the table already eating—such a thing as waiting for her had never entered their heads. They ate crouched over, and that gave them the opportunity of watching her surreptiously. Mrs. Mason said: "You can sit here next to Johnny. This is my husband. And this is my stepson, Ed."

The brutality on Ed's face was less deeply ingrained than on Mason's. It was only a matter of degree, however. Like father, like son.

"Evenin'," Mason grunted.

The son only nodded, peering upward at her in a half-baleful, half-suspicious way, taking her measure.

They ate in silence for a while, though she could tell that all their minds were busy on the same thing: her presence here, trying to decide what it might mean.

Finally Mason spoke. “Reckon you’ll be staying some time?”

“No,” she said quietly, “just a short while.”

The son spoke next, after a considerable lapse of time. She could tell he’d premeditated the question for a full ten minutes. “How’d you happen to pick our place?”

“I knew Johnny, from my class. And it’s quieter out here.”

She caught the flicker of a look passing among them. She couldn’t read its exact meaning, whether acceptance of her explanation or skepticism.

They shoved back their chairs, one after the other, got up and turned away, without a word of apology. Mason sauntered out into the dark beyond the porch. Ed Mason stopped to strike a match to a cigarette he had just rolled. Even in the act of doing that, however, she caught his head turned slightly toward her, watching her when he thought she wasn’t looking.

The older man’s voice sounded from outside: “Ed, come out here a minute, I want to talk to you.”

She knew what about—they were going to compare impressions, possibly plot a course of action.

The first battle was a draw.

She got up and went after Mrs. Mason. “I’ll help you with the dishes.” She wanted to get into that kitchen.

She couldn’t see it at first. She kept using her eyes, scanning the floor surreptitiously while she wiped Mrs. Mason’s thick, chipped crockery. Finally she thought she detected something. A shadowy bald patch, so to speak. It was both cleaner than the surrounding area, as though it had been scrubbed vigorously, and at the same time it was overcast. There were the outlines of a stain still faintly discernible. But it wasn’t very conspicuous, just the shadow of a shadow.

She said to herself: “She’ll tell me. I’ll find out what I want to know.”

She moved aimlessly around, pretending to dry off something, until she was standing right over it. Then she pretended to fumble her cloth, let it drop. She bent down, and planted the flat of her hand squarely on the shadowy place, as if trying to retain her balance. She let it stay that way for a moment.

She didn’t have to look at the other woman. A heavy mug slipped through her hands and shattered resoundingly at her feet. Emily Prince straightened up, and only then glanced at her. Mrs. Mason’s face had whitened a little. She averted her eyes.

“She’s told me,” Miss Prince said to herself with inward satisfaction.

There hadn’t been a word exchanged between the two of them.

She went upstairs to her room a short while after. If somebody had been murdered in the kitchen, what disposal had been made of the body? Something must have been done with it—a thing like that just doesn’t disappear.

She sat on the edge of the cot, wondering: “Am I going to have nerve enough to sleep here tonight, under the same roof with a couple of murderers?” She drew the necessary courage, finally, from an unexpected quarter. The image of Detective Kendall flashed before her mind, laughing uproariously at her. “I certainly am! I’ll show him whether I’m right nor not!” And she proceeded to blow out the lamp and lie down.

In the morning sunlight the atmosphere of the house was less macabre. She rode to school with Johnny on the bus, and for the next six hours put all thoughts of the grisly matter she was engaged upon out of her mind, while she devoted herself to parsing, syntax, and participles.

After she had dismissed class that afternoon she went to her former quarters to pick up a few belongings. This was

simply to allay suspicion on the part of the Masons. She left the greater part of her things undisturbed, to be held for her.

She was waiting for the bus, her parcels beside her, when Kendall came into sight on the opposite side of the street. He was the last person she wanted to meet under the circumstances. She pretended not to recognize him, but it didn't work. He crossed over to her, stopped, touched his hat-brim, and grinned. "You seem to be moving. Give you a hand with those?"

"I can manage," she said distantly.

He eyed the bus route speculatively, then followed it with his gaze out toward her eventual destination. "It wouldn't be out to the Mason place?" Which was a smarter piece of deduction than she had thought him capable of.

"It happens to be."

To her surprise his face sobered. "I wouldn't fool around with people of that type," he said earnestly. "It's not the safest thing, you know."

Instantly she whirled on him, to take advantage of the flaw she thought she detected in his line of reasoning. "You're being inconsistent, aren't you? If something happened out there which they want to keep hidden, I agree it's not safe. But you say nothing happened out there. Then why shouldn't it be safe?"

"Look," he said patiently, "you're going at this from the wrong angle. There's a logical sequence to things like this." He told off his fingers at her, as though she were one of her own pupils. "First, somebody has to be missing or unaccounted for. Second, the body itself, or evidence sufficiently strong to take the place of an actual body, has to be brought to light. The two of them are interchangeable, but one or the other of them always has to precede an assumption of murder. That's the way we work. Your first step is a composition written by an eight-year-old child. Even in the composition itself, which is your whole

groundwork, there's no direct evidence of any kind. No assault was seen by the kid, no body of any victim was seen either before or after death. In other words, you're reading an imaginary crime between the lines of an account that's already imaginary in itself. You can't get any further away from facts than that."

She loosed a blast of sarcasm at him sufficient to have withered the entire first three rows of any of her classes. "You're wasting your breath, my textbook expert. The trouble with hard-and-fast rules is that they always let a big chunky exception slip by."

He shoved a helpless palm at her. "But there's nobody missing, man, woman, or child, within our entire jurisdiction, and that goes out well beyond the Mason place. Word would have come in to us by now if there were! How're you going to get around that?"

"Then why don't you go out after it?" she flared. "Why don't you take this main road, this interstate highway that runs through here, and zone it off, and then work your way back along it, zone by zone, and find out if anyone's missing from other jurisdictions? Believe me," she added crushingly, "the only reason I suggest you do it is that you have the facilities and I haven't!"

He nodded with tempered consideration. "That could be done," he admitted. "I'll send out inquiries to the main townships along the line. I'd hate to have to give my reasons for checking up, though, in case I was ever pinned down to it: 'A kid in school here wrote a composition in which he mentioned he saw his mother scrubbing the kitchen floor at two in the morning." He grinned ruefully. "Now why don't you just let it go at that and leave it in our hands? In case I get a bite on any of my inquiries, I could drop out there myself and look things over—"

She answered this with such vehemence that he actually retreated a step. "I'll do my own looking over, thank you! I mayn't know all the rules in the textbook, but at least I'm

able to think for myself. My mind isn't in handcuffs! Here comes my bus. Good day, Mr. Kendall!"

He thrust his hat back and scratched under it. "Whew!" she heard him whistle softly to himself, as she clambered aboard with her baggage.

It was still too early in the day for the two men to be on hand when she reached the Mason place. She found Mrs. Mason alone in the kitchen. A stolen glance at the sector of flooring that had been the focus of her attention the previous night revealed a flagrant change. Something had been done to it since then, and whatever it was, the substance used must have been powerfully corrosive. The whole surface of the wood was now bleached and shredded, as though it had been eaten away by something. Its changed aspect was far more incriminating now than if it had been allowed to remain as it was. They had simply succeeded in proving that the stain was not innocent, by taking such pains to efface it. However, it was no longer evidence now, even if it had been to start with. It was only a place where evidence had been.

She opened the back door and looked out at the peaceful sunlit fields that surrounded the place, with a wall of woodland in the distance. In one direction, up from the house, they had corn growing. The stalks were head-high, could have concealed anything. A number of black specks—birds—were hovering above one particular spot, darting busily in and out. They'd rise above it and circle and then go down again; but they didn't stray very far from it. Only that one place seemed to hold any attention for them.

Down the other way, again far off—so far off as to be almost indistinguishable—she could make out a low quadrangular object that seemed to be composed of cobblestones or large rocks. It had a dilapidated shed over

it on four uprights. A faint, wavering footpath led to it. “What’s that?” she asked.

Mrs. Mason didn’t answer for a moment. Then she said, somewhat unwillingly: “Used to be our well. Can’t use it now, needs shoring up. Water’s all sediment.”

“Then where do you get water from?” Miss Prince asked.

“We’ve been going down the road and borrowing it from the people at the next place down, carrying it back in a bucket. It’s a long ways to go, and they don’t like it much neither.”

Miss Prince waited a moment, to keep the question from sounding too leading. Then she asked casually: “Has your well been unfit to use for very long?”

She didn’t really need the answer. New grass was sprouting up everywhere, but it had barely begun to overgrow the footpath. She thought the woman’s eyes avoided her, but that might have been simply her chronic hangdog look. “Bout two or three weeks,” she mumbled reluctantly.

Birds agitated in a cornfield. A well suddenly unfit for use for the last two or three weeks. And then, in a third direction, straight over and across, the woods, secretive and brooding. Three possibilities.

She said to herself: “She told me something I wanted to know once before. Maybe I can get her to tell me what I want to know now.” Those who live in the shadow of fear have poor defenses. The teacher said briskly: “I think I’ll go for a nice long stroll in the open.”

She put her to a test, probably one of the most peculiar ever devised. Instead of turning and striking out at once, as a man would have in parting from someone, she began to retreat slowly, half-turned backwards toward her as she drew away, chattering as she went, as though unable to tear herself away.

She retreated first in the general direction of the cornfield, as though intending to ramble among the stalks.

The woman just stood there immobile in the doorway, looking after her.

The teacher closed in again, as though inadvertently, under necessity of something she had just remembered. “Oh, by the way, could you spare me an extra chair for my room I—”

Then when she again started to part company with her, it was in a diametrically opposite direction, along the footpath that led to the well. “Any kind of a chair will do,” she called back talkatively. “Just so long as it has a seat and four—”

The woman just stood there, eyeing her without a flicker.

She changed her mind, came back again the few yards she had already traveled. “The sun’s still hot, even this late,” she prattled. She pretended to touch the top of her head. “I don’t think I care to walk in the open. I think I’ll go over that way instead—those woods look nice and cool from here. I always did like to roam around in woods—”

The woman’s eyes seemed to be a little larger now, and she swallowed hard. Miss Prince could distinctly see the lump go down the scrawny lines of her throat. She started to say something, then she didn’t after all. It was obvious, the way her whole body had seemed to lean forward for a moment, then subside against the door-frame. Her hands, inert until now, had begun to mangle her apron.

But not a sound came from her. Yet, though the test seemed to have failed, it had succeeded.

“I know the right direction now,” Miss Prince was saying to herself grimly, as she trudged along. “It’s in the woods. It’s somewhere in the woods.”

She went slowly. Idly. Putting little detours and curleycues into her line of progress, to seem aimless, haphazard. She knew, without turning, long after the house was a tiny thing behind her, that the woman was still there in the doorway, straining her eyes after her, watching her all the way to the edge of the woods. She knew too, that that had been a give-and-take back there. The woman had

told her what she wanted to know, but she had told the woman something too. If nothing else, that she wasn't quite as scatterbrained,, as frivolous, as she had seemed to be about which direction to take for her stroll. Nothing definite maybe, but just a suspicion that she wasn't out here just for her health.

She'd have to watch her step with them, as much as they'd have to watch theirs with her. A good deal depended on whether the woman was an active ally of the two men, or just a passive thrall involved against her will.

She was up to the outermost trees now, and soon they had closed around her. The house and its watcher was gone from sight, and a pall of cool blue twilight had dimmed everything. She made her way slowly forward. The trees were not set thickly together but they covered a lot of ground.

She had not expected anything so miraculous as to stumble on something the moment she stepped in here. It was quite likely that she would leave none the wiser this time. But she intended returning here again and again if necessary, until—

She was getting tired now, and she was none too sure of her whereabouts. She spotted a half-submerged stump protruding from the damp, moldy turf and sat down on it, fighting down a suspicion that was trying to form in the back of her mind that she was lost. A thing like that, if it ever got to that Kendall's ears, would be all that was needed to complete his hilarity at her expense. The stump was green all over with some sort of fungus, but she was too tired to care. The ground in here remained in a continual state of moldy dampness, she noticed. The sun never had a chance to reach through the leafy ceiling of the trees and dry it out.

She had been sitting there perhaps two minutes at the most, when a faint scream of acute fright reached her from a distance. It was thin and piping, and must have been thin

even at its source. She jarred to her feet. It had sounded like the voice of a child, not a grown-up. It repeated itself, and two others joined in with it, as frightened as the first, if less shrilly acute. She started to run, as fast as the trackless ground would allow, toward the direction from which she believed the commotion was coming.

She could hear waters splashing, and then without any warning she came crashing out into the margin of a sizable and completely screened-off woodland pool. It was shaped like a figure 8.

At the waist, where it narrowed, there was an irregular bridge of flat stones, although the distances between them were unmanageable except by sprinting. There was a considerable difference in height between the two sections, and the water coursed into the lower one in a placid, silken waterfall stretching the entire width of the basin. This lower oval was one of the most remarkable sights she had ever seen. It was shallow, the water was only about knee-high in it, and under the water was dazzling creamy-white sand. There was something clean and delightful looking about it.

Two small boys in swimming trunks, one of them Johnny Gaines, were arched over two of the stepping-stones, frantically tugging at a third boy who hung suspended between them, legs scissoring wildly over the water and the sleek sand below. “Keep moving them!” she heard Johnny shriek just as she got there. “Don’t let ‘em stay still!”

She couldn’t understand the reason for their terror. The water below certainly wasn’t deep enough to drown anybody—

“Help us, lady!” the other youngster screamed. “Help us get him back up over the edge here!”

She kicked off her high-heeled shoes, picked her way out to them along the stones, displaced the nearest one’s grip with her own on the floundering object of rescue. He wouldn’t come up for a minute, even under the added pull of her adult strength, and she couldn’t make out what was

holding him. There was nothing visible but a broil of sand-smoking water around his legs. She hauled backwards from him with every ounce of strength in her body, and suddenly he came free.

The three of them immediately retreated to the safety of the bank, and she followed. “Why were you so frightened?” she asked.

“Don’t you know what that is?” Johnny said, still whimpering. “Quicksand! Once that gets you—’

There could be no mistaking the genuineness of their fright. Johnny’s two companions had scuttled off for home without further ado, finishing their dressing as they went.

“Look, I’ll show you.” He picked up a fist-sized rock and threw it in. What happened sent a chill down her spine. The stone lay there for a moment, motionless and perfectly visible through the crystalline water. Then there was a slight concentric swirl of the sand immediately around it, a dimple appeared on its surface, evened out again, and suddenly the stone wasn’t there any more. The sand lay as smooth and satiny as ever. The delayed timing was what was so horrible to watch.

“We’d better go,” she said, taking a step backward from it.

“The upper pool’s all right, it’s only got gravel at the bottom,” Johnny was explaining, wiping his hair with a handful of leaves.

She didn’t hear him. She was examining the branch of a bush growing beside the bank that had swung back into place in her wake. It formed an acute angle such as is never found in nature. It was badly fractured halfway along its length. She reached for a second branch, a third, and fingered them. Their spines were all broken the same way.

Her face paled a little. She moved around the entire perimeter of the bush, handling its shoots. Then she examined the neighboring bushes. The fractures were all on the landward side, away from the pool. The tendrils that

overhung the water itself—that anyone in difficulties in the sand could have been expected to grasp—were all undamaged, arching gracefully the way they had grown.

She came away with a puzzled look on her face. But only that, no increased pallor.

At the edge of the woods, just before they came out into the open again, the youngster beside her coaxed plaintively: “Miss Prince, don’t gimme ‘way about going swimming in there, will you?”

“Won’t they notice your hair’s damp?”

“Sure, but I can say I went swimming in the mill-pond, down by the O’Brien place. I’m allowed to go there.”

“Oh, it’s just that—that place we just came from they don’t want you to go near?”

He nodded.

That could have been because of the quicksand. Then again it could have been for other reasons. “Have they always told you to keep away from there?” she hazarded.

It paid off. “No’m, only lately,” he answered.

Only lately. She decided she was going to pay another visit to that cannibal sandbed. With a long pole, perhaps.

The evening meal began in deceptive calmness. Although the two Masons continued to watch her in sullen silence, there seemed to be less of overt suspicion and more of just casual curiosity in their underbrow glances. But a remark from Johnny suddenly brought on a crisis when she was least expecting it. The youngster didn’t realize the dynamite in his question. “Did I pass, in that composition I handed in?” he asked all at once. And then, before she could stop him in time, he blurted out: “You know, the one about the dream I had, where I came down and—”

Without raising eyes from the table she could sense the tightening of the tension around her. It was as noticeable as

though an electric current were streaking around the room. Ed Mason forgot to go ahead eating, he just sat looking down at his plate. Then his father stopped too, and looked at his plate. There was a soft slur of shoe-leather inching along the floor from somewhere under the table.

Mrs. Mason said in a stifled voice, “Sh-h, Johnny.”

There was only one answer she could make. “I haven’t got around to reading it yet.” Something made her add: “It’s up there on the table in my room right now.”

Mason resumed eating. Then Ed followed suit.

She had given them all the rope they needed: Let them go ahead and hang themselves now. If the composition disappeared, as she was almost certain it was going to, that would be as good as an admission that—

She purposely lingered below, helping Mrs. Mason as she had the night before. When she came out of the kitchen and made ready to go up to her room, they were both sprawled out in the adjoining room. Whether one of them had made a quick trip up the stairs and down again, she had no way of knowing—until she got up there herself.

Mason’s eyes followed her in a strangely steadfast way as she started up the stairs. Just what the look signified she couldn’t quite make out. It made her uneasy, although it wasn’t threatening in itself. It had some other quality that she couldn’t figure out, a sort of shrewd complacency. Just before she reached the turn and passed from sight he called out: “Have a good night’s sleep, Miss.” She saw a mocking flicker of the eyes pass between him and Ed.

She didn’t answer. The hand with which she was steadying the lamp she was taking up with her shook a little as she let herself into her room and closed the door. She moved a chair in front of it as a sort of barricade. Then she hurried to the table and sifted through the homework papers stacked on it.

It was still there. It hadn’t been touched. It was out of the alphabetical order she always kept her papers in, but it had

been left there for her to read at will.

That puzzled, almost crestfallen look that she'd had at the pool came back to her face again. She'd been positive she would find it missing.

How long she'd been asleep she could not tell, but it must have been well after midnight when something roused her. She didn't know exactly what it was at first; then as she sat up and put her feet to the floor, she identified it as a strong vibration coming from some place below. As though two heavy bodies were threshing about in a struggle down there.

She quickly put something on and went out to listen in the hall. A chair went over with a vicious crack. A table jarred. She could hear an accompaniment of hard breathing, an occasional wordless grunt. But she was already on her way down by that time, all further thought of concealment thrown to the winds.

Mason and his son were locked in a grim, heaving struggle that floundered from one end of the kitchen to the other, dislodging everything in its path. Mrs. Mason was a helpless onlooker, holding a lighted lamp back beyond danger of upsetting, and ineffectually whimpering: "Don't! Dirk! Ed! Let each other be now!"

"Hold the door open, quick, Ma! I've got him!" Mason gasped just as Miss Prince arrived on the scene.

The woman edged over sidewise along the wall and flung the door back. Mason catapulted his adversary out into the night. Then he snatched up a chicken lying in a pool of blood over in a corner, sent that after him, streaking a line of red drops across the floor. "Thievin' drunkard!" he shouted, shaking a fist at the sprawling figure outside. "Now you come back when you sober up, and I'll let you in!" He slammed the door, shot the bolt home. "Clean up that mess, Ma," he ordered gruffly. "That's one thing I won't 'low, is no chicken-stealing drunkards in my house!" He

strode past the open-mouthed teacher without seeming to see her, and stamped up the stairs.

“He’s very strict about that,” Mrs. Mason whispered confidentially. “Ed don’t mean no harm, but he helps himself to things that don’t belong to him when he gets likkered up.” She sloshed water into a bucket, reached for a scrubbing brush, sank wearily to her knees, and began to scour ruddy circles of chicken blood on the floor. “I just got through doin’ this floor with lye after the last time,” she murmured.

Miss Prince found her voice at last. It was still a very small, shaky one. “Has—has this happened before?”

“Every so often,” she admitted. “Last time he run off with the O’Brien’s Ford, drove it all the way out here just like it belonged to him. Mr. Mason had to sneak it back where he took it from, at that hour of the night.”

An odor of singeing felt suddenly assailed the teacher’s nostrils. She looked, discovered a felt hat, evidently the unmanageable Ed’s, fallen through the open scuttle-hold of the woodburning stove onto the still-warm ashes below. She drew it up and beat it against the back of a chair.

There was a slight rustle from the doorway and Johnny was standing there in his night-shirt, sleepily rubbing one eye. “I had another of those dreams, Ma,” he complained. “I dreamed the whole house was shaking and—”

“You go back to bed, hear?” his mother said sharply. “And don’t go writin’ no more compositions about it in school, neither!” She fanned out her skirt, trying to screen the crimson vestiges on the floor from him. “Another of them wood-varmints got into the house, and your Pa and your Uncle Ed had to kill it, that’s all!”

Miss Prince turned and slunk up the stairs, with a peculiar look on her face—the look of someone who has made a complete fool of herself. She slammed the door of her room behind her with—for her—unusual asperity. She went over to the window and stood looking out. Far down

the highway she could make out the dwindling figure of Ed Mason in the moonlight, steering a lurching, drunken course back toward town and singing, or rather hooting, at the top of his voice as he went.

"Appearances!" she said bitterly. "Appearances!"

She always seemed to meet Kendall just when she didn't want to. He appeared at her elbow next morning just as she alighted from the bus in town. "How're things going? Get onto anything yet?"

She made a move to brush by him without answering.

"I haven't received anything definite yet on any of those inquiries I sent out," he went on.

She turned and faced him. "You won't, either. You can forget the whole thing! All right, laugh, you're entitled to it! You were right and I was wrong."

"You mean you don't think—"

"I mean I practically saw the same thing the boy did, with my own eyes, last night and it was just a family row! I've made a fool out of myself and gone to a lot of trouble, for nothing."

"What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to pack my things and leave."

"Don't take it too hard—" he tried to console her.

She stalked off. At least, she had to admit to herself, he'd been decent enough not to say, "I told you so," and laugh right in her face. Oh, well, he was probably saving it up to enjoy it more fully back at the station house with his cronies.

Mrs. Mason was alone in the kitchen again when she returned that afternoon to get her things together. There hadn't been time before school in the morning. The woman

looked at her questioningly, but the teacher didn't say anything about her imminent departure. Time enough to announce it when she came down again.

In her room she picked up the dress she'd had on the afternoon before and started to fold it over. Something caught her eye. There was a stain, a blotch, that she hadn't noticed until now. She looked at it more closely, as though unable to account for it. Then she remembered sitting down on a half-submerged stump for a moment, just before hearing the boys' cries of distress. "No more appearances!" she warned herself, and tossed the dress into the open bag.

She picked up the batch of school papers lying on the table to follow suit with them. There was that composition of Johnny's that had started all the trouble. She started to reread it. She was standing up at first. Before she had finished she was seated once more. She turned and looked over at the dress she had just put away. Then she got up and took it out again.

There was a timid knock on the door and Mrs. Mason looked in at her. "I thought maybe you'd like me to help you get your things together," she faltered.

Miss Prince eyed her coolly. "I didn't say anything about leaving. What gave you that idea? I'm staying—at least, for a little while longer."

The woman's hands started out toward her, in a palsied gesture of warning. She seemed about to say something. Then she quickly closed the door.

Her main worry was to get down the venerable stairs without causing them to creak and betray her. The house lay steeped in midnight silence. She knew that Mason and his son were inveterate snorers when asleep—she had heard them at other times, even downstairs when they dozed after meals. Tonight she could not hear them.

She didn’t use the flashlight she had brought with her, for fear of attracting attention while still within the house. The real need for that would be later, out in the woods. The stairs accomplished without mishap, it was an easy matter to slip the bolt on the back door and leave without much noise. There was a full moon out, but whether it would be much help where she was going, she doubted.

She stole around to the back of the rickety tool-house and retrieved the long-poled pitchfork she had concealed there earlier in the evening. Its tines were bent, and with a little manipulation, it might serve as a sort of grappling hook if—if there was anything for it to hook onto. A button was all she needed, a rotting piece of suiting. Evidence. Until she had that, she couldn’t go to Kendall, she had to keep on working alone. Not after what she had admitted to him that morning.

She struck out across the silver-dappled fields. The trees closed around her finally, a maw of impenetrable blackness after the moonlight, and she brought her flashlight into play, following its wan direction-finder in and out among the looming, ghostly trunks.

The bed of quicksand loomed whitely even in the dark. There was something sinister about it, like a vast evil eye lying there in wait. The coating of water refracted the shine of her light to a big phosphorescent balloon when she cast the beam downward. She discovered her teeth chattering and clamped them shut. She looked around for something to balance her light, finally nested it in a bush so that the interlaced twigs supported it. She shifted a little farther along the bank and poised the pitchfork like someone about to spear fish.

She lunged out and downward with it. The soft feel of the treacherous sand as the tines dove in was transferred repugnantly along the pole to her hands. That was all she had time to notice. She didn’t even see it sink in.

A leathery hand was pressed to the lower half of her face, a thick anaconda-like arm twined about her waist from behind, and the light winked out. Her wrists were caught together as they flew up from the pitchfork-pole, and held helpless.

"Got her, Ed?" a quiet voice said.

"Got her," a second voice answered.

There hadn't been any warning sound. They must have been lurking there ahead of her, to be able to spring the trap so unexpectedly.

Her pinioned hands were swung around behind her, brought together again. The hand had left her mouth. "You int'rested in what's down in there?" the man behind her asked threateningly.

"I don't know what you mean. Take your hands off me!"

"You know what we mean. And we know what you mean. Don't you suppose we're onto why you're hanging around our place? Now you'll get what you were lookin' for." He addressed his father. "Take off her shoes and stockings and lie 'em on the bank. Careful, don't tear 'em now."

"What's that for?"

"She came out here alone, see, early tomorrow morning, and it looked so pretty she went wading without knowing what it was, and it got her."

She kicked frantically, trying to stop them. She was helpless in their hands. Her ankles were caught, one at a time, and stripped.

"They'll dredge for her, won't they?" Dirk Mason mentioned with sinister meaning.

"She'll be on top, won't she?" was the grisly reassurance. "Once they get her out, they'll be no call for them to go ahead dredging any further down."

She ripped out a scream of harrowing intensity. If it had been twice as shrill, it couldn't have reached past the confines of these woods. And who was there in the woods to

hear her? “Think we ought to stuff something in her mouth?” the older man asked.

“No, because we gotta figure on her being found later. Don’t worry, no one’ll hear her.”

She was fighting now the way an animal fights for its life. But she was no match for the two of them. Not even a man would have been.

They were ready for the incredible thing they were about to do. “Grab her legs and swing her, so she goes out far enough.” There was a moment of sickening indecision, while she swung suspended between them, clear of the ground. Then her spinning body shot away from them.

Water sprayed over her as she struck. The fall was nothing. It was like landing on a satin quilt, the sand was so soft. She rolled over, tore her arms free, and threshed to a kneeling position. There was that awful preliminary moment in which nothing happened, as with that stone she had seen Johnny throw in yesterday. Then a sudden pull, a drawing, started in—weak at first, barely noticeable, giving the impression of being easy to counteract. And each move she made wound the sand tighter around her bared feet, ankles, calves.

Meanwhile, something was happening on the bank, or at least, farther back in the woods; but she was only dimly aware of it, too taken up in her own floundering struggles. It reached her vaguely, like something through a heavy mist. An intermittent winking as of fireflies here and there, each one followed by a loud crack like the breaking of a heavy bough. Then heavy forms were crashing through the thickets in several directions at once, two of them fleeing along the edge of the pool, others fanning out farther back, as if to intercept them. There was one final crack, a fall, and then a breathless voice nearby said: “Don’t shoot—I give up!”

A light, stronger than the one she had brought, suddenly flashed out, caught her, steadied, lighting up the whole

pool. Her screams had dwindled to weak wails now, simply because she hadn't enough breath left. She was writhing there, still upright, but her legs already gone past the knees.

"Hurry up, and help me with this girl!" a voice shouted somewhere behind the blinding light. "Don't you see what they've done to her?" The pole of the same pitchfork she had used was thrust out toward her. "Hang onto this!" She clutched it with both hands. A moment later a noosed rope had splashed into the water around her. "Pass your arms through that and tighten it around you. Grab hold now and kick out behind you!"

For minutes nothing happened; she didn't seem to move at all, though there must have been at least three of them pulling on the rope. "Are we hurting you?" Then suddenly there was a crumbling feeling of the sand around her trapped legs and she came free.

Kendall was one of them, of course, and even the brief glimpse she had of his face by torchlight made her wonder how she could have ever felt averse to running into him at any time. She certainly didn't feel that way now.

They carried her out of the woods in a "chair" made of their hands and put her into a police car waiting at the edge of the fields.

"You'd better get back there and go to work," she said. "Even before you got the rope around me, the downward pull had stopped, I noticed. I seemed to be standing on something . . . How did you get out here on time?"

"One of those inquiries I sent out finally paid off. A commercial traveler named Kenneth Johnson was reported missing, from way over in Jordanstown. He was supposed to show up at Indian River, out beyond here in the other direction, and he never got there—dropped from sight somewhere along the way, car and all. He was carrying quite a gob of money with him. He left three weeks ago, but it wasn't reported until now, because he was only expected

back around this time. I only got word a half hour ago. I thought of the Masons right away, thanks to you. I started right out here with a couple of my partners to look around, never dreaming that you were still here yourself. Then a little past the next house down, the O'Brien place, we met the kid, Johnny, running along the road lickety-split, on his way to phone in to us and get help. His mother had finally got pangs of conscience and thrown off her fear of her husband and stepson long enough to try to save you from what she guessed was going to happen."

She went out there again first thing the next morning. Kendall came forward to meet her as she neared the pool. He told her they'd finally got the car out a little after daybreak, with the help of a farm-tractor run in under the trees, plenty of stout ropes, and some grappling hooks. She could see the weird-looking sandencrusted shape standing there on the bank, scarcely recognizable for what it was.

"Kenneth Johnson, all right," Kendall said quietly, "and still inside it when we got it out. But murdered before he was ever swallowed up in the sand. I have a confession from the two Masons. He gave Ed a hitch back along the road that night. Mason got him to step in for a minute on some excuse or other, when they'd reached his place, so he'd have a chance to rifle his wallet. Johnson caught him in the act, and Mason and his father murdered him with a flatiron. Then they put him back in the car, drove him over here, and pushed it in. No need to go any closer, it's not a very pretty sight."

On the way back he asked: "But what made you change your mind so suddenly? Only yesterday morning when I met you you were ready to—"

"I sat down on a stump not far from the pool, and afterwards I discovered axle-grease on my dress. It was so

damp and moldy in there that the clot that had fallen from the car hadn't dried out yet. Why should a car be driven in there where there was no road?

"But the main thing was still that composition of Johnny's. Remember where Johnny said the hat had fallen? Through the stove onto the ashes. But in the reenactment they staged for me, Ed Mason's hat also fell through the open scuttlehold in the stove onto the ashes below. Is it probable that a hat, flung off somebody's head in the course of a struggle, would land in the identical place twice? Hardly. Things like that just don't happen. The second hat had been deliberately placed there for me to see, to point up the similarity to what had happened before."

That night, safely back in her old quarters in town, she was going over back-schoolwork when her landlady knocked on the door. "There's a gentleman downstairs to see you. He says it's not business, but social."

Miss Prince smiled a little. "I think I know who it is. Tell him I'll be right down as soon as I've finished grading this composition."

She picked up the one Johnny Gaines had written. She marked it A-plus, the highest possible mark she could give, without bothering for once about grammar, punctuation, or spelling. Then she put on her hat, turned down the light, and went out to meet Kendall.

IT HAD TO BE MURDER

I didn’t know their names. I’d never heard their voices. I didn’t even know them by sight, strictly speaking, for their faces were too small to fill in with identifiable features at that distance. Yet I could have constructed a timetable of their comings and goings, their daily habits and activities. They were the rear-window dwellers around me.

Sure, I suppose it was a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom.

That wasn’t my fault, that wasn’t the idea. The idea was, my movements were strictly limited just around this time. I could get from the window to the bed, and from the bed to the window, and that was all. The bay window was about the best feature my rear bedroom had in the warm weather. It was unscreened, so I had to sit with the light out or I would have had every insect in the vicinity in on me. I couldn’t sleep, because I was used to getting plenty of exercise. I’d never acquired the habit of reading books to ward off boredom, so I hadn’t that to turn to. Well, what should I do, sit there with my eyes tightly shuttered?

Just to pick a few at random: Straight over, and the windows square, there was a young jitter-couple, kids in their teens, only just married. It would have killed them to stay home one night. They were always in such a hurry to go, wherever it was they went, they never remembered to turn out the lights. I don’t think it missed once in all the

time I was watching. But they never forgot altogether, either. I was to learn to call this delayed action, as you will see. He'd always come skittering madly back in about five minutes, probably from all the way down in the street, and rush around killing the switches. Then fall over something in the dark on his way out. They gave me an inward chuckle, those two.

The next house down, the windows already narrowed a little with perspective. There was a certain light in that one that always went out each night too. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad. There was a woman living there with her child, a young widow I suppose. I'd see her put the child to bed, and then bend over and kiss her in a wistful sort of way. She'd shade the light off her and sit there painting her eyes and mouth. Then she'd go out. She'd never come back till the night was nearly spent—

Once I was still up, and I looked and she was sitting there motionless with her head buried in her arms. Something about it, it used to make me a little sad.

The third one down no longer offered any insight, the windows were just slits like in a medieval battlement, due to foreshortening. That brings us around to the one on the end. In that one, frontal vision came back full-depth again, since it stood at right angles to the rest, my own included, sealing up the inner hollow all these houses backed on. I could see into it, from the rounded projection of my bay window, as freely as into a doll house with its rear wall sliced away. And scaled down to about the same size.

It was a flat building. Unlike all the rest it had been constructed originally as such, not just cut up into furnished rooms. It topped them by two stories and had rear fire escapes, to show for this distinction. But it was old, evidently hadn't shown a profit. It was in the process of being modernized. Instead of clearing the entire building while the work was going on, they were doing it a flat at a time, in order to lose as little rental income as possible. Of

the six rearward flats it offered to view, the topmost one had already been completed, but not yet rented. They were working on the fifth-floor one now, disturbing the peace of everyone all up and down the “inside” of the block with their hammering and sawing.

I felt sorry for the couple in the flat below. I used to wonder how they stood it with that bedlam going on above their heads. To make it worse the wife was in chronic poor health, too; I could tell that even at a distance by the listless way she moved about over there, and remained in her bathrobe without dressing. Sometimes I’d see her sitting by the window, holding her head. I used to wonder why he didn’t have a doctor in to look her over, but maybe they couldn’t afford it. He seemed to be out of work. Often their bedroom light was on late at night behind the drawn shade, as though she were unwell and he was sitting up with her. And one night in particular he must have had to sit up with her all night, it remained on until nearly daybreak. Not that I sat watching all that time. But the light was still burning at three in the morning, when I finally transferred from chair to bed to see if I could get a little sleep myself. And when I failed to, and hopscotched back again around dawn, it was still peering wanly out behind the tan shade.

Moments later, with the first brightening of day, it suddenly dimmed around the edges of the shade, and then shortly afterward, not that one, but a shade in one of the other rooms—for all of them alike had been down—went up, and I saw him standing there looking out.

He was holding a cigarette in his hand. I couldn’t see it, but I could tell it was that by the quick, nervous little jerks with which he kept putting his hand to his mouth, and the haze I saw rising around his head. Worried about her, I guess. I didn’t blame him for that. Any husband would have been. She must have only just dropped off to sleep, after night-long suffering. And then in another hour or so, at the most, that sawing of wood and clattering of buckets was

going to start in over them again. Well, it wasn't any of my business, I said to myself, but he really ought to get her out of there. If I had an ill wife on my hands . . .

He was leaning slightly out, maybe an inch past the window frame, carefully scanning the back faces of all the houses abutting on the hollow square that lay before him. You can tell, even at a distance, when a person is looking fixedly. There's something about the way the head is held. And yet his scrutiny wasn't held fixedly to any one point, it was a slow, sweeping one, moving along the houses on the opposite side from me first. When it got to the end of them, I knew it would cross over to my side and come back along there. Before it did, I withdrew several yards inside my room, to let it go safely by. I didn't want him to think I was sitting there prying into his affairs. There was still enough blue night-shade in my room to keep my slight withdrawal from catching his eye.

When I returned to my original position a moment or two later, he was gone. He had raised two more of the shades. The bedroom one was still down. I wondered vaguely why he had given that peculiar, comprehensive, semicircular stare at all the rear windows around him. There wasn't anyone at any of them, at such an hour. It wasn't important, of course. It was just a little oddity, it failed to blend in with his being worried or disturbed about his wife. When you're worried or disturbed, that's an internal preoccupation, you stare vacantly at nothing at all. When you stare around you in a great sweeping arc at windows, that betrays external preoccupation, outward interest. One doesn't quite jibe with the other. To call such a discrepancy trifling is to add to its importance. Only someone like me, stewing in a vacuum of total idleness, would have noticed it at all.

The flat remained lifeless after that, as far as could be judged by its windows. He must have either gone out or gone to bed himself. Three of the shades remained at normal height, the one masking the bedroom remained down. Sam, my day houseman, came in not long after with my eggs and morning paper, and I had that to kill time with for awhile. I stopped thinking about other people's windows and staring at them.

The sun slanted down on one side of the hollow oblong all morning long, then it shifted over to the other side for the afternoon. Then it started to slip off both alike, and it was evening again—another day gone.

The lights started to come on around the quadrangle. Here and there a wall played back, like a sounding board, a snatch of radio program that was coming in too loud. If you listened carefully you could hear an occasional click of dishes mixed in, faint, far off. The chain of little habits that were their lives unreeled themselves. They were all bound in them tighter than the tightest straitjacket any jailer ever devised, though they all thought themselves free. The jitterbugs made their nightly dash for the great open spaces, forgot their lights, he came careening back, thumbed them out, and their place was dark until the early morning hours.

The woman put her child to bed, leaned mournfully over its cot, then sat down with heavy despair to redden her mouth.

In the fourth-floor flat at right angles to the long, interior "street" the three shades had remained up, and the fourth shade had remained at full length, all day long. I hadn't been conscious of that because I hadn't particularly been looking at it, or thinking of it, until now. My eyes may have rested on those windows at times, during the day, but my thoughts had been elsewhere. It was only when a light suddenly went up in the end room behind one of the raised shades, which was their kitchen, that I realized that the

shades had been untouched like that all day. That also brought something else to my mind that hadn't been in it until now: I hadn't seen the woman all day. I hadn't seen any sign of life within those windows until now.

He'd come in from outside. The entrance was at the opposite side of their kitchen, away from the window. He'd left his hat on, so I knew he'd just come in from the outside.

He didn't remove his hat As though there was no one there to remove it for any more. Instead, he pushed it farther to the back of his head by pronging a hand to the roots of his hair. That gesture didn't denote removal of perspiration, I knew. To do that a person makes a sidewise sweep—this was up over his forehead. It indicated some sort of harassment or uncertainty. Besides, if he'd been suffering from excess warmth, the first thing he would have done would be to take off his hat altogether.

She didn't come out to greet him. The first link, of the so-strong chain of habits, of custom, that binds us all, had snapped wide open.

She must be so ill she had remained in bed, in the room behind the lowered shade, all day. I watched. He remained where he was, two rooms away from there. Expectancy became surprise, surprise incomprehension. Funny, I thought, that he doesn't go in to her. Or at least go as far as the doorway, look in to see how she is.

Maybe she was asleep, and he didn't want to disturb her. Then immediately: but how can he know for sure that she's asleep, without at least looking in at her? He just came in himself.

He came forward and stood there by the window, as he had at dawn. Sam had carried out my tray quite some time before, and my fights were out. I held my ground, I knew he couldn't see me within the darkness of the bay window. He stood there motionless for several minutes. And now his attitude was the proper one for inner preoccupation. He stood there looking downward at nothing, lost in thought.

He’s worried about her, I said to myself, as any man would be. It’s the most natural thing in the world. Funny, though, he should leave her in the dark like that, without going near her. If he’s worried, then why didn’t he at least look in on her on returning? Here was another of those trivial discrepancies, between inward motivation and outward indication. And just as I was thinking that, the original one, that I had noted at daybreak, repeated itself. His head went up with renewed alertness, and I could see it start to give that slow circular sweep of interrogation around the panorama of rearward windows again. True, the light was behind him this time, but there was enough of it falling on him to show me the microscopic but continuous shift of direction his head made in the process. I remained carefully immobile until the distant glance had passed me safely by. Motion attracts.

Why is he so interested in other people’s windows, I wondered detachedly. And of course an effective brake to dwell on that thought too lingeringly clamped down almost at once: Look who’s talking. What about you yourself?

An important difference escaped me. I wasn’t worried about anything. He, presumably, was.

Down came the shades again. The lights stayed on behind their beige opaqueness. But behind the one that had remained down all along, the room remained dark.

Time went by. Hard to say how much—a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes. A cricket chirped in one of the back yards. Sam came in to see if I wanted anything before he went home for the night. I told him no, I didn’t—it was all right, run along. He stood there for a minute, head down. Then I saw him shake it slightly, as if at something he didn’t like. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“You know what that means? My old mammy told it to me, and she never told me a lie in her life. I never once seen it to miss, either.”

“What, the cricket?”

“Any time you hear one of them things, that’s a sign of death someplace close around.” I swept the back of my hand at him. “Well, it isn’t in here, so don’t let it worry you.” He went out, muttering stubbornly: “It’s somewhere close by, though. Somewhere not very far off. Got to be.” The door closed after him, and I stayed there alone in the dark.

It was a stifling night, much closer than the one before. I could hardly get a breath of air even by the open window at which I sat. I wondered how he—that unknown over there—could stand it behind those drawn shades.

Then suddenly, just as idle speculation about this whole matter was about to alight on some fixed point in my mind, crystallize into something like suspicion, up came the shades again, and off it flitted, as formless as ever and without having had a chance to come to rest on anything.

He was in the middle windows, the living room. He’d taken off his coat and shirt, was bare-armed in his undershirt. He hadn’t been able to stand it himself, I guess—the sultriness.

I couldn’t make out what he was doing at first. He seemed to be busy in a perpendicular, up-and-down way rather than lengthwise. He remained in one place, but he kept dipping down out of sight and then straightening up into view again, at irregular intervals. It was almost like some sort of calisthenic exercise, except that the dips and rises weren’t evenly timed enough for that. Sometimes he’d stay down a long time, sometimes he’d bob right up again, sometimes he’d go down two or three times in rapid succession. There was some sort of a widespread black V railing him off from the window. Whatever it was, there was just a sliver of it showing above the upward inclination to which the window still deflected my line of vision. All it did

was strike off the bottom of his undershirt, to the extent of a sixteenth of an inch maybe. But I haven't seen it there at other times, and I couldn't tell what it was.

Suddenly he left it for the first time since the shades had gone up, came out around it to the outside, stooped down into another part of the room, and straightened again with an armful of what looked like varicolored pennants at the distance at which I was. He went back behind the V and allowed them to fall across the top of it for a moment, and stay that way. He made one of his dips down out of sight and stayed that way a good while.

The "pennants" slung across the V kept changing color right in front of my eyes. I have very good sight. One moment they were white, the next red, the next blue.

Then I got it. They were a woman's dresses, and he was pulling them down to him one by one, taking the topmost one each time. Suddenly they were all gone, the V was black and bare again, and his torso had reappeared. I knew what it was now, and what he was doing. The dresses had told me. He confirmed it for me. He spread his arms to the ends of the V, I could see him heave and hitch, as if exerting pressure, and suddenly the V had folded up, become a cubed wedge. Then he made rolling motions with his whole upper body, and the wedge disappeared off to one side.

He'd been packing a trunk, packing his wife's things into a large upright trunk.

He reappeared at the kitchen window presently, stood still for a moment. I saw him draw his arm across his forehead, not once but several times, and then whip the end of it off into space. Sure, it was hot work for such a night. Then he reached up along the wall and took something down. Since it was the kitchen he was in, my imagination had to supply a cabinet and a bottle.

I could see the two or three quick passes his hand made to his mouth after that. I said to myself tolerantly: That's what nine men out of ten would do after packing a trunk—

take a good stiff drink. And if the tenth didn't, it would only be because he didn't have any liquor at hand.

Then he came closer to the window again, and standing edgewise to the side of it, so that only a thin paring of his head and shoulder showed, peered watchfully out into the dark quadrilateral, along the line of windows, most of them unlighted by now, once more. He always started on the left-hand side, the side opposite mine, and made his circuit of inspection from there on around.

That was the second time in one evening I'd seen him do that. And once at daybreak, made three times altogether. I smiled mentally. You'd almost think he felt guilty about something. It was probably nothing, just an odd little habit, a quirk, that he didn't know he had himself. I had them myself, everyone does.

He withdrew into the room, and it blacked out his figure passed into the one that was still lighted next to it, the living room.

That blacked next. It didn't surprise me that the third room, the bedroom with the drawn shade, didn't light up on his entering there. He wouldn't want to disturb her, of course—particularly if she was going away tomorrow for her health, as his packing of her trunk showed. She needed all the rest she could get, before making the trip. Simple enough for him to slip into bed in the dark.

It did surprise me, though, when a match-flare winked some time later, to have it still come from the darkened living room.

He must be lying down in there, trying to sleep on a sofa or something for the night. He hadn't gone near the bedroom at all, was staying out of it altogether. That puzzled me, frankly. That was carrying solicitude almost too far.

Ten minutes or so later, there was another matchwink, still from that same living room window. He couldn't sleep.

The night brooded down on both of us alike, the curiosity-monger in the bay window, the chain-smoker in the fourth-floor flat, without giving any answer. The only sound was that interminable cricket.

I was back at the window again with the first sun of morning. Not because of him. My mattress was like a bed of hot coals.

Sam found me there when he came in to get things ready for me. "You're going to be a wreck, Mr. Jeff," was all he said.

First, for awhile, there was no sign of life over there. Then suddenly I saw his head bob up from somewhere down out of sight in the living room, so I knew I'd been right; he'd spent the night on a sofa or easy chair in there. Now, of course, he'd look in at her, to see how she was, find out if she felt any better. That was only common ordinary humanity. He hadn't been near her, so far as I could make out, since two nights before.

He didn't. He dressed, and he went in the opposite direction, into the kitchen, and wolfed something in there, standing up and using both hands. Then he suddenly turned and moved off side, in the direction in which I knew the flat-entrance to be, as if he had just heard some summons, like the doorbell.

Sure enough, in a moment he came back, and there were two men with him in leather aprons. Expressmen. I saw him standing by while they laboriously maneuvered that cubed black wedge out between them, in the direction they'd just come from. He did more than just stand by. He practically hovered over them, kept shifting from side to side, he was so anxious to see that it was done right.

Then he came back alone, and I saw him swipe his arm across his head, as though it was he, not they, who was all heated up from the effort.

So he was forwarding her trunk, to wherever it was she was going. That was all.

He reached up along the wall again and took something down. He was taking another drink. Two. Three. I said to myself, a little at a loss: Yes, but he hasn't just packed a trunk this time. That trunk has been standing packed and ready since last night.

Where does the hard work come in? The sweat and the need for a bracer?

Now, at last, after all those hours, he finally did go in to her. I saw his form pass through the living room and go beyond, into the bedroom. Up went the shade, that had been down all this time. Then he turned his head and looked around behind him. In a certain way, a way that was unmistakable, even from where I was. Not in one certain direction, as one looks at a person. But from side to side, and up and down, and all around, as one looks at—an empty room.

He stepped back, bent a little, gave a fling of his arms, and an unoccupied mattress and bedding upended over the foot of a bed, stayed that way, emptily curved. A second one followed a moment later.

She wasn't in there.

They use the expression "delayed action." I found out then what it meant. For two days a sort of formless uneasiness, a disembodied suspicion, I don't know what to call it, had been flitting and volplaning around in my mind, like an insect looking for a landing place. More than once, just as it had been ready to settle, some slight thing, some slight reassuring thing, such as the raising of the shades after they had been down unnaturally long, had been enough to keep it winging aimlessly, prevent it from staying still long enough for me to recognize it. The point of contact had been there all along, waiting to receive it. Now, for some reason, within a split second after he tossed over the empty mattresses, it landed—zoom! And the point of

contact expanded—or exploded, whatever you care to call it—into a certainty of murder.

In other words, the rational part of my mind was far behind the instinctive, subconscious part. Delayed action. Now the one had caught up to the other. The thought-message that sparked from the synchronization was: He's done something to her!

I looked down and my hand was bunching the goods over my kneecap, it was knotted so tight. I forced it to open. I said to myself, steadyingly: Now wait a minute, be careful, go slow. You've seen nothing. You know nothing. You only have the negative proof that you don't see her any more.

Sam was standing there looking over at me from the pantryway. He said accusingly: "You ain't touched a thing. And your face looks like a sheet."

It felt like one. It had that needling feeling, when the blood has left it involuntarily. It was more to get him out of the way and give myself some elbow room for undisturbed thinking, than anything else, that I said: "Sam, what's the street address of that building down there? Don't stick your head too far out and gape at it."

"Somep'n or other Benedict Avenue." He scratched his neck helpfully.

"I know that. Chase around the corner a minute and get me the exact number on it, will you?"

"Why you want to know that for?" he asked as he turned to go.

"None of your business," I said with the good-natured firmness that was all that was necessary to take care of that once and for all. I called after him just as he was closing the door: "And while you're about it, step into the entrance and see if you can tell from the mailboxes who has the fourth-floor rear. Don't get me the wrong one now. And try not to let anyone catch you at it." He went out mumbling something that sounded like, "When a man ain't got nothing to do but just sit all day, he sure can think up the blamest

things—“ The door closed and I settled down to some good constructive thinking.

I said to myself: What are you really building up this monstrous supposition on? Let’s see what you’ve got. Only that there were several little things wrong with the mechanism, the chain-belt, of their recurrent daily habits over there. 1. The lights were on all night the first night. 2. He came in later than usual the second night. 3. He left his hat on. 4. She didn’t come out to greet him—she hasn’t appeared since the evening before the lights were on all night. 5. He took a drink after he finished packing her trunk. But he took three stiff drinks the next morning, immediately after her trunk went out. 6. He was inwardly disturbed and worried, yet superimposed upon this was an unnatural external concern about the surrounding rear windows that was off-key. 7. He slept in the living room, didn’t go near the bedroom, during the night before the departure of the trunk.

Very well. If she had been ill that first night, and he had sent her away for her health, that automatically canceled out points 1, 2, 3, 4. It left points 5 and 6 totally unimportant and unincriminating. But when it came up against 7, I hit a stumbling block.

If she went away immediately after being ill that first night, why didn’t he want to sleep in their bedroom last night?

Sentiment? Hardly. Two perfectly good beds in one room, only a sofa or uncomfortable easy chair in the other. Why should he stay out of there if she was already gone? just because he missed her, was lonely? A grown man doesn’t act that way. All right, then she was still in there.

Sam came back parenthetically at this point and said: “That house is Number 525 Benedict Avenue. The fourth-floor rear, it got the name of Mr. and Mrs. Lars Thorwald up.”

“Sh-h,” I silenced, and motioned him backhand out of my ken.

“First he wants it, then he don’t,” he grumbled philosophically, and retired to his duties.

I went ahead digging at it. But if she was still in there, in that bedroom last night, then she couldn’t have gone away to the country, because I never saw her leave today. She could have left without my seeing her in the early hours of yesterday morning.

I’d missed a few hours, been asleep. But this morning I had been up before he was himself, I only saw his head rear up from the sofa after I’d been at the window for some time.

To go at all she would have had to go yesterday morning. Then why had he left the bedroom shade down, left the mattresses undisturbed, until today? Above all, why had he stayed out of that room last night? That was evidence that she hadn’t gone, was still in there. Then today, immediately after the trunk had been dispatched, he went in, pulled up the shade, tossed over the mattresses, and showed that she hadn’t been in there. The thing was like a crazy spiral.

No, it wasn’t either. Immediately after the trunk had been dispatched

The trunk.

That did it.

I looked around to make sure the door was safely closed between Sam and me. My hand hovered uncertainly over the telephone dial a minute. Boyne, he’d be the one to tell about it. He was on Homicide. He had been, anyway, when I’d last seen him.

I didn’t want to get a flock of strange dicks and cops into my hair. I didn’t want to be involved any more than I had to. Or at all, if possible.

They switched my call to the right place after a couple of wrong tries, and I got him finally.

“Look, Boyne? This is Hal Jeffries—”

“Well, where’ve you been the last sixty-two years?” he started to enthuse.

“We can take that up later. What I want you to do now is take down a name and address. Ready? Lars Thorwald. Five twenty-five Benedict Avenue. Fourth-floor rear. Got it?”

“Fourth-floor rear. Got it. What’s it for?”

“Investigation. I’ve got a firm belief you’ll uncover a murder there if You start digging at it. Don’t call on me for anything more than that—just a conviction. There’s been a man and wife living there until now. Now there’s just the man. Her trunk went out early this morning. If you can find someone who saw her leave herself—“Marshaled aloud like that and conveyed to somebody else, a lieutenant of detectives above all, it did sound flimsy, even to me.

He said hesitantly, “Well, but—“Then he accepted it as was. Because I was the source. I even left my window out of it completely. I could do that with him and get away with it because he’d known me years, he didn’t question my reliability. I didn’t want my room all cluttered up with dicks and cops taking turns nosing out of the window in this hot weather. Let them tackle it from the front.

“Well, we’ll see what we see,” he said. “I’ll keep you posted.”

I hung up and sat back to watch and wait events. I had a grandstand seat. Or rather a grandstand seat in reverse. I could only see from behind the scenes, but not from the front. I couldn’t watch Boyne go to work. I could only see the results, when and if there were any.

Nothing happened for the next few hours. The police work that I knew must be going on was as invisible as police work should be. The figure in the fourth-floor windows over there remained in sight, alone and undisturbed. He didn’t go out. He was restless, roamed from room to room without staying in one place very long, but he stayed in. Once I saw him eating again—sitting down this time—and once he

shaved, and once he even tried to read the paper, but he didn't stay with it long.

Little unseen wheels were in motion around him. Small and harmless as yet, preliminaries. If he knew, I wondered to myself, would he remain there quiescent like that, or would he try to bolt out and flee? That mightn't depend so much upon his guilt as upon his sense of immunity, his feeling that he could outwit them. Of his guilt I myself was already convinced, or I wouldn't have taken the step I had.

At three my phone rang. Boyne calling back. "Jeffries? Well, I don't know. Can't you give me a little more than just a bald statement like that?"

"Why?" I fenced. "Why do I have to?"

"I've had a man over there making inquiries. I've just had his report. The building superintendent and several of the neighbors all agree she left for the country, to try and regain her health, early yesterday morning."

"Wait a minute. Did any of them see her leave, according to your man?"

"No."

"Then all you've gotten is a second-hand version of an unsupported statement by him. Not an eyewitness account"

"He was met returning from the depot, after he'd bought her ticket and seen her off on the train."

"That's still an unsupported statement, once removed."

"I've sent a man down there to the station to try and check with the ticket agent if possible. After all, he should have been fairly conspicuous at that early hour. And we're keeping him under observation, of course, in the meantime, watching all his movements. The first chance we get we're going to jump in and search the place." I had a feeling that they wouldn't find anything, even if they did.

"Don't expect anything more from me. I've dropped it in your lap. I've given you all I have to give. A name, an address, and an opinion."

“Yes, and I’ve always valued your opinion highly before now, Jeff—”

“But now you don’t, that it?’

“Not at all. The thing is, we haven’t turned up anything that seems to bear out your impression so far.”

“You haven’t gotten very far along, so far.”

He went back to his previous cliché. “Well, we’ll see what we see. Let you know later.” Another hour or so went by, and sunset came on. I saw him start to get ready to go out, over there. He put on his hat, put his hand in his pocket and stood still looking at it for a minute. Counting change, I guess. It gave me a peculiar sense of suppressed excitement, knowing they were going to come in the minute he left. I thought grimly, as I saw him take a last look around: If you’ve got anything to hide, brother, now’s the time to hide it

He left. A breath-holding interval of misleading emptiness descended on the flat. A three-alarm fire couldn’t have pulled my eyes off those windows. Suddenly the door by which he had just left parted slightly and two men insinuated themselves, one behind the other. There they were now. They closed it behind them, separated at once, and got busy. One took the bedroom, one the kitchen, and they started to work their way toward one another again from those extremes of the flat. They were thorough. I could see them going over everything from top to bottom. They took the living room together. One cased one side, the other man the other.

They’d already finished before the warning caught them. I could tell that by the way they straightened up and stood facing one another frustratedly for a minute. Then both their heads turned sharply, as at a tip-off by doorbell that he was coming back.

They got out fast.

I wasn’t unduly disheartened, I’d expected that. My own feeling all along had been that they wouldn’t find anything

incriminating around. The trunk had gone.

He came in with a mountainous brown-paper bag sitting in the curve of one arm. I watched him closely to see if he'd discover that someone had been there in his absence. Apparently he didn't. They'd been adroit about it.

He stayed in the rest of the night. Sat tight, safe and sound. He did some desultory drinking, I could see him sitting there by the window and his hand would hoist every once in awhile, but not to excess. Apparently everything was under control, the tension had eased, now that—the trunk was out

Watching him across the night, I speculated: Why doesn't he get out? If I'm right about him, and I am, why does he stick around after it? That brought its own answer: Because he doesn't know anyone's on to him yet. He doesn't think there's any hurry.

To go too soon, right after she has, would be more dangerous than to stay awhile.

The night wore on. I sat there waiting for Boyne's call. It came later than I thought it would. I picked the phone up in the dark.

He was getting ready to go to bed, over there, now. He'd risen from where he'd been sitting drinking in the kitchen, and put the light out. He went into the living room, lit that He started to pull his shirttail up out of his belt. Boyne's voice was in my ear as my eyes were on him, over there. Three-cornered arrangement

"Hello, Jeff? Listen, absolutely nothing. We searched the place while he was out." I nearly said, "I know you did, I saw it," but checked myself in time.

"—and didn't turn up a thing. But—" He stopped as though this was going to be important. I waited impatiently for him to go ahead.

"Downstairs in his letter box we found a post card waiting for him. We fished it up out of the slot with bent pins—"

"And?"

“And it was from his wife, written only yesterday from some farm up-country. Here’s the message we copied: ‘Arrived OK. Already feeling a little better. Love, Anna.’ ”

I said, faintly but stubbornly: “You say, written only yesterday. Have you proof of that? What was the postmark-date on it?” He made a disgusted sound down in his tonsils. At me, not it. “The postmark was blurred. A comer of it got wet, and the ink smudged.”

“All of it blurred?”

“The year-date,” he admitted. “The hour and the month came out OK. August. And seven thirty p.m., it was mailed at.” This time I made the disgusted sound, in my larynx. “August, seven thirty p.m.—1937 or 1939 or 1942. You have no proof how it got into that mail box, whether it came from a letter carrier’s pouch or from the back of some bureau drawer!”

“Give up, Jeff,” he said. “There’s such a thing as going too far.”

I don’t know what I would have said. That is, if I hadn’t happened to have my eyes on the Thorwald flat living room windows just then. Probably verve little. The post card had shaken me, whether I admitted it or not. But I was looking over there. The light had gone out as soon as he’d taken his shirt off. But the bedroom didn’t light up. A match-flare winked from the living room, low down, as from an easy chair or sofa. With two unused beds in the bedroom, he was still staying out of there.

“Boyne,” I said in a glassy voice, “I don’t care what post cards from the other world you’ve turned up, I say that man has done away with his wife! Trace that trunk he shipped out. Open it up when you’ve located it-and I think you’ll find her!” And I hung up without waiting to hear what he was going to do about it. He didn’t ring back, so I suspected he

was going to give my suggestion a spin after all, in spite of his loudly proclaimed skepticism.

I stayed there by the window all night, keeping a sort of deathwatch. There were two more match-flares after the first, at about half-hour intervals. Nothing more after that. So possibly he was asleep over there. Possibly not I had to sleep some myself, and I finally succumbed in the flaming light of the early sun. Anything that he was going to do, he would have done under cover of darkness and not waited for broad daylight. There wouldn't be anything much to watch, for a while now. And what was there that he needed to do any more, anyway? Nothing, just sit tight and let a little disarming time slip by.

It seemed like five minutes later that Sam came over and touched me, but it was already high noon. I said irritably: "Didn't you lamp that note I pinned up, for you to let me sleep?"

He said: "Yeah, but it's your old friend Inspector Boyne. I figured you'd sure want to—" It was a personal visit this time. Boyne came into the room behind him without waiting, and without much cordiality.

I said to get rid of Sam: "Go inside and smack a couple of eggs together." Boyne began in a galvanized-iron voice: "Jeff, what do you mean by doing anything like this to me? I've made a fool out of myself thanks to you. Sending my men out right and left on wild-goose chases. Thank God, I didn't put my foot in it any worse than I did, and have this guy picked up and brought in for questioning."

"Oh, then you don't think that's necessary?" I suggested, dryly.

The look he gave me took care of that. "I'm not alone in the department, you know. There are men over me I'm accountable to for my actions. That looks great, don't it, sending one of my fellows one-half-a-day's train ride up into the sticks to some God-forsaken whistle-stop or other at departmental expense—"

“Then you located the trunk?”

“We traced it through the express agency,” he said flintily.

“And you opened it?”

“We did better than that. We got in touch with the various farmhouses in the immediate locality, and Mrs. Thorwald came down to the junction in a produce-truck from one of them and opened it for him herself, with her own keys!” Very few men have ever gotten a look from an old friend such as I got from him. At the door he said, stiff as a rifle barrel: “Just let’s forget all about it, shall we? That’s about the kindest thing either one of us can do for the other. You’re not yourself, and I’m out a little of my own pocket money, time and temper. Let’s let it go at that. If you want to telephone me in future I’ll be glad to give you my home number.”

The door went whopp! behind him.

For about ten minutes after he stormed out my numbed mind was in a sort of straitjacket. Then it started to wriggle its way free. The hell with the police. I can’t prove it to them, maybe, but I can prove it to myself, one way or the other, once and for all.

Either I’m wrong or I’m right. He’s got his armor on against them. But his back is naked and unprotected against me.

I called Sam in. “Whatever became of that spyglass we used to have, when we were bumming around on that cabin-cruiser that season?”

He found it some place downstairs and came in with it, blowing on it and rubbing it along his sleeve. I let it lie idle in my lap first. I took a piece of paper and a pencil and wrote six words on it: What have you done with her?

I sealed it in an envelope and left the envelope blank. I said to Sam: “Now here’s what I want you to do, and I want you to be slick about it. You take this, go in that building 525, climb the stairs to the fourth-floor rear, and ease it under the door. You’re fast, at least you used to be. Let’s see

if you’re fast enough to keep from being caught at it. Then when you get safely down again, give the outside doorbell a little poke, to attract attention.”

His mouth started to open.

“And don’t ask me any questions, you understand? I’m not fooling.”

He went, and I got the spyglass ready.

I got him in the right focus after a minute or two. A face leaped up, and I was really seeing him for the first time. Dark-haired, but unmistakable Scandinavian ancestry. Looked like a sinewy customer, although he didn’t run to much bulk.

About five minutes went by. His head turned sharply, profilewards. That was the bell-poke, right there. The note must be in already.

He gave me the back of his head as he went back toward the flat-door. The lens could follow him all the way to the rear, where my unaided eyes hadn’t been able to before.

He opened the door first, missed seeing it, looked out on a level. He closed it. Then dipped, straightened up. He had it. I could see him turning it this way and that.

He shifted in, away from the door, nearer the window. He thought danger lay near the door, safety away from it. He didn’t know it was the other way around, the deeper into his own rooms he retreated the greater the danger.

He’d torn it open, he was reading it. God, how I watched his expression. My eyes clung to it like leeches. There was a sudden widening, a pulling—the whole skin of his face seemed to stretch back behind the ears, narrowing his eyes to Mongoloids. Shock.

Panic. His hand pushed out and found the wall, and he braced himself with it. Then he went back toward the door again slowly. I could see him creeping up on it, stalking it as

though it were something alive. He opened it so slenderly you couldn't see it at all, peered fearfully through the crack. Then he closed it, and he came back, zigzag, off balance from sheer reflex dismay. He toppled into a chair and snatched up a drink. Out of the bottle neck itself this time. And even while he was holding it to his lips, his head was turned looking over his shoulder at the door that had suddenly thrown his secret in his face.

I put the glass down.

Guilty! Guilty as all hell, and the police be damned!

My hand started toward the phone, came back again. What was the use? They wouldn't listen now any more than they had before. "You should have seen his face, etc." And I could hear Boyne's answer: "Anyone gets a jolt from an anonymous letter, true or false. You would yourself." They had a real live Mrs. Thorwald to show me—or thought they had. I'd have to show them the dead one, to prove that they both weren't one and the same. I, from my window, had to show them a body.

Well, he'd have to show me first.

It took hours before I got it. I kept pegging away at it, pegging away at it, while the afternoon wore away. Meanwhile he was pacing back and forth there like a caged panther. Two minds with but one thought, turned inside-out in my case. How to keep it hidden, how to see that it wasn't kept hidden.

I was afraid he might try to light out, but if he intended doing that he was going to wait until after dark, apparently, so I had a little time yet—Possibly he didn't want to himself, unless he was driven to it—still felt that it was more dangerous than to stay.

The customary sights and sounds around me went on unnoticed, while the main stream of my thoughts pounded like a torrent against that one obstacle stubbornly damming them up: how to get him to give the location away to me, so that I could give it away in turn to the police.

I was dimly conscious, I remember, of the landlord or somebody bringing in a prospective tenant to look at the sixth-floor apartment, the one that had already been finished. This was two over Thorwald's; they were still at work on the in-between one. At one point an odd little bit of synchronization, completely accidental of course, cropped up. Landlord and tenant both happened to be near the living room windows on the sixth at the same moment that Thorwald was near those on the fourth. Both parties moved onward simultaneously into the kitchen from there, and, passing the blind spot of the wall, appeared next at the kitchen windows.

It was uncanny, they were almost like precision-strollers or puppets manipulated on one and the same string. It probably wouldn't have happened again just like that in another fifty years. Immediately afterwards they digressed, never to repeat themselves like that again.

The thing was, something about it had disturbed me. There had been some slight flaw or hitch to mar its smoothness. I tried for a moment or two to figure out what it had been, and couldn't. The landlord and tenant had gone now, and only Thorwald was in sight. My unaided memory wasn't enough to recapture it for me. My eyesight might have if it had been repeated, but it wasn't.

It sank into my subconscious, to ferment there like yeast, while I went back to the main problem at hand.

I got it finally. It was well after dark, but I finally hit on a way. It mightn't work, it was cumbersome and roundabout, but it was the only way I could think of. An alarmed turn of the head, a quick precautionary step in one certain direction, was all I needed. And to get this brief, flickering, transitory give-away, I needed two phone calls and an absence of about half an hour on his part between them.

I leafed a directory by matchlight until I'd found what I wanted: Thorwald, Lars. 525 Bndct . . . SWansea 5-2114.

I blew out the match, picked up the phone in the dark. It was like television. I could see to the other end of my call, only not along the wire but by a direct channel of vision from window to window.

He said “Hullo?” gruffly.

I thought: How strange this is. I’ve been accusing him of murder for three days straight, and only now I’m hearing his voice for the first time.

I didn’t try to disguise my own voice. After all, he’d never see me and I’d never see him. I said: “You got my note?” He said guardedly: “Who is this?”

“Just somebody who happens to know.”

He said craftily: “Know what?”

“Know what you know. You and I, we’re the only ones.”

He controlled himself well. I didn’t hear a sound. But he didn’t know he was open another way too. I had the glass balanced there at proper height on two large books on the sill. Through the window I saw him pull open the collar of his shirt as though its stricture was intolerable. Then he backed his hand over his eyes like you do when there’s a light blinding you.

His voice came back firmly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Business, that’s what I’m talking about. It should be worth something to me, shouldn’t it? To keep it from going any further.” I wanted to keep him from catching on that it was the windows. I still needed them, I needed them now more than ever. “You weren’t very careful about your door the other night.. Or maybe the draft swung it open a little.” That hit him where he lived. Even the stomach-heave reached me over the wire. “You didn’t see anything. There wasn’t anything to see.”

“That’s up to you. Why should I go to the police?” I coughed a little. “If it would pay me not to.”

“Oh,” he said. And there was relief of a sort in it. “D’you want to—see me? Is that it?”

“That would be the best way, wouldn’t it? How much can you bring with you for now?”

“I’ve only got about seventy dollars around here.”

“All right, then we can arrange the rest for later. Do you know where Lakeside Park is? I’m near there now. Suppose we make it there.” That was about thirty minutes away. Fifteen there and fifteen back. “There’s a little pavilion as you go in.”

“How many of you are there?” he asked cautiously.

“Just me. It pays to keep things to yourself. That way you don’t have to divvy up.” He seemed to like that too. “I’ll take a run out,” he said, ‘just to see what it’s all about.” I watched him more closely than ever, after he’d hung up. He flitted straight through to the end room, the bedroom, that he didn’t go near any more. He disappeared into a clothes-closet in there, stayed a minute, came out again. He must have taken something out of a hidden cranny or niche in there that even the dicks had missed. I could tell by the piston-like motion of his hand, just before it disappeared inside his coat, what it was. A gun.

It’s a good thing, I thought, I’m not out there in Lakeside Park waiting for my seventy dollars.

The place blacked and he was on his way.

I called Sam in. “I want you to do something for me that’s a little risky. In fact, damn risky. You might break a leg, or you might get shot, or you might even get pinched. We’ve been together ten years, and I wouldn’t ask you anything like that if I could do it myself. But I can’t, and it’s got to be done.” Then I told him. “Go out the back way, cross the back yard fences, and see if you can get into that fourth-floor flat up the fire escape. He’s left one of the windows down a little from the top.”

“What do you want me to look for?”

“Nothing.” The police had been there already, so what was the good of that? “There are three rooms over there. I want you to disturb everything just a little bit, in all three,

to show someone's been in there. Turn up the edge of each rug a little, shift every chair and table around a little, leave the closet doors standing out. Don't pass up a thing. Here, keep your eyes on this." I took off my own wrist watch, strapped it on him. "You've got twenty-five minutes, starting from now. If You stay within those twenty-five minutes, nothing will happen to you. When you see they're up, don't wait any longer, get out and get out fast."

"Climb back down?"

"No." He wouldn't remember, in his excitement, if he'd left the windows up or not. And I didn't want him to connect danger with the back of his place, but with the front—I wanted to keep my own window out of it. "Latch the window down tight, let yourself out the door, and beat it out of the building the front way, for your life!"

"I'm just an easy mark for you," he said ruefully, but he went.

He came out through our own basement door below me, and scrambled over the fences. If anyone had challenged him from one of the surrounding windows, I was going to backstop for him, explain I'd sent him down to look for something. But no one did.

He made it pretty good for anyone his age. He isn't so young any more. Even the fire escape backing the flat, which was drawn up short, he managed to contact by standing up on something. He got in, lit the light, looked over at me. I motioned him to go ahead, not weaken.

I watched him at it. There wasn't any way I could protect him, now that he was in there. Even Thorwald would be within his rights in shooting him down—this was break and entry. I had to stay in back behind the scenes, like I had been all along. I couldn't get out in front of him as a lookout and shield him. Even the dicks had had a lookout posted.

He must have been tense, doing it. I was twice as tense, watching him do it. The twenty-five minutes took fifty to go by.

Finally he came over to the window, latched it fast. The lights went, and he was out. He'd made it. I blew out a bellyful of breath that was twenty-five minutes old.

I heard him keying the street door, and when he came up I said warningly: "Leave the light out in here. Go and build yourself a great big two-story whisky punch; you're as close to white as you'll ever be." Thorwald came back twenty-nine minutes after he'd left for Lakeside Park. A pretty slim margin to hang a man's life on. So now for the finale of the long-winded business, and here was hoping. I got my second phone call in before he had time to notice anything amiss. It was tricky timing but I'd been sitting there with the receiver ready in my hand, dialing the number over and over, then killing it each time. He came in on the 2 of 5-2114, and I saved that much time. The ring started before his hand came away from the light switch.

This was the one that was going to tell the story.

"You were supposed to bring money, not a gun; that's why I didn't show up." I saw the jolt that threw him. The window still had to stay out of it—"I saw you tap the inside of your coat, where you had it, as you came out on the street" Maybe he hadn't, but he wouldn't remember by now whether he had or not. You usually do when you're packing a gun and aren't an habitual carrier.

"Too bad you had your trip out and back for nothing. I didn't waste my time while you were gone, though. I know more now than I knew before." This was the important part —I had the glass up and I was practically fluoroscoping him. 'I've found out where it is. You know what I mean. I know now where you've got it. I was there while you were out." Not a word. just quick breathing.

"Don't you believe me? Look around. Put the receiver down and take a look for yourself. I found it." He put it down, moved as far as the living room entrance, and touched off the lights. He just looked around him once, in a

sweeping, all-embracing stare, that didn't come to a head on any one fixed point, didn't center at all.

He was smiling grimly when he came back to the phone. All he said, softly and with malignant satisfaction, was: "You're a liar."

Then I saw him lay the receiver down and take his hand off it. I hung up at my end.

The test had failed. And yet it hadn't—He hadn't given the location away as I'd hoped he would. And yet that "You're a liar" was a tacit admission that it was there to be found, somewhere around him, somewhere on those premises. In such a good place that he didn't have to worry about it, didn't even have to look to make sure.

So there was a kind of sterile victory in my defeat. But it wasn't worth a damn to me.

He was standing there with his back to me, and I couldn't see what he was doing. I knew the phone was somewhere in front of him, but I thought he was just standing there pensive behind it. His head was slightly lowered, that was all. I'd hung up at my end.

I didn't even see his elbow move. And if his index finger did, I couldn't see it.

He stood like that a moment or two, then finally he moved aside. The lights went out over there; I lost him. He was careful not even to strike matches, like he sometimes did in the dark.

My mind no longer distracted by having him to look at, I turned to trying to recapture something else—that troublesome little hitch in synchronization that had occurred this afternoon, when the renting agent and he both moved simultaneously from one window to the next. The closest I could get was this: it was like when you're looking at someone through a pane of imperfect glass, and

a flaw in the glass distorts the symmetry of the reflected image for a second, until it has gone on past that point. Yet that wouldn't do, that was not it. The windows had been open and there had been no glass between. And I hadn't been using the lens at the time.

My phone rang. Boyne, I supposed. It wouldn't be anyone else at this hour. Maybe, after reflecting on the way he'd jumped all over me—I said "Hello" unguardedly, in my own normal voice.

There wasn't any answer.

I said: "Hello? Hello? Hello?" I kept giving away samples of my voice.

There wasn't a sound from first to last—

I hung up finally. It was still dark over there, I noticed.

Sam looked in to check out. He was a bit thick-tongued from his restorative drink. He said something about "Awri' if I go now?" I half heard him. I was trying to figure out another way of trapping him over there into giving away the right spot. I motioned my consent absently.

He went a little unsteadily down the stairs to the ground floor and after a delaying moment or two I heard the street door close after him. Poor Sam, he wasn't much used to liquor.

I was left alone in the house, one chair the limit of my freedom of movement—

Suddenly a light went on over there again, just momentarily, to go right out again afterwards. He must have needed it for something, to locate something that he had already been looking for and found he wasn't able to put his hands on readily without it. He found it, whatever it was, almost immediately, and moved back at once to put the lights out again. As he turned to do so, I saw him give a glance out the window. He didn't come to the window to do it, he just shot it out in passing.

Something about it struck me as different from any of the others I'd seen him give in all the time Id been watching

him. If you can qualify such an elusive thing as a glance, I would have termed it a glance with a purpose. It was certainly anything but vacant or random, it had a bright spark of fixity in it. It wasn't one of those precautionary sweeps I'd seen him give, either. It hadn't started over on the other side and worked its way around to my side, the right. It had hit dead-center at my bay window, for just a split second while it lasted, and then was gone again. And the lights were gone, and he was gone.

Sometimes your senses take things in without your mind translating them into their proper meaning. My eyes saw that look.

My mind refused to smelter it properly. "It was meaningless," I thought. "An unintentional bull's-eye, that just happened to hit square over here, as he went toward the lights on his way out."

Delayed action. A wordless ring of the phone. To test a voice? A period of bated darkness following that, in which two could have played at the same game—stalking one another's window-squares, unseen. A last-moment flicker of the lights, that was bad strategy but unavoidable. A parting glance, radioactive with malignant intention. All these things sank in without fusing. My eyes did their job, it was my mind that didn't—or at least took its time about it.

Seconds went by in packages of sixty. It was very still around the familiar quadrangle formed by the back of the houses. Sort of a breathless stillness. And then a sound came into it, starting up from nowhere, nothing. The unmistakable, spaced clicking a cricket makes in the silence of the night. I thought of Sam's superstition about them, that he claimed had never failed to fulfill itself yet If that was the case, it looked bad for somebody in one of these slumbering houses around here—

Sam had been gone only about ten minutes. And now he was back again, he must have forgotten something. That drink was responsible. Maybe his hat, or maybe even the

key to his own quarters uptown. He knew I couldn't come down and let him in, and he was trying to be quiet about it, thinking perhaps I'd dozed off. All I could hear was this faint jiggling down at the lock of the front door. It was one of those old-fashioned stoop houses, with an outer pair of storm doors that were allowed to swing free all night, and then a small vestibule, and then the inner door, worked by a simple iron key. The liquor had made his hand a little unreliable, although he'd had this difficulty once or twice before, even without it. A match would have helped him find the keyhole quicker, but then, Sam doesn't smoke. I knew he wasn't likely to have one on him.

The sound had stopped now. He must have given up, gone away again, decided to let whatever it was go until tomorrow. He hadn't gotten in, because I knew his noisy way of letting doors coast shut by themselves too well, and there hadn't been any sound of that sort, that loose slap he always made.

Then suddenly it exploded. Why at this particular moment, I don't know. That was some mystery of the inner workings of my own mind. It flashed like waiting gunpowder which a spark has finally reached along a slow train. Drove all thoughts of Sam, and the front door, and this and that completely out of my head. It had been waiting there since midafternoon today, and only now—

More of that delayed action. Damn that delayed action.

The renting agent and Thorwald had both started even from the living room window. An intervening gap of blind wall, and both had reappeared at the kitchen window, still one above the other. But some sort of a hitch or flaw or jump had taken place, right there, that bothered me. The eye is a reliable surveyor. There wasn't anything the matter with their timing, it was with their parallel-ness, or

whatever the word is. The hitch had been vertical, not horizontal. There had been an upward “jump.” Now I had it, now I knew. And it couldn’t wait—

It was too good. They wanted a body? Now I had one for them.

Sore or not, Boyne would have to listen to me now. I didn’t waste any time, I dialed his precinct—house then and there in the dark, working the slots in my lap by memory alone. They didn’t make much noise going around, just a light click. Not even as distinct as that cricket out there—

“He went home long ago,” the desk sergeant said.

This couldn’t wait. “All right, give me his home phone number.”

He took a minute, came back again. “Trafalgar,” he said. Then nothing more.

“Well? Trafalgar what?” Not a sound.

“Hello? Hello?” I tapped it. “Operator, I’ve been cut off. Give me that party again.” I couldn’t get her either.

I hadn’t been cut off. My wire had been cut. That had been too sudden, right in the middle of—And to be cut like that it would have to be done somewhere right here inside the house with me. Outside it went underground.

Delayed action. This time final, fatal, altogether too late. A voiceless ring of the phone. A direction-finder of a look from over there. “Sam” seemingly trying to get back in a while ago.

Suddenly, death was somewhere inside the house here with me. And I couldn’t move, I couldn’t get up out of this chair. Even if I had gotten through to Boyne just now, that would have been too late. There wasn’t time enough now for one of those camera-finishes in this. I could have shouted out the window to that gallery of sleeping rear-window neighbors around me, I supposed. It would have brought them to the windows. It couldn’t have brought them over here in time. By the time they had even figured which particular house it was coming from, it would stop

again, be over with, I didn't open my mouth. Not because I was brave, but because it was so obviously useless.

He'd be up in a minute. He must be on the stairs now, although I couldn't hear him. Not even a creak. A creak would have been a relief, would have placed him. This was like being shut up in the dark with the silence of a gliding, coiling cobra somewhere around you.

There wasn't a weapon in the place with me. There were books there on the wall, in the dark, within reach. Me, who never read. The former owner's books. There was a bust of Rousseau or Montesquieu, I'd never been able to decide which, one of those gents with flowing manes, topping them. It was a monstrosity, bisque clay, but it too dated from before my occupancy.

I arched my middle upward from the chair seat and clawed desperately up at it. Twice my fingertips slipped off it, then at the third raking I got it to teeter, and the fourth brought it down into my lap, pushing me down into the chair. There was a steamer rug under me. I didn't need it around me in this weather, I'd been using it to soften the seat of the chair. I tugged it out from under and mantled it around me like an Indian brave's blanket. Then I squirmed far down in the chair, let my head and one shoulder dangle out over the arm, on the side next to the wall. I hoisted the bust to my other, upward shoulder, balanced it there precariously for a second head, blanket tucked around its ears. From the back, in the dark, it would look—I hoped—

I proceeded to breathe adenoidally, like someone in heavy upright sleep. It wasn't hard. My own breath was coming nearly that labored anyway, from tension.

He was good with knobs and hinges and things. I never heard the door open, and this one, unlike the one downstairs, was right behind me. A little eddy of air puffed through the dark at me. I could feel it because my scalp, the real one, was all wet at the roots of the hair right then.

If it was going to be a knife or head-blow, the dodge might give me a second chance, that was the most I could hope for, I knew. My arms and shoulders are hefty. I'd bring him down on me in a bear-hug after the first slash or drive, and break his neck or collarbone against me. If it was going to be a gun, he'd get me anyway in the end. A difference of a few seconds. He had a gun, I knew, that he was going to use on me in the open, over at Lakeside Park. I was hoping that here, indoors, in order to make his own escape more practicable—

Time was up.

The flash of the shot lit up the room for a second, it was so dark. Or at least the corners of it, like flickering, weak lightning.

The bust bounced on my shoulder and disintegrated into chunks.

I thought he was jumping up and down on the floor for a minute with frustrated rage. Then when I saw him dart by me and lean over the window sill to look for a way out, the sound transferred itself rearwards and downwards, became a pummeling with hoof and hip at the street door. The camera-finish after all. But he still could have killed me five times.

I flung my body down into the narrow crevice between chair arm and wall, but my legs were still up, and so was my head and that one shoulder.

He whirled, fired at me so close that it was like looking at sunrise in the face. I didn't feel it, so—it hadn't hit.

"You—" I heard him grunt to himself. I think it was the last thing he said. The rest of his life was all action, not verbal.

He flung over the sill on one arm and dropped into the yard. Two-story drop. He made it because he missed the

cement, landed on the sod-strip in the middle. I jacked myself up over the chair arm and flung myself bodily forward at the window, neatly hitting it chin first.

He went all right. When life depends on it, you go. He took the first fence, rolled over that bellywards. He went over the second like a cat, hands and feet pointed together in a spring. Then he was back in the rear yard of his own building. He got up on something, just about like Sam had—

The rest was all footwork, with quick little corkscrew twists at each landing stage. Sam had latched his windows down when he was over there, but he'd reopened one of them for ventilation on his return. His whole life depended now on that casual, unthinking little act—

Second, third. He was up to his own windows. He'd made it. Something went wrong. He veered out away from them in another pretzel-twist—flashed up toward the fifth, the one above. Something sparked in the darkness of one of his own windows where he'd been just now, and a shot thudded heavily out around the quadrangle-enclosure like a big bass drum.

He passed the fifth, the sixth, got to the roof. He'd made it a second time. Gee, he loved life! The guys in his own windows couldn't get him, he was over them in a straight line and there was too much fire escape interlacing in the way.

I was too busy watching him to watch what was going on around me. Suddenly Boyne was next to me, sighting. I heard him mutter: "I almost hate to do this, he's got to fall so far."

He was balanced on the roof parapet up there, with a star right over his head. An unlucky star. He stayed a minute too long, trying to kill before he was killed. Or maybe he was killed, and knew it.

A shot cracked, high up against the sky, the window pane flew apart all over the two of us, and one of the books snapped right behind me.

Boyne didn’t say anything more about hating to do it. My face was pressing outward against his arm. The recoil of his elbow jarred my teeth. I blew a clearing through the smoke to watch him go.

It was pretty horrible. He took a minute to show anything, standing up there on the parapet. Then he let his gun go, as if to say: “I won ‘t need this any more.” Then he went after it. He missed the fire escape entirely, came all the way down on the outside.

He landed so far out he hit one of the projecting planks, down there out of sight. It bounced his body up, like a springboard. Then it landed again—for good. And that was all.

I said to Boyne: “I got it. I got it finally. The fifth-floor flat, the one over his, that they’re still working on. The cement kitchen floor, raised above the level of the other rooms. They wanted to comply with the fire laws and also obtain a dropped living room effect, as cheaply as possible. Dig it up —”

He went right over then and there, down through the basement and over the fences, to save time. The electricity wasn’t turned on yet in that one, they had to use their torches. It didn’t take them long at that, once they’d got started. In about half an hour he came to the window and wigwagged over for my benefit. It meant yes.

He didn’t come over until nearly eight in the morning; after they’d tidied up and taken them away. Both away, the hot dead and the cold dead. He said: “Jeff, I take it all back. That damn fool that I sent up there about the trunk-well, it wasn’t his fault, in a way. I’m to blame. He didn’t have orders to check on the woman’s description, only on the contents of the trunk. He came back and touched on it in a general way. I go home and I’m in bed already, and suddenly pop! into my brain—one of the tenants I questioned two whole days ago had given us a few details

and they didn't tally with his on several important points. Talk about being slow to catch on!"

"I've had that all the way through this damn thing," I admitted ruefully. "I called it delayed action. It nearly killed me."

"I'm a police officer and you're not."

"That how you happened to shine at the right time?"

"Sure. We came over to pick him up for questioning. I left them planted there when we saw he wasn't in, and came on over here by myself to square it up with you while we were waiting. How did you happen to hit on that cement floor?" I told him about the freak synchronization. "The renting agent showed up taller at the kitchen window in proportion to Thorwald, than he had been a moment before when both were at the living room windows together. It was no secret that they were putting in cement floors, topped by a cork composition, and raising them considerably. But it took on new meaning. Since the top floor one has been finished for some time, it had to be the fifth. Here's the way I have it lined up, just in theory. She's been in ill health for years, and he's been out of work, and he got sick of that and of her both. Met this other

"She'll be here later today, they're bringing her down under arrest—"

"He probably insured her for all he could get, and then started to poison her slowly, trying not to leave any trace. I imagine—and remember, this is pure conjecture—she caught him at it that night the light was on all night. Caught on in some way, or caught him in the act. He lost his head, and did the very thing he had wanted all along to avoid doing. Killed her by violence—strangulation or a blow. The rest had to be hastily improvised. He got a better break than he deserved at that. He thought of the apartment upstairs, went up and looked around. They'd just finished laying the floor, the cement hadn't hardened Yet, and the materials were still around. He gouged a trough out of it

just wide enough to take her body, put her in it, mixed fresh cement and recemented over her, possibly raising the general level of the floor an inch or two so that she'd be safely covered. A permanent, odorless coffin. Next day the workmen came back, laid down the cork surfacing on top of it without noticing anything, I suppose held used one of their own trowels to smooth it. Then he sent his accessory upstate fast, near where his wife had been several summers before, but to a different farmhouse where she wouldn't be recognized, along with the trunk keys. Sent the trunk up after her, and dropped himself an already used post card into his mailbox, with the year-date blurred. In a week or two she would have probably committed 'suicide' up there as Mrs. Anna Thorwald. Despondency due to ill health. Written him a farewell note and left her clothes beside some body of deep water. It was risky, but they might have succeeded in collecting the insurance at that." By nine Boyne and the rest had gone. I was still sitting there in the chair, too keyed up to sleep. Sam came in and said: "Here's Doc Preston."

He showed up rubbing his hands, in that way he has. "Guess we can take that cast off your leg now. You must be tired of sitting there all day doing nothing."

DORMANT ACCOUNT

I often think, what a strange thing Chance is. I often wonder what would have happened if I had picked the name above it, the name below it. Or any of the others. Nothing, probably. But out of all of them, I singled out that one. How? Why? Chance.

It was in an ad in the paper. The paper was in a waste-bin in the park. And I was in the park on the bum. To make it worse, I was young enough yet to refuse to take it lying down. The old are resigned. I wasn't. I was sore with a burning sense of injustice, bitter about it, and ripe for Chance. And Chance got its devious work in.

I came along a certain pathway in the park. It could have been any other, I had nowhere to go and all of them were alike to me; but it wasn't, it was that particular one. I came to a bench and I sat down; it could have been any other, but it was that one. Nearby there was a paper-bin. I'd already passed half a dozen others without looking into them, but now I got up, went over to this one, and looked into it to see if I could find a discarded newspaper to read while I was sitting there. Most of them were messed up. There was one in it standing on end, fresh as though it had been thrown away by someone after just one reading. I took that one out, went back to the bench with it, slowly started meandering through it.

I came to the ad. It would have been impossible to miss, it took up half the page. It must have cost a good deal to

insert, but the state banking law (I found out later) required it. It said:

STANDARD SAVINGS BANK
List of Dormant Accounts, Un-K
claimed for Fifteen Years or More

And then the five columns of names, each with the last known address given next to it.

I let my eye stray over them desultorily. Money waiting for each one. And most of them didn't know about it. Had forgotten, or were dead, or had vanished forever into the maw of the past. Money waiting, money saying, "Here I am, come and get me." I started to turn the page, to go on with my idle browsing. My last thought, before the list passed from sight, was a rueful, "Gee, I wish I was one of them."

And then suddenly, so unexpectedly it almost seemed to come from somewhere outside of me, "Well, why don't you be?"

My hand turned the page back again.

I was asking myself two things. One: Is it worth trying, would there be enough in it to repay the risk? I did a little figuring. The minimum they were required to advertise for by law was $10 or over, after fifteen years. But even on $10, 2 per cent for fifteen years brought it up to thirteen. And until just recently they'd given as high as 4 per cent, some of these banks. So the very least I could expect was $15 or better. Not very much, maybe? Well, what did I have now? A bench in the park and a secondhand newspaper out of a waste-bin. And what was the most I could expect? Ah, there was where the laws of chance got in their play. The ceiling on interest in such banks was $7,500, but that didn't mean the original deposit couldn't have been even higher than that. I didn't bother figuring out what the maximum could be. It wasn't likely to be the maximum, any more than it was likely to be the minimum. The probabilities were all that it

would hit somewhere in-between. That answered the first question. It was worth trying.

The second was: Can I get away with it?

The first thing they'd ask me was what the original amount was. How was I going to answer?

That didn't stop me. I wasn't going to. I just didn't know, that was all. After fifteen years, wasn't it natural if I'd forgotten? If I didn't remember having the account itself until I saw my own name in the paper, how could they expect me to recall how much was in it?

That took care of that.

Next, I'd have to verify my identity in some way, prove it. They weren't just going to hand out the money to me on demand. Just how did they check? I couldn't inquire ahead, that would be tipping my hand. I had to prepare myself, unaided, the best I could.

Every depositor has to sign his own name on a reference-card. First of all, handwriting. That didn't worry me so much; handwriting can change in fifteen years. If the discrepancy turned out to be too glaring, I could always plead some disability during the intervening years, rheumatism or joint-trouble that had cost me the use of my hands for a while and forced me to learn to write all over again. I might get away with it. Something else did worry me, though.

Every depositor is asked his age when he opens an account, whether it's transcribed in his own handwriting or that of the bank-official. How was I to guess the right age that went with any of these names? That was one thing I couldn't plead forgetfulness of. Even after fifteen years, I was expected to know my own age.

Another requirement: the given name of one parent, preferably the mother. That was another thing you didn't

forget all your life.

An impossibility. Here were two factors in which the laws of chance were manacled, had no opportunity whatever to operate in my favor.

For a minute or two I was on the point of giving the whole thing up. I wouldn't let myself. The paper kneaded into ridges at the margins with the stubborn determination of my grip on it. I said to myself: "Don't quit. Don't be yellow. Some way may come up of getting around those two hitches. Try it anyway. If you don't try it, you'll go on sitting on a park bench, reading newspapers out of a bin. If you do try it, you've got a 50-50 chance. Which prospect appeals to you most?"

That didn't need any answer.

So I was going to do it. I had nothing to lose, everything to gain, and here I went.

But now the most important thing of all. Which name? Who was I going to be? In one way, it didn't make much difference which one I picked. In another, it made all the difference in the world. One of these names might bring me $1,000; the very next one under it might bring only twenty. One might spell immunity, its rightful owner might be dead; the very next one might mean sure-fire exposure. But there was no way of controlling this, it was ruled by sheer unadulterated chance. That being the case, the way to choose was by sheer unadulterated chance as well.

I turned the page over, covering the ad. I took a pin I had in my lapel, and I circled it blindly a couple of times, and then I punched it through, from the back. Then I turned the page back again, with the pin skewering it, and looked to see where its point was projecting.

It had pierced the "e" of Nugent, Stella.

I grimaced, got ready to try it again. That was one thing I couldn't be, a woman. Then I happened to look closer as I withdrew the pin.

Nugent, Stella, in trust for Lee Nugent, 295 Read Street.

Good enough. She was probably dead, and he must have been a kid at the time. That made it a lot more plausible. I would have had a hard time shaving fifteen years off my own right age without putting myself back into short pants.

I folded the paper and put it in my pocket. That was me, from now on. Sink or swim, win or lose, that was me.

Less than an hour later I was reconnoitering Read Street, on the odd-numbers side. I came to 291 halfway down the block, and right after that there was a triple-width vacant lot. The building had been torn down, and so had the ones on either side of it.

But I wasn't ready to give up yet. I loitered there, scanning the other buildings roundabout. They were all pretty old. If there had ever been a building in that vacant gap, these survivors were easily its contemporaries. But you can't ask a building questions.

I watched the people that occasionally came or went from the doorways. Kids were no good to me. Neither were the younger grown-ups. I needed someone good and old. Finally I saw what I wanted. She was about 70 and she'd come to one of the ground-floor windows in the building directly opposite the empty space, to water some geraniums.

I sauntered over, trying not to seem too anxious. I didn't know how to begin, but the old are like children, you don't have to be quite so wary with them. I tipped my hat. "I'm a real estate man looking over likely sites for development, ma'am." Her eyesight couldn't have been too keen, or I'd never have gotten away with that in my shabby condition.

“Could you tell me about how long ago the buildings over there were torn down?”

“They weren’t torn down,” she piped. “They had a big fire there once, and then they just cleared away what was left of them afterwards.”

“Oh, I see,” I said politely. “You couldn’t tell me about just how long ago that was?”

“Ages ago. That was before even we moved around here, and we’ve been living here the longest of anybody on the whole block.”

That ended that. I’d been hoping against hope that I could get some sort of an indirect line on—

A younger woman appeared in the background, said, “Grandma, don’t do so much talking!,” darted me a suspicious look—suspicious just on general principles—and drew grandma back inside with her.

I turned and drifted away. I didn’t want to ask questions of anyone else; too many questions weren’t good. If she hadn’t known, nobody else would. I was little better off than I had been before. There once *had* been a 295 Read Street. But I still didn’t know if there’d ever been anyone named Nugent living in it. Or if there had been, how old he’d been.

I roamed around, without straying very far from the immediate neighborhood. I didn’t actually know what I was looking for—or that I was looking for anything—until I’d suddenly sighted it: a red-brick building with a yawning wide-open ramp for an entrance. There was a Dalmatian stretched out on the sidewalk in front of it. I stopped to caress him. Then from that I worked into a harmless, friendly chat with the fireman sitting by in his suspenders reading a newspaper. He was graying and looked as though he was nearing the retirement age—

Something like this: “Keeping pretty busy these days?”

“Oh, we’re still getting them now and then.”

“Had any real big ones?”

“Not lately.”

“That must have been a pretty big one that took down those three buildings over on Read Street. Know where I mean?”

“That was before my time,” he said. “Yeah, that was a wow, from what I’ve heard. Five-bagger.”

“No kidding?” I said, continuing to play with the Dalmatian’s ear. “About what year was that?”

“Oh—fifteen, seventeen years ago.

I used to hear some of the older fellows speak of it. Spring of ’24, I guess. Well, it was either ’24 or ’23, somewhere thereabouts.”

Just a harmless little chat, about nothing much at all. It stopped after that. “Nice dog you’ve got there.” I ambled on.

I had a little something more now. I went, from there, to the reference room of the main library and I put in a requisition for the bound volume 1922-23 of the *Herald-Times.* It split like that, in the middle of the calendar year. I started at January 1, 1923, and worked my way from there on. Just skimming headlines and inside-page column-leads. If it had been a five-alarm fire it must have made headlines at the time, but I wasn’t taking any chances on how accurate his memory was; he’d gotten it second-hand after all, and with firemen a blaze never shrinks but enlarges.

It was slow work, but in an hour and a half I’d reached the end of the volume. I went back and changed it for 1923-1924.

It came up after about another half-hour or so of page-scanning. I couldn’t very well have missed it. It was all the way over in November, so that fireman’s accuracy as to time of year hadn’t been so hot after all. At least he’d approximated the year. I finally found it on November 5:

TENEMENT HOLOCAUST
TAKES 5 LIVES

I didn’t care much about the details. I was looking for proper names, hoping against hope. The five dead were listed first. Rabinowitz, Cohalan, Mendez—no, nothing there. Wait a minute, two unidentified bodies.

Maybe it was one of them. I followed the thing through to the back. There it was, there it was! It seemed to fly up off the page and hit me in the eye like cinders. Nugent. I devoured the paragraph it was imbedded in.

A sudden gap in the smoke, caused by a shift of wind, revealed to the horrified spectators a woman and her two children balanced precariously on a narrow ledge running under the top-floor windows, their escape cut off by the flames mushrooming out both below and above them, at the fifth-floor windows and from the roof. The woman, later identified as Mrs. Stella Nugent, 42, a newcomer who had moved in only the day before, pushed both children off ahead of her into the net the firemen had hastily stretched out below to receive them, and then followed them down herself. All three landed safely, but it was found on examination that both children, Lee, 9, and Dorothy, 11, as well as the mother, had suffered badly-gashed throats, probably from thrusting their heads blindly through the broken glass of shattered window-panes to scream down for help. The mother lapsed into unconsciousness and little hope is held for her recovery. Neither child could give a coherent account of what had happened immediately preceding their appearance on the window-ledge, nor could it be learned at once whether there were any other members of the family—

I went on to the next day's paper, the sixth. There was a carry-over in it. "Mrs. Stella Nugent, one of the victims of yesterday's fire on Read Street, died early today in the hospital without regaining consciousness, bringing the total number of casualties to—"

I went ahead a little further. Then on the ninth, three days later:

FIRE CLAIMS SEVENTH VICTIM

> Dorothy Nugent, 11, who with her mother and brother—etc., etc.—succumbed late yesterday afternoon from loss of blood and severe shock. The Nugent girl, although unharmed by the fire itself, suffered severe lacerations of the throat from broken window-glass in making her escape from the flat, a fact which has somewhat mystified investigators. Her younger brother, who was injured in the same way, remains in a critical condition—

I followed it through just to see, but that was the last, there wasn't any more after that. I quit finally, when I saw I'd lapped over into December. He'd either died by then or recovered, and either way it wasn't of topical consequence enough any more to rate mention. Just a tenement kid.

So I still didn't know one way or the other. But outside of that, I had about everything else, more than I'd ever dared hope to have! Given names, ages, and all! I had my age now. If he was nine in November 1923, I was 27 now. And by a peculiar coincidence, I was actually 26 years old myself.

But, of course, I wasn't George Palmer any more.

I was about ready. I had about all the background I'd ever have, so there was nothing more to wait for. Even the handwriting obstacle had melted away, since the account had been opened in trust for me and therefore I hadn't

signed it anyway. I considered that an auspicious omen. Present identification wasn't very difficult. The prosperous, the firmly rooted, have a hard time changing identities. To a bird of passage like me, rootless, friendless, what was one identity more or less? No close friends, no business associates, to hamper my change of skin. I was just "Slim" to the few of my own kind who knew me by sight, and "Slim" could be anybody, right name Palmer or right name Nugent.

I took two days for present identification, that was all it needed. I realized of course that meanwhile, from one minute to the next, a real Nugent, the real Nugent, might show up, but I went right ahead.

That was one bracket of the 50-50 chance that I'd willingly accepted.

The two days were up, and now for it. I left myself looking pretty much as I was. To look too trim might invite suspicion quicker than to look down-at-heel, as I had been all along. I wasn't pretending to be anything other than what I was; I was only pretending my name was different.

I headed for the bank and I went straight inside. I didn't hesitate, nor loiter around the entrance reconnoitering, nor pass back and forth outside it trying to get my courage up. My courage was up already. If I didn't plunge right in I was afraid it would start oozing away again.

I still had the original newspaper with me. I stalked up to one of the guards and I tapped the ad with my fingernail. "What do you do about this? My name's listed here." He sent me over to one of the officers, sitting at a desk in an enclosure to one side of the main banking-floor.

I repeated what I'd said to the guard. He pressed a buzzer, had the records of the account brought to him, to familiarize himself with them before doing anything further.

Not a word out of him so far. I tried to read his face. He shot me a searching look, but I couldn't figure out what it was meant to convey. The documents were old and yellowed, you could tell they'd been on file a long time. He was holding them tipped toward him. I would have given anything to be able to see what was on them.

Finally he put them down, cleared his throat. This was the first test, coming up now. I knew there would be others, if I passed this one O.K. This was just the preliminary. I braced myself for it. "So you're Lee Nugent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any identification on you?"

I fumbled around in my clothing haltingly, as though I hadn't been expecting to be called on for documentary proof, was caught off-guard. I produced a carefully prepared scrap or two, just about as much as a fellow in my circumstances would have been likely to have on him. I wasn't counting on it to be enough, I'd known it wouldn't be. He shook his head. "Haven't you got anything more than that? We can't just turn over a sum of money to you, you know, on the strength of your word alone."

"I know that, sir," I said docilely. He said: "Can you get anyone to vouch for you? Someone that's known you for several years?"

I'd expected that. For that matter, I could hardly have gotten anyone to vouch for me as George Palmer. That gave me the right line to take. I said, promptly and unqualifiedly, "No, I can't. Not one single person, as far as I know. You've got me there."

He spread his hands. "Why not? What's the matter?"

"I've been footloose, I've been drifting around. I've got acquaintances here and there, yes. They don't know me by name. I'm 'Slim' to most of them." I watched him. It was unsatisfactory in one respect, but I think it made a favorable impression, rather than otherwise. It sounded so plausible. It should have, it was true.

“Well, you’ve worked at times, haven’t you?” He could tell by looking at me that I wasn’t working right now, didn’t have to ask that.

“Sure, whenever I could, which wasn’t often.”

I mentioned two or three jobs I’d actually had, which I knew wouldn’t be any good to him. Hand-labor jobs in which my name hadn’t even been down on any pay-roll, just “Slim” to the foreman and paid off in line according to bulk; fruit-picking jobs in orchards on the West Coast and stuff like that.

He took up the file-cards again. “Answer a few questions, please. Your age?

“Twenty-seven.”

“Date of birth?”

“I can’t give you that,” I said unhesitatingly. “You see, I lost both parents and my older sister when I was nine. If my mother ever told me what my exact birth-date was—and I guess she must have—I’ve forgotten it long since.”

“Place of birth?”

“Right here.” That was an out-and-out guess. If it had backfired, I was going to give him the small stall as on the previous question. I must have hit it right, I noticed he didn’t pick me up on it.

“Mother’s given name?”

“Stella.”

“Can you give me her age at the time of her death?”

“She died in 1923 and she was 42 at the time.”

“You didn’t know of the existence of this account until now?”

“It’s the first I ever heard of it. She may have told me at the time, I can’t remember. If she did, I was just a kid, I didn’t even know what she meant.”

“No passbook, I suppose?”

“My mother lost her life in a fire.

The passbook must have been destroyed along with all the rest of her belongings at the same time.”

He put the checked answers away. He brought out some other kind of a paper, said, “Sign this.”

I looked it over carefully. It was an application, a claim on the account. I wasn’t afraid of the handwriting angle any more. I wrote “Lee Nugent” unstudiedly, unselfconsciously, in my own script. I let it stream out. I saw him watching intently as I did, to see if I’d hesitate or think twice.

He blotted for me. “All right,” he said. “That’s all for now. We’ll notify you at—”

I gave him the name and address of a cheap lodging-house.

They were going to check. As far as they were able to, and that wasn’t going to be terribly far.

I said, “Thanks,” turned away. I hadn’t expected to walk out with it then and there. I didn’t. I hadn’t even learned what the amount was yet. I didn’t ask him; there was time enough for that. For the present, the main thing was to see if I was going to get it or not.

It came within three days after that. Came to the “desk” of this 30-cents-a-night flop-house where I’d been stopping for three days past as “Lee Nugent,” in order to have some place to receive it. That was even quicker than I’d expected. It worried me a little. It didn’t say one way or the other, when I’d tremblingly torn it open. Just a typed paragraph, neat and official looking.

Kindly call at the bank in reference to Unclaimed Account Number 24,612.

I went up at once. It was harder to force myself to go inside than the first time. This was the crucial time, now. I could feel moisture at the palms of my hands, and I dried them against my sides before I pushed the revolving doors around. A temptation to drop the whole thing, back out while there was still time, even flitted briefly through my

mind. “Keep walking, don’t go in. You’re still out of trouble. Stay outside, keep walking.”

“To where?” I answered myself viciously. “A bench in the park again?” I flipped the door and went in.

I went straight over to him. He said, “Hello, Nugent,” non-committally.

I said to myself: “This looks like it, this looks like it. He’s accepted me under that name.”

He got out all the data again, with new data that had been added to it since the last time. It made quite a sheaf by now. He patted it all together, and then he said: “What do you want to do, leave it in?”

I was getting it! I swallowed twice before I could trust myself to make an answering sound. I managed to bring out in a studious monotone, “Then it’s O.K.?”

“We’re satisfied it’s rightfully yours. You want to withdraw it, that right?” I sure did. The real Nugent might appear from one moment to the next. Even right while I was sitting there winding up the last of the transaction.

He said, “Sign this.” This time it was a blank withdrawal slip. I passed it back and he filled in the rest of it for me himself. The date, the-account number, most important of all—the amount involved. He wrote it in script, not ciphers, and it was upside-down from where I was; I still couldn’t tell how much it was. He scrawled his official O.K. on it, sent it over to the teller by messenger. He said, “It’ll take a minute or two,” leaned back in his chair.

He kept looking at me. That added to my uneasiness. For a minute I was tempted to bolt and run, even at this late stage of the proceedings. It seemed to be taking a long time. Were they just using it for an excuse to hold me here while they sent out for the police?

Suddenly the runner was standing beside the desk again. He put down the file-card, with a sheaf of money clipped up against it. The card had been diagonally perforated “Canceled” to show that the account was closed out. The

bank-official undipped the money, separated it from the card, shifted it over to me. “There you are,” he said and watched my face.

I was looking down at a hundred-dollar bill. My heart started to pick up speed. Over $100—gee, it had been worth going to all that—I thumbed it. The second one from the top was a $100 bill too. Over $200; this was even better than I’d dared think; the third was still another—I couldn’t go ahead separating them. My heart was rattling around in my chest like a loose bolt. I took a short-cut, reached out for the file-card, scanned it instead.

My eyes riveted themselves to that last group of numerals at the bottom, blurred, then cleared again by sheer will-power. Twelve hundred and—over $1000! Suddenly another zero had jumped up at the end, almost as though an invisible adding-machine was at work under my very eyes.

12010

I just looked at him helplessly. He nodded. He finished counting it out for me, since I was obviously too shaken to be able to do it for myself right then. Dazedly I saw 120 hundreds whirr through his deft fingers. And then a lone ten at the end.

“It’s the biggest unclaimed sum we’ve turned over in years,” he told me. “In fact, as far as I know, it’s the biggest that’s ever been held anywhere, since the law first went into effect. Sign this, please.”

It was some kind of a quit-claim or acknowledgment. There had to be one in this case, because of the size of the sum involved and because I hadn’t presented any passbook. Catastrophe flicked me with its dread wings—I just managed to swerve out from under them by a hair’s breadth now, at the very end, with the money already counted out and turned over to me.

I was so stunned, so punchdrunk, that as I took up the pen I started to write George Palmer, my own name, my

former name, I should say, from automatic force of long habit. I'd already formed the capital G when I caught myself doing it. Luckily, his eyes were off me at that instant, he was putting the money in an envelope for me. I quickly pushed down on the pen and a blot obliterated the damning initial completely. I started further over and scrawled "Lee Nugent" with a shaky hand.

He blotted it for me, put it away. I picked up the envelope stood up, and found my legs were a little unmanageable. I had to "lock" them at the knees to get them to work. He shook hands with me. "Sure you don't want to rent a safety-box with us, make sure of nothing happening to it? That's a lot of cash to be carrying around on you."

"No thanks, I'll take it with me," I mumbled. The one thing I was sure of was I wanted to get far away from there with it, and stay away. "Good day." I turned around and walked out, a little stiff-legged.

I could feel heads turning to look after me curiously as I made my way toward the revolving door. Something about the pallor of my face, I guess, or my jerky gait. Heads of people I didn't know, and who didn't know me. Or did they? Was there one among them that knew me, knew what had brought me there? I couldn't tell. I was Lee Nugent now.

I didn't know whom I knew any more.

Sometimes I think they have a sixth sense, that other people don't have, that draws them unerringly to the right place at just the right time. As I came down the sloping steps to sidewalk-level, there were several others behind me leaving at the same time I did. Just as there were those making their way in. The bank was a busy one. But it seemed to me that one of them had kept on looking at me intently all the way out here, outside the bank. I was

conscious of the “feel” of his eyes on the back of my neck, just as you are of any prolonged stare.

I stiffened the cords of my neck to keep my head from turning as it wanted to. I didn’t want to meet anyone’s eyes, lock glances with anyone. I just wanted to get into the street crowds and lose myself. I hurried along, close to the building line. Then, just before rounding the corner, I couldn’t hold out, I cast a circumspect look over one shoulder.

No one had followed me with their feet, but eyes were definitely following me, from back there at the bank entrance. Not just one face was turned my way, but two now. One of those who had left when I did had gone over to a small car standing at the curb. Both he and the man at the wheel were looking unmistakably toward me. I even caught one of them make a gesture pointing me out to the other. He didn’t actually point, he sort of nudged down toward me with his thumb as if giving an order.

I didn’t wait for any more. I hurried around the corner and out of sight. I quickened my gait, still trying to keep from an outright run, if possible. Before I could cover a third of the distance toward the next corner, which I again intended rounding, there was a hissing sound and the car had suddenly overshot me, braked against the curb a few yards ahead. One of them had stayed on the outside, clinging standing up to the door.

I stopped short, swerved, and started back the other way. I might have made it, but I ran full-tilt into one of these vagrant peddlers you see here and there on the downtown streets, carrying a shoulder-slung tray of razor blades or shoelaces out before him. The whole trayful went all over the sidewalk. Before I could get out and around him, the two in the car had leaped down and come up to me, one behind the other. I crouched back against the wall, at bay.

The one in the lead was jabbering as he closed in: “Your name’s Lee Nugent and you just came into a whale of a big unclaimed deposit back there at the bank, right? How about a few words, what it feels like and what you intend doing—” And before I knew it the second one had fanned out from behind him, sighted a camera, and clicked it at me repeatedly.

Instead of being relieved I was more frightened even than when I’d thought it was a hold-up or some sort of retributive vengeance. That was the one thing I didn’t want: pictures and publicity on it. That was the one thing that could make it end up bad for me.

I reversed, rushed headlong out at them instead of away. The legman warned, “Look out for your camera, Bill, he’s after it!” They both evaded me, jumped agilely aside. “Never mind, I’ll write it on the cuff back at the office, let’s clear out.” They doubled back, regained the car, and it had streaked off again before I could stop them. I stood there staring after them with a mixture of premonitory fear and baffled fury coursing through me.

Then I turned and met the eyes of the poor devil of a street-vendor. Probably if he had stood there and snarled imprecations at me I would have told him to go to the devil, and hurried on my way. But he didn’t, for some strange reason. He just stood there and looked at me in a sort of mildly reproachful way without saying a word, as though accepting this as just one more of the hard knocks he kept getting all day long. Something about that look on his face touched me. After all, he was me, twenty minutes ago. Except that I’d had the use of both of my legs and he was game-legged.

I moved over against the wall, took out the envelope, fumbled in it without letting anyone see me, turned back to him and handed him the odd ten that came with the 12010. “Here,” I said, “to make it square.”

He just stared at me speechless. It gave me sort of a glow. It was as though I'd found myself a mascot, a living good-luck piece, to help ward off the evil that I could feel crowding close behind me. Long before he could stammer his thanks I was out of hearing and on my way again.

It had hit all the papers by six that evening. It was a natural, you couldn't blame them for playing it up. I didn't mind the write-ups so much; it was the pictures. All of them ran that one he'd taken, probably it had been distributed by some news-service.

There was my face, caught for good. For thousands to look at. For the whole city around me to see. And somewhere among those thousands, somewhere in that whole city around me, might be—must be—the real Lee Nugent.

I was in a night-club with a redhead on one side of me, a blonde on the other, when I first became aware of him. I was in a different nightclub every night now, with a different blonde and a different redhead beside me every night.

At the third look he started to sink in. He was standing there by the entrance looking steadfastly over at me. At first sight there was nothing unusual in that. The place was small and overcrowded and there were plenty of people standing around, jawing and holding drinks. But he wasn't with anyone and he wasn't holding any drink. And he wasn't looking anywhere but over at my table, the direction of his head never changed. Not even at the girls with me, either; he kept his eyes on me and me alone. Not a muscle moved; he stood there impassive as a cigar-store Indian.

At the fourth look, the fourth I gave him, I mean, he tried to cover up. He was looking at the ceiling. Only there was nothing up there to see. And the first three looks had told

the story. I said, trying to laugh it off: “Let’s go some place else, that guy’s getting on my nerves.”

They didn’t have a brain between the two of them. “Maybe he knows you, why don’t you ask him over?” one of them giggled.

I said: “Quit staring at him. Start putting your faces on. I’ll be right with you, I’m going out back.”

I went back toward the men’s room. Fortunately it was in the other direction, away from the front. There was an attendant there in a white jacket. I let him give me the works, brush-off, shoe-dusting, hair-tonic, talcum, anything to stay in there.

Then when he was all through, I eased the door a finger’s width open and squinted out. By standing there in a certain position I could look straight out across the club proper, over to the entrance where he was. He hadn’t stirred. His whole attitude expressed that terrible lethal patience that never tires, never gives up. I could see where he was looking now, too. It wasn’t at the table any more. It was straight over at this very door, waiting for me to show up again.

“Is there any other way out of here?” I asked the attendant.

“No suh, this a one-way place.”

I peered out again, and he had started to move. Time was up. I was taking too long to come back. He was coming in after me. There was no mistaking that. You could tell by the way he cut through the dancers, elbowed aside waiters and whoever happened to get into his way, eyes fixed straight ahead—at the door behind which I was standing. He meant business.

Conscience makes cowards of us all. There was no reason why I shouldn’t stand there, find out what he wanted with me. But I couldn’t—because I already knew, or at least had a pretty good idea. I wasn’t entitled to this money I was throwing around right and left, it belonged to someone else.

These spiffy clothes I was standing in, they weren't mine either. Every stitch I had on, from head to foot, from my underwear on out—belonged to somebody else.

I pointed to a narrow door right beside the main one. "What's that?"

"Closet where I keep my supplies, boss."

I peeled off another ten. It was always tens these days. "What would you do for one of these?"

"Practickly anything," was his frank answer.

I only had seconds. I hoisted up first one foot, then the other, wrenched off my patent dress-oxfords, handed them to him. "Put these on the floor in that cabinet over there. Side by side, where they can be seen from outside, as though there was somebody in them. Here's a jit to open it up with. There's a man on his way in—this $10 is for you to do something—anything—so I can get from the closet out that door without him seeing me."

I backed into it, drew the door after me. It was lined with shelves, but there was enough space between them and the door for me to sandwich myself upright in; one week's high living hadn't been enough to put any paunch on me yet. I left the closet-door open by a hair's breadth, to be able to breathe and also so I could watch for a chance to slip out.

The other door winged inward, blocking the one I was behind. Then it receded again, and he was standing there. Motionless for a moment, like he had been outside against the wall. There were two things I didn't like about him. One was the look on his face, even though it was held profile-ward to me. It was bloodless and yet glowing, as if with the imminent infliction of death—on someone, by him—right in here, right now, no matter who was around, no matter where he happened to be. And the second thing I didn't like was the stance his right arm had fallen into. It was right-angled to the rear of him, elbow sharp in air, forearm slanted down under the tail of his coat, as it ready to bring out something. It was held still, frozen, like the rest of him.

To the attendant facing him from the line of gleaming washstands opposite, it might have seemed only as if he Mas fumbling for a handkerchief. But I was behind him, and I could see the wedge-shaped bottom of the hip-holster peering from under his coat.

The attendant was engaged in dumping talcum from a big square canister into a round glass bowl, to be set out on the shelf for the convenience of customers whose beards grew in too fast while they were patronizing the club. But he managed to get too much in, it piled up higher than the rim in a mound.

The man in the doorway took a slow step forward. He started, “Hey, you—” and backed up his thumb. I suppose he was going to tell him to clear out.

The attendant said, “Yessuh, gen’ man, whut’ll it be?” but in his anxiety to please, he stepped out without watching where he put his foot, and it landed on the floor-pedal of a hot-air drier. The blast caught the cone of dumped talcum in the bowl he was holding head-on. There was suddenly a swirling blizzard over there, veiling the two of them as though they were in a fog. It was worth more than $10, it was worth $100.

The man facing him sneezed violently, so violently he floundered with it, staggered with it. A whole series of sneezes exploded from him, bending him over, blinding him, rendering him as helpless for those few minutes as a third-degree drunk.

Two quick, quiet steps in my bare socks took me from the closet to the outer door. I pared it open, sidled around the edge of it, and was outside.

I passed through the club a moment later in my bare socks, without stopping. I flung down a pair of tens at the table with the redhead and the blonde, said, “Sorry, girls, see you around,” and was gone before their heads had even had time to turn around toward me. I knew the type, they wouldn’t grieve long.

I hobbled painfully out across the hard cold sidewalk and jumped into a cab. I gave him the address of my hotel, and spent the first few blocks of the ride dusting off the soles of my feet between both hands. I'd have to change quarters right away, as soon as I got back. He'd be able to pick up the trail too easily, from back there at the club, now that he was once on it. Too many of those little numbers who frequented the place knew where I was stopping, had called me up now and then.

Just before we made the turn around the corner into the block the hotel fronted on, a light held us up. I I swore softly; every minute counted. But I should have blessed it instead of cursing it out. In the minutes that we were standing there motionless, there was a street light shining into the cab from almost directly overhead, and a figure suddenly launched itself out at us from the enshrouding gloom of the building-line, where it must have been lurking unseen. The driver had already thrown his brakes and begun to swing around by that time.

The human projectile caught onto the door-handle, was carried around the corner with us, managed to get it open and flounder in against me. I shied away instinctively along the seat before I saw who it was. It was my living talisman, the shoelace peddler.

He'd made the immediate vicinity of the hotel his beat, ever since that first day. There wasn't one night, since then, that I'd failed, on coming home, to stop a minute by him and slip him another one of those tens.

I reached for my wallet to do it again right now. "Hullo, Limpy. You seem mighty spry tonight. Sorry I couldn't stop, I'm in kind of a rush—" He motioned the offered money away. "That ain't why I stopped you, Mr. Nugent!" he said breathlessly. Meanwhile he was tugging at me by the

shoulders, trying to draw me off the seat. “Get down! Get down low, where you can’t be seen! And tell him not to stop, don’t leave him stop in front of the hotel. Quick, tell him to keep on going straight through and turn the next corner. I’ll tell you why after we get around there. Hurry up, Mr. Nugent, we’re nearly there!”

I had to take his word for it. I didn’t hesitate long. “Keep going, driver, don’t slow up.”

“What was it?” I asked.

“There’s a guy waiting in the shadows across the way from the hotel-entrance for you to come back. I don’t know what his game is, but he don’t act like he’s up to any good. I’ve been casing every car that came along for the past hour down there at the other corner, trying to head you off and tell you. Luckily it’s a one-way street and they all got to slow up for the turn even when the light’s with them.”

“How do you know it’s me he’s waiting for?”

“There were two of them came up together first. I seen them stand and chat for a minute with old Pete, your hotel doorman. One of them went inside, maybe to see if you were in, then he came out again in a minute, and they shoved off. But not very far, just down around the lower corner there. I went up to Pete after they’d gone, I know him pretty well from hanging around here so much, and he told me they’d just been asking him kind of aimless questions about you. I went on down the line, pushing my pack, and when I got around the corner they were still there. They didn’t pay any attention to me, and I’ve got a favorite doorway right there I hang out in in wet weather. I couldn’t help overhearing a little of what they were saying, they were right on the other side of the partition from me. One of them said: ‘I’ll go back and keep the hotel covered. You start out and make a round of the clubs. See if you can put the finger on him. Don’t close in on him, just tail him, stay with him. Between the two of us we ought to be able to get him.’

“Then they split up. One crossed over, got in a car, and drove off. The other one went back around the corner, but he stayed on the dark side, hid himself in the shadows. You couldn’t tell he was there any more, after that, unless you knew like me.”

“What’d the one that drove off in the car look like?”

He described him to the best of his ability. I knew by that he wasn’t lying. It was the same man I’d seen at the club—the man I had narrowly evaded.

So there were two of them, instead of just one. The authentic Lee Nugent, if it was he, had someone working with him. Which was which didn’t matter. Their intentions, obviously, went far beyond mere accusation, arrest, and juridical procedure. They wouldn’t have gone about it the way they were, if that had been the case. They noticeably had avoided having the police participate.

And the expression I’d seen on the face of one of them, in that washroom, had been that of a killer as he closes in for the kill.

I reached out and gripped Limpy absently by one of his skinny shoulders while I was thinking it over. “Thanks, you’re a real pal.”

“That ain’t nothing. One good turn deserves another. You’ve been swell to me ever since that first day you bumped into me on the street.” He waited a while, watching me intently. “What’re you going to do, Mr. Nugent?”

That was it, what was I? I pawed my chin a couple of times. “I don’t know who they are or what they’re out for,” I lied for his benefit, “but I’m not going back there and get all tangled up with them.”

“Why don’t you go to the police, Mr. Nugent?”

“No, that’s no good.” I didn’t tell him why. I had as much, possibly even more, to lose by police interference than they

did. “I’m going to blow town for a while,” I decided suddenly.

Yes, that was it. I had the money now, one place was as good as another to enjoy it in. That was the best way of throwing them off the trail once and for all. Simply to change from one hotel to another would only win me temporary immunity.

I looked down at my sock-feet, wiggled my toes ruefully. “Look, there’s something I have to have, though, and I can’t go back to there myself and get it. You’ve been up to my place several times, you know the layout.” I didn’t know why, but I had a strong hunch I could trust him. “I’m going to take a chance on you, Limpy. Here’s my key. Go up there and get me a pair of shoes out of the clothes-closet. That’s one thing. And the second thing—now listen carefully. You know that little knee-high frigidaire in the serving-pantry? Open it up. Put your hand in where the icecube tray goes. Instead you’ll find a flat tin box, locked. Pull it out, wrap it up in a towel or something, and bring it out with you.”

I didn’t tell him what was in it. There was roughly $11,000 in cash in it. I’d spent about $1,000 in the past week. I hadn’t trusted it to any bank or even the hotel safe. I was glad now. It made it easier to get hold of at short notice, and without having to appear personally.

“The elevator boys all know you, and I’ll phone in to the desk from outside and tell them I’m sending you over to get something from my rooms, so you won’t be stopped on the way out. You bring it over to the station and meet me there. I’ll be in the last row of benches in the waiting-room, against the wall, so my bare feet won’t be noticed. I’ll have a newspaper spread out full-width in front of my face. Look for me behind a spread-out newspaper.”

“I can get in and out through the service entrance. That way, if they do happen to spot me, they won’t think nothing of it. I know the hotel fireman, I’ve often gone down there to get warmed up in the cold weather.”

“Make it as fast as you can, Limpy. There’s a Midnight Flier I’d like to make.”

As I watched him get out of the cab and disappear around the corner, I wondered if I’d ever see him again. Even though I hadn’t told him, he was no fool, he must have a good hunch what was in such a box as I’d asked him to bring. Locked or otherwise, a chisel and hammer would open it in five minutes. It was a pretty strong temptation to put to a halfdisabled down-and-outer like him.

Maybe, I thought shamefacedly, he’s not like you, maybe he don’t take what don’t belong to him.

I put in my identifying call to the hotel and then I cabbed over to the station. I had enough money on my person to buy my Flier ticket ahead of time, without waiting for him. My socks were black, fortunately, and I forced myself to walk as naturally as possible, in order to avoid attracting attention to my feet. No one seemed to notice that my extremities ended in silk instead of shoe leather. I picked up a newspaper, sidled into the last row of benches in the waiting-room, and opened it out full-spread before my face.

I had sixteen minutes to go before train-time.

The first five minutes, he was coming and it was going to be all right. The second five, he’d let me down, he’d taken the cash-box and goodbye. I’d have to powder out of here as broke as I’d been a week ago, and when I got where I was going, the whole thing would start over—park-benches and papers out of bins. Then the next four minutes or so after that with the gates already open and that minute-hand on the wall creeping closer and closer to twelve, were a mixture of the two, hope and despair, with a third fear added for good measure. Maybe it wasn’t his fault, maybe those guys waiting outside had caught on, had jumped on him and hauled him off with them as he came out.

Somebody coughed in front of my newspaper, and I tucked my head a little lower. The cough came again, like a double-take-em of the throat if there is such a thing. This was on the fourteenth minute.

I lowered the paper and Limpy was sitting there, in the seat right in front of me. He was turned sidewise toward me, holding up a paper of his own to screen him from the front. His arm hung down over the back of the seat toward me. An oddly shaped newspaper-wrapped bundle, obviously a pair of shoes, already lay on the floor beside me. The flat oblong of the strong-box, also newspaper-wrapped, came down beside them a moment later, from somewhere underneath his outer clothing.

“Boy,” I exhaled softly. I’d never been so glad to see anyone in my life. I got on the shoes, and sheathed the long flat box in the waist-band of my trousers, upright against my side. It stayed there pretty securely, and without making a very noticeable bulge.

There was a minute-and-a-half yet before the train left. I couldn’t resist asking him, as I stood up: “Limpy, did you have any idea what was in this box?”

“Sure,” he said unhesitatingly. “Several thousands dollars in cash.”

I stared at him, startled. “How did you know?”

“I couldn’t help seeing it, the lid came open while I was wrapping it. You maybe thought you locked it the last time you took it out, but in your excitement or hurry you must have forgot to. It was open.”

I just stared at him unbelievingly. “You’re what I call an honest man, Limpy, There aren’t many like you.”

“But you’re my friend, Mr. Nugent,” he protested. “A guy don’t do that to his friends.”

“Sure no one followed you?” I said as we made our way toward the track.

“The two of them were still waiting there when I came away. The other guy had come back again. I guess they

think you'll still show up there eventually from that club where you gave him the slip," he explained softly.

He came out to the train with me to see me off. There was less than a minute left now. A day-coach had been all I'd been able to get, at the last minute like that. I got aboard, found a seat by the window, and spoke to him on the platform outside, where he'd remained standing, through a two-inch opening left at the bottom of the pane, bending over so I could see him. The shade had been drawn down to match.

"Look," I said. "There's a lot of swell clothes, some of them I never had time to wear yet, and gadgets I'm leaving behind at the hotel. I want you to have them. The rooms have been paid for until tomorrow night. You still have the key. You go up there and take them with you."

"I couldn't do that, Mr. Nugent," he said disclaimingly. "F'rinstance, if I wore clothes that looked too good, it would kill my way of earning a livelihood. But I'll take your belongings over to my place and look after them for you there, until you come back to town. I'll give you my address, so you'll know where to find me. Or in case you want them forwarded, drop me a line. Just Limpy Jones. I got a room on the third floor, over at 410 Pokanoke Street. You can remember that name, can't you?"

"Look, Limpy, I want to do something for you—" I protested to him vehemently.

"Four ten Pokanoke Street," he insisted.

Somebody had dropped heavily into the seat beside me. I lowered my voice so I wouldn't be overheard. "I'll never forget what you did for me tonight. I'm O.K. now, the train'll be pulling out in a few more seconds. Take care of yourself, Limpy."

"Lots of luck, Mr. Nugent," he said. He turned and drifted away through the groups on the platform. There went a swell guy, I said to myself.

I sank back in my seat, tilted my hat well down on the bridge of my nose to shade my eyes, and prepared to doze.

I pushed my hat up off my eyes again and turned to the man beside me. “Pardon me, would you mind taking your elbow out of my ribs, I’m trying to take a little nap here.”

“That ain’t my elbow,” was the casual answer.

I looked and it was a gun. He had his right arm tucked under his left, and the gun came out just about where his left elbow would have been.

The wheels had given their first jerky little turn under us. “Time we were getting off, isn’t it?” He was as matter-of-fact about it as though we were a couple of fellow-commuters riding out to the same station together of an evening. That was the deadly thing about him; no tension, no pallor, no strain, like that fellow to the washroom.

“You can’t hijack me off the middle of a crowded train, gun or no gun.”

“The gun ain’t the important part,” he agreed languidly. “The tin is.” His hand came out of his vest, showed it to me, put it back again. “The gun is just to hold you still so you’ll take time to look at it.” The wheels were starting to pick up tempo. He raised his voice authoritatively, so that it would reach the vestibule. “Hold that door, conductor, two rain-checks!” And to me: “Get going.”

I walked down the aisle ahead of him, made the transfer to the platform beginning to sidle past, and he hopped off at my heels, without breaking the twist he had on my arm.

He stopped there a moment and frisked me, in full sight of everyone, while the train hurtled by. “What’s this?” he said, when he came to the tin box.

“Money.”

He transferred it to his own outside coat-pocket. “All right,” he said, “now if you don’t want the bracelets in front of everyone, just walk quietly out through the station with me.”

I began walking. A dick. And all along I'd thought it was a matter of personal vengeance on the part of the real Lee Nugent. "What's it for?" I asked him as we made our way back across the main rotunda.

He gave me a halfway smile. "What're you trying to do, kid me? You don't know, do you? You haven't the slightest idea. Are you Lee Nugent or aren't you?"

Sure, it had to do with that. They must have changed their minds, turned it over to the police, when they found I'd slipped through their own fingers. What could I do but brazen it out? "I'm Lee Nugent," I answered crisply. "And that money is rightfully mine."

"Glad to hear it," he said drily. "Nobody's talking about the money. You're wanted for murder. Long time no catch. But all that publicity you got a couple days ago sure dropped you in our laps pretty. Pictures 'n everything. Brother, you must think we don't keep records and haven't got good memories."

I'd taken sudden root on the mosaic flooring. Even the gun couldn't get me to stir for a second. So that explained why the account hadn't been claimed! The original Nugent had known better than to show up, 12,000 or no 12,000. And I like a fool had walked straight into the trap!

"No, wait—listen to me a minute—I'll make a clean breast of it, I'm not Lee Nugent. I crashed that account. My right name is—"

He smiled humorlessly. "So now you're not. A minute ago you were. You sure change fast. Keep moving." I stumbled on out to the street beside him. They must have fingerprints and things like that on record; I could clear myself, I could prove I wasn't the same individual. But suppose they didn't, suppose it was just one of those circumstantial cases—

We'd stopped beside a car standing waiting a short distance down from the main entrance to the station. There was one other man in it, in civilian clothes, at the wheel. He

swung the door open as we neared it. The dick collared me into the back ahead of him and then got in after me.

Neither he nor the driver said anything to one another, and the car started off without any instructions being given.

“Look,” I began again in another minute or two, “I tell you I’m not Lee Nugent. There must be a difference in our descriptions, there must be something that’ll—”

“Don’t tell it to me,” he said with stony unconcern, “tell it where we’re going when we get there—if it’ll do you any good. Personally, I don’t give a hoot who you are. To me you’re just a guy I was sent out to bring in.”

I didn’t speak again for a while—what was the use?—until a wrong street had ticked by, and then a second and a third. I looked out sharply, and then sharply back to them. “This isn’t the way to headquarters.”

Something darker than the overtones of the official arrest began to descend on me; an oppressive sense of doom, a complete extinction of hope. The police, though they may err at times, at least are not vindictive just for the sake of being so. Private vengeance is.

I hardly noticed the direction they took me; what difference could background make at a time like this? It was all a blur of shadows heavy-laden with imminent death. I knew in my heart this was a one-way journey.

When the car stopped finally, I was vaguely aware of the dim outline of some large house directly before us. I was hustled inside before I could further identify it. The driver of the car as well as the man who had seized me on the train both came inside with me. The door opened as we reached it, as though we had been sighted beforehand. I tried to turn my head and see who had been behind it, but the hand of one of my captors caught me tightly at the back of the neck, just below the skull, and held me rigid there while they continued to thrust me forward between them.

I was shoved into a room in which there was a cobblestone fireplace and wood panelling on the walls.

Whatever this place was, it was fitted up as though it was used for dwelling purposes, was someone's residence. There were two men in it, waiting for us. One standing, the other negligently balanced across the corner of a heavy table, one leg dangling short and repeatedly flipping an open jackknife in air and catching it almost miraculously each time by the flat of the *open blade* between two fingers before it could bite into the polished table surface. The one standing was the man I had given the slip to at the night-club.

He came forward and he said: "Here. You forgot something." And he let me have one of my own patent dress-shoes full in the face. It stunned me for a minute. I went back against the table, and the ones who had come in with me held me up between them. I heard one of them say: "Don't do that till Ed sees him."

One of them left the room, and there was a short wait. Then he reappeared followed by a short, heavy-set man. The latter was fully dressed, but he was in the act of shrugging on his jacket as he came through the doorway. He buttoned it, then he raised both hands and smoothed back his stringy black hair, as though he'd been taking a nap fully-dressed when they summoned him. He appeared to be in his early forties, and he was probably younger than he looked. The others drew back from me as he came on, I noticed, as though to give him plenty of room.

He walked all around me two or three times, looking me up and down, almost like a fitter in a clothing-store inspecting someone trying on a new suit. "Uh-huh," he grunted affirmatively a couple of times, "uh-huh." Then he stopped finally, directly before me. "So this is what you're like." I said, a lot more defiantly than I felt: "You're not the police. What's this for, what's it about?"

"We're our own police."

"What're you doing with me here, exactly what do you want with me?" He withdrew to the other side of the table,

ensconced himself in a swivel chair, cocked one leg up over the other, stripped a cigar. One of his henchmen supplied the match.

Finally, when I thought he was never going to speak again, “I’m Eddie Donnelly,” he said. “Mean anything to you?”

“No, because I’m not—”

“It should,” he overrode me. “Well it would to your father, if he hadn’t been smart enough to die before I could get my hands on him.”

“I haven’t any fa—”

Again he bore me down. “Maybe I should refresh your memory. Joe Nugent, your father, and mine were partners. A crooked partner and a partner that was honest. The crooked one swindled the honest one, and hundreds of other people that trusted the honest one besides. Then he disappeared, and let the innocent one take the rap for him. It’s an old story, old as the hills. But I never yet grew tired of repeating it. Because it happened to me and mine!”

His face darkened. “My father went to jail, for something he didn’t do. Yours hid his family out of sight for a while, and went off by himself, out of reach, to another country, where he lived off the fat of the land on stolen money, waiting for things to blow over. But it didn’t end there. My father died in jail. He never came out alive again. It killed him just as surely as a gun or a knife. He was murdered. They took me up to see him near the end. Yes, I was just a kid, but they took me up to see him, that was his last request. And his dying words to me were: ‘Get even for us, Eddie. Get even on that man that’s done this to us, on him and his, if it takes all your life.’ I swore I would, and I keep my oath to a dying man.”

He flung down his cigar, as though the memory of all this made it taste bad. “I saw my mother scrub floors on her hands and knees, until she died too, years before her time, a worn-out drudge. I saw my sister—well something even worse happened to her, because there was no one to give us a home any more. I grew up on the streets myself, and then in reform school. All because my birthright was taken away from me.

“But I had one thing through it all to keep me going. My oath to get even. And it still hasn’t been fulfilled. I caught up with him years later. I tracked him down until I’d caught up with him. And I was just too late. Just a few weeks too late. He’d died safe in bed, in the beautiful mansion that blood-money had bought him. He’d died a respected, honored, adopted citizen in that second home of his in a foreign land. I couldn’t take that away from him. My oath went unfulfilled. But I knew he had a son somewhere. A son he was too cowardly to come back and acknowledge.” His fist came down with a sound like thunder. “And now I’ve got his son. That’s something even better!”

“Only you haven’t,” I said. “I was born George Palmer. I never heard of any Lee Nugent until a few short days ago. I picked the name at random out of a newspaper because I saw there was some money waiting to be claimed, and I went down there and impersonated him. You’ve got the wrong guy. You’ve got a fake, a phony. What good is it to your vengeance to get even on somebody entirely different? I haven’t got the blood of your father’s enemy in my veins —”

To my surprise he’d shut up completely. I hadn’t thought it would be this easy to convince him. Suddenly, for some reason or other, he seemed uncertain. They were all looking at him curiously, I saw. He made a steeple of his fingertips and poised them before his mouth. “It’s always possible, of course,” he said quietly, “that me and my fellows here have made such a mistake. Isn’t it, boys?”

He turned and looked hard at them, one by one. I saw the corners of his eyebrows quirk upward. Then he turned back to me again. “I don’t want to be too hasty. I’ve waited a long time. I can afford to wait just a little longer, for the sake of being sure. Suppose I send down to your old neighborhood, bring someone up here and see if they recognize you. There’s no one has such long memories nor such keen eyesight for familiar faces as old-time neighbors—” He was soft as silk now; he was good. “Naturally, I don’t mean where you were first raised, you were too small then,” he interposed smoothly. “I mean from where you moved to after that, from where he hid you out later—” He snapped his fingers helplessly a couple of times, like you do when you’re trying to remember a name.

“Read Street?” I blurted out incautiously. “But they weren’t there long enough—”

“What d’you mean they weren’t there long enough?” he said glibly.

“There was a fire, the very first night after they’d moved in. The building at 295 burned down and—” I clamped my jaws shut too late, felt like biting off my tongue.

He didn’t do anything for a minute. There was silence. Then he turned and looked at the others like he had before. With the same quirk to his eyebrows. As if to say, “See?”

But there wasn’t a smile on any of them, him included. He turned back to me.

“You’ve told us who you are out of your own mouth,” he said with soft ferocity. “If you weren’t Lee Nugent how would you know the street and the very housemumber you lived at as a kid? How could you know there was such a fire, in which your mother and sister lost their lives, but in which you were saved—for me, here, today?”

He got up and came over to me. He gave me the back of his hand across my mouth, back and forth, three, four, five times. It sounds light, the back of a hand; it wasn’t. He had a heavy ring on it. It opened my lip the second time, it

widened the split on the back-swing. It chipped the enamel from my front teeth the time after. By the time he quit there were thin strings of red running down crisscross all over my chin.

"Take him outside," he said, "and put on your best hats, we're all going to a funeral."

They put me in the back again, one on each side of me. He sat in front, next to the driver. He rode turned halfway around in the seat, facing me over the back of it, so that he could gloat all the way.

People have been taken for rides before. I kept telling myself that; it was all I had. They died at the end of it, and then it was over. It only took a few minutes. All right, they were going to show me my own grave at the cemetery, readied years beforehand, he'd told me just now as we got in. Then they'd make me climb down into it, most likely, and then they'd shoot me. People had died in worse ways than that. Sewn up in gunny-sacks, so that they strangled themselves. Dropped into the river with their feet stuck into buckets of cement.

And meanwhile, he kept riding sidewards on the seat, looking back at me, arm slung over the seat-top. He couldn't wait until we got there, that might have spared me ten or fifteen minutes premonitory agony of mind. No, he had to tell me now, ahead of time, so I'd have that much added horror to look forward to.

"You think you're going to be stretched out in it dead, don't you?" he smiled. "My father was buried alive. That's what that jail amounted to. We'll do as much for you. We've got a length of copper tubing, with a little nozzle. D'you get what I mean? You'll last for hours, maybe days. He lasted *years!"* A mouth wasn't meant to smile like that; to call such a thing a smile was sacrilege. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," he said softly.

I raised my face toward the ceiling of the car and drew in a slow, cold, shuddering breath. I shivered as it went down

me. He was getting what he wanted; anticipation was sheer unadulterated agony. One of the oldest instincts of man is fear of being put into the ground alive.

He all but licked his lips. If he didn't that was the expression in his eyes as he watched me. Then something the driver did took his attention off me for a moment. He turned his head around forward. "No, you should have taken the other one, Chris. This won't get you anywhere." He was indulgent about it, though. I was his only hate in the world. He could forgive anyone else anything, tonight. "Back up to the intersection we just crossed and turn right into Hallowell Avenue, that's the shortest way."

"Sorry, chief," the driver mumbled, crestfallen. "I thought this one was just as good." He went into reverse. "Wasn't watching."

"Naw, this is Pokanoke Street, this won't take us anywhere. It just runs on for a while and then quits cold. You'd only have to shuttle back over again when you got to the end of it—"

The name sank in, the funny name, like a pebble thrown into a dark pool, and went plunging downward through layers of memory. Pokanoke Street, Pokanoke Street. That name, there was something I had to remember—No there wasn't, it didn't matter, what was the difference? I was going to be dead in a little while, what good would a street-name do me?

There was a moment or two of awkward maneuvering, while he guided the car backward, erasing the slight error of direction he'd made. I suppose he thought it was simpler than making a complete loop around and facing the other way, only to have to reverse a second time a few moments later for the new start. There wasn't anything behind us in a straight line, his mirror showed him that, but as our rear backed out into the open past the corner-line, a lightweight truck came at us from the transverse direction without any warning.

The two things happened at once. The plunging pebble struck bottom in the pool of my memory, and the truck sideswiped the back of the car, shunted it out of the way, and sent it lashing around in a long shuddering skid against the pull of its own brakes, that momentarily threatened to overturn it.

Limpy. A helping hand, waiting down there along that street. Refuge if I could only get to it. Sanctuary. It's true he was only a lame peddler, but he had a door that would let me in, and close them out. The only friendly door in the whole length and breadth of the town—

There were four of them around me in the car. And only one—the driver—without a gun either already in his hands or within such short reach of his hands that it amounted to the same thing.

But the odds had suddenly evened out in my favor. For, while the car rocked from side to side and threatened to topple from one instant to the next, they were all afraid of dying, death was all they had time to think of. I'd been afraid of dying all along, long before they were, so I was ready for it, and now life was all I could think of.

I freed the gun from the hand of the man next to me on my right. His grip had become so nerveless that I didn't even have to wrench it from him. I just plucked it from his loose fingers. That meant I had it by the bore and that was the way I wanted it, it saved me the trouble of reversing it. I hitched it against the ceiling and chopped down backhard into the middle of his forehead with it, square between the two eyebrow-bulges. Then I freed the door on that side and made a circular hop out past his relaxing knees. The car hadn't even finished its burning skid yet. They were all still suspended between two worlds.

Ed Donnelly turned just in time to see me go, then reversed to try to get me on that side. "Hold onto him!" I gave him the gun-butt the flat way, across his teeth. He got his hands on it blindly, as though he were a glutton

cramming something into his own mouth. I let it go. His whole head was well-shocked, he couldn't use it.

By the time the first shot came, I was already sprinting up Pokanoke Street. It was a soft, spongy sound I didn't recognize for a shot. It was like a soggy paper bag crunching open. Silencer. I swerved in closer to the building-line and kept hurtling along.

410. 410, he'd said. 410 alone was life, and every other doorway spelled death. Their badges, their phony tin badges would open them, pull me out.

The crunching sound came again, but it was further behind me now.

The doorways kept ticking off, like uprights of a black picket-fence, I was going so fast. Most were dark. I flashed past one with a dim light behind its grubby fanlight. 395. I was on the wrong side, but it was right over there, just a few doors ahead.

I had to get over. I didn't slacken, but I launched myself out on a diagonal, away from the sheltering building-line, and that was when they got me. They got me halfway over; I guess I showed better against the empty middle of the street. It made me miss a step, but then I went right on as though nothing had happened.

It was like the prickling of a needle first. That was all, nothing more. Then a sharper pain bored its way in more slowly, as though an awl was being rotated in its wake. Then came heat, as though the awl were generating friction. Then fire, then agony, then approaching collapse.

400. 402. They were coming now. Something had held them up, they hadn't been able to start right out after me. Most likely the truck that had participated in the collision had halted a short distance off around the corner and its occupants got out to parley for a minute. They'd been held

there against their wills a minute or two, until they could get rid of them, even though one had ventured the muffled potshots in the meantime that had gained their object. Now the running splatter of their feet suddenly surged out after me in the silence up there; it echoed forebodingly.

I had to get in off the street. I couldn't make another doorway. I couldn't get there. This was only 406, still three houses away, but this was as far as I could go. I fell twice, once outside the threshold and once inside. The feet were coming nearer. I picked myself up and zig-zagged back to where some stairs began.

I pulled the steps down toward me with my hands, got up them that way, scrambling on all fours like somebody going up a treadmill. I got to the first landing, reared upright, fell again, clawed up another flight of steps.

They got there. They made a blunder outside the door that gained me another flight, a third. They went on past, one doorway too many. I could hear them arguing. "No, it's this one back here, I tell you! I seen him!" They'd doubled back now, and come in after me, down below. I could tell by the hollow tone their bated voices took as soon as they were in out of the open. "This is it. See the blood-spots across the doorway?" Two of them must have preceded the others. There was a short, surreptitious whistle, by way of signal. "In here."

And then an order from Donnelly, in a husky undertone: "You two stay out there, me and Chris'll go in after him. Bring the car down this way and keep it running. Keep your eyes on all these doors along here, he may try to cross over the roofs and come out one of the others—"

I could hear every word, through the silence, up there where I was. And they could hear me, wrenching at the last barrier of all, the roof-door that ended the stairs, warped and half-unmanageable, but held only a rusted hook and eye on the inside. "Listen, he's up above there, hear him?"

I was out now, in the dark, stars over me, gravel squashing away from under my feet. I kept going blindly, in the same direction as down below in the street. A low brick division-rampart, only ankle-high, came up. That meant 408 was beginning. I had to keep count, or I'd go too far. I couldn't raise my feet that high any more, to step over it. I had to kneel on it and let myself fall over to the other side. I got up again, it got wet all over again where the bullet had gone in, but I managed to pull myself up again.

I stumbled on. Those stars were acting funny, they kept blurring and swirling, like pinwheels. Another brick partition came up. I crawled over that full-length, like an eel. This was 410 now. This was safety, down under my feet somewhere. Only his door, his was the only one was any good against that tin badge.

I found the roof-door, in the little hutch it fitted into. And then—something was the matter. It would come out just so far, about a hand's breadth, and then it wouldn't come out any further. That same hook and eye arrangement on the inside, like the other. I pulled and strained at it, but I didn't have enough strength left—

And behind me, two rooftops away, I heard the gravel scuff as they came out after me. There was a wink of light from one of them as though he'd lit a match, but it wasn't that. There was another of those crunches.

I'll never know just what it was. I don't think it could have been the bullet, such a thing happens only in fairy tales. But I hadn't been able to open it until now, the hook was in the way, holding it back. And all of a sudden, after that flash, the hook wasn't there any more, the door swung out free for me.

I got down the first flight, inside, on my own feet, although sometimes they were too far behind and sometimes they were too far out in front of me. But the next one I couldn't make standing up any more, I fell all the way

down. Not head-first, but in a sort of diagonal slide on my back. And then I just lay flat.

This was the third floor. It was one of these doors. But I was still as far away as I had been outside, or back in the car. All that travail for nothing. A thought passed through my mind: why do you want to live this bad? They have the money now, you have nothing. Just a bench in the park, just a paper out of a bin.

Give me that, I breathed, but let me live.

There was a door just inches beyond my numb, outstretched arm lying along the floor. I couldn't move those few inches. I couldn't reach it.

I heard another one open, somewhere behind me, as though the sound of my sliding fall just now had attracted someone's attention. Feet moved toward me and stood there before my glazing eyes.

Someone's arms dug under me, and I was hoisted up, propped against the wall. My blurred vision cleared for a moment, and Limpy's face came through. It blotted, then came into right focus.

"They're coming down after me," I breathed hoarsely. "From up there. And there are others waiting down below outside the door. I haven't any place to go but here—"

He just stood looking at me.

I reached out and caught him weakly by the shoulder. "Limpy, it's me, don't you know me, can't you see my face? What're you standing waiting for like that? Take me inside with you, close the door. Don't you want to save me?"

They were opening the roof-door. He still didn't move. But he spoke at last.

"Would *you?*" he said. "Would you if you were me? You see, I happen to be—the real Lee Nugent."

My first day out of the hospital, I came along a pathway in the park. It could have been any pathway, they were all alike to me and I had nowhere to go, but it happened to be that particular one. I slumped down on a bench.

I sat there thinking over what had happened that night. How he'd hauled my half-conscious form inside with him at the last minute, after they were already clattering down the stairs; barred the door and shoved things up against it to hold them off for awhile. "Sure, I'm Lee Nugent," I'd heard him say softly, "but you're still my friend."

I suppose they would have gotten us there, in the end, though—the two of us together, the real and the fake, instead of just me alone. There was no telephone, no weapon, not even an outside window through which to call for help.

But those truck-drivers who had been in the collision earlier with the death-car hadn't been as gullible as they had appeared to be. They went straight to the police from there, reported a car from which a man had been seen to break away, followed by suspicious flashes that might have been silenced shots, and gave its license number. The cops closed in in turn around them, and jumped them just as the door was splintering under their vicious assault, caught them pretty, the whole lot of them. The two who had stayed behind were picked up later. Donnelly and one other guy had been shot dead in the fracas.

And that was about all. Except, and this came weeks later, I was free to leave the hospital whenever I was in condition to go. Lee Nugent, the real Lee Nugent, didn't want me held, was willing to drop all charges against me. He felt I'd been punished enough already for my week of stolen high life, and if it hadn't been for me, he wouldn't have been able to come into unhampered enjoyment of the money himself.

So here I was back where I'd started, slumped on a bench in the park, staring meditatively down at the ground

before me. I heard a car brake in the driveway out front, and footsteps approached.

I stared at the expensive custom-made shoes and then on up to his face. He was smiling. “They told me you’d checked out when I tried to find you at the hospital just now. I’ve been looking for you. Don’t take offense now, but there’s something that I want to do, I won’t be happy until it’s off my mind. I’m a firm believer in completing the circle of events, ending things where they began.” And he took out his wallet and handed me a ten-dollar bill, one of those same tens I used to give him all the time. “Remember?” he grinned.

He turned and went back to the car. I just sat there holding it in my hand, looking after him. Gee, life was screwy.

He waited a minute by the wheel. Then he beckoned me. “Come on,” he called over genially, “get in. You don’t want to sit there on a bench in the park. We should stick together, you and me, we’ve got a lot in common.”

George Palmer went over and climbed in beside Lee Nugent, and the two of us drove off together.

THREE KILLS FOR ONE

That night, just like on all the other nights before it, around a quarter to twelve Gary Severn took his hat off the hook nearest the door, turned and said to his pretty, docile little wife in the room behind him: “Guess I’ll go down to the corner a minute, bring in the midnight edition.”

“All right, dear,” she nodded, just like on all the other nights before this.

He opened the door, but then he stood there undecidedly on the threshold. “I feel kind of tired,” he yawned, backing a hand to his mouth. “Maybe I ought to skip it. It wouldn’t kill me to do without it one night. I usually fall asleep before I can turn to page two, anyway.”

“Then don’t bother getting it, dear, let it go if you feel that way,” she acquiesced. “Why put yourself out? After all, it’s not that important.”

“No it isn’t, is it?” he admitted. For a moment he seemed about to step inside again and close the door after him. Then he shrugged. “Oh well,” he said, “I may as well go now that I’ve got my hat on. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes.” He closed the door from the outside.

Who knows what is important, what isn’t important? Who is to recognize the turning-point that turns out to be a trifle, the trifle that turns out to be a turning-point?

A pause at the door, a yawn, a two-cent midnight paper that he wouldn’t have remained awake long enough to finish anyway.

He came out on the street. Just a man on his way to the corner for a newspaper, and then back again. It was the 181st day of the year, and on 180 other nights before this one he had come out at this same hour, for this same thing. No, one night there'd been a blizzard and he hadn't. 179 nights, then.

He walked down to the corner, and turned it, and went one block over the long way, to where the concession was located. It was just a wooden trestle set up on the sidewalk, with the papers stacked on it. The tabs were always the first ones out, and they were on it already. But his was a standard size, and it came out the last of all of them, possibly due to complexities of make-up.

The man who kept the stand knew him by his paper, although he didn't know his name or anything else about him. "Not up yet," he greeted him. "Any minute now."

Why is it, when a man has read one particular paper for any length of time, he will refuse to buy another in place of it, even though the same news is in both? Another trifle?

Gary Severn said, "I'll take a turn around the block. It'll probably be here by the time I get back."

The delivery trucks left the plant downtown at 11:30, but the paper never hit the stands this far up much before twelve, due to a number of variables such as traffic-lights and weather which were never the same twice. It had often been a little delayed, just as it was tonight.

He went up the next street, the one behind his own, rounded the upper corner of that, then over, and back into his own again. He swung one hand, kept his other pocketed. He whistled a few inaccurate bars *of Elmer's Tune*. Then a few even more inaccurate bars of *Rose O'Day*. Then he quit whistling. It had just been an expression of the untroubled vacancy of his mind, anyway. His thoughts went something like this: "Swell night. Wonder what star that is up there, that one just hitting the roof? Never did know much about them. That Colonna sure was funny on the air tonight." With

a grin of reminiscent appreciation. “Gee I’m sleepy. Wish I hadn’t come out just now.” Things like that.

He’d arrived back at his own doorway from the opposite direction by now. He slackened a little, hesitated, on the point of going in and letting the paper go hang. Then he went on anyway. “I’m out now. It’ll just take a minute longer. There and back.” Trifle.

The delivery truck had just arrived. He saw the bale being pitched off the back to the asphalt; for the dealer to pick up, as he rounded the corner once more. By the time he’d arrived at the stand the dealer had hauled it onto the sidewalk, cut the binding, and stacked the papers for sale on his board. A handful of other customers who had been waiting around closed in. The dealer was kept busy handing them out and making change.

Gary Severn wormed his way in through the little cluster of customers, reached for a copy from the pile, and found that somebody else had taken hold of it at the same time. The slight tug from two different directions brought their eyes around toward one another. Probably neither would have seen the other, that is to look at squarely, if it hadn’t been for that. Trifle.

It was nothing. Gary Severn said pleasantly, “Go ahead, help yourself,” and relinquished that particular copy for the next one below it.

“Must think he knows me,” passed through his inattentive mind. The other’s glance had come back a second time, whereas his own hadn’t. He paid no further heed. He handed the dealer his nickel, got back two cents, turned and went off, reading the headlines as he went by the aid of the fairly adequate shop-lights there were along there.

He was dimly aware, as he did so, of numbers of other footsteps coming along the same way he was. People who

had just now bought their papers as he had, and had this same direction to follow. He turned the corner and diverged up into his own street. All but one pair of footsteps went on off the long way, along the avenue, died out. One pair turned off and came up this way, as he had, but he took no notice.

He couldn't read en route any more, because he'd left the lights behind. The paper turned blue and blurred. He folded it and postponed the rest until he should get inside.

The other tread was still coming along, a few yards back. He didn't look around. Why should he? The streets were free to everyone. Others lived along this street as well as he. Footsteps behind him had no connection with him. He didn't have that kind of a mind, he hadn't led that kind of a life.

He reached his own doorway. As he turned aside he started to drag up his key. The other footsteps would go on past now, naturally. Not that his mind was occupied with them. Simply the membranes of his ears. He'd pulled out the building street-door, had one foot already through to the other side. The footsteps had come abreast—

A hand came down on his shoulder.

"Just a minute."

He turned. The man who had been buying a paper; the one who had reached for the same one he had. Was he going to pick a quarrel about such a petty—?

"Identify yourself."

"Why?"

"I said identify yourself." He did something with his free hand, almost too quick for Gary Severn to take in its significance. Some sort of a high-sign backed with metal.

"What's that for?"

"That's so you'll identify yourself."

"I'm Gary Severn. I live in here."

"All right. You'd better come with me." The hand on his shoulder had shifted further down his arm now, tightened.

Severn answered with a sort of peaceable doggedness, “Oh no, I won’t go with you unless you tell me what you want with me. You can’t come up to me like this outside my house and—”

“You’re not resisting arrest, are you?” the other man suggested. “I wouldn’t.”

“Arrest?” Severn said blankly. “Is this arrest? Arrest for what?”

A note of laughter sounded from the other, without his grim lips curving in accompaniment to it. “I don’t have to tell you that, do I? Arrest for murder. For the worst kind of murder there is. Murder of a police-officer. In the course of an attempted robbery. On Farragut Street.” He spaced each clipped phrase. “Now do you remember?”

Arrest for murder.

He said it over to himself. It didn’t even frighten him. It had no meaning. It was like being mistaken for Dutch Schultz or—some sort of a freak mix-up. The thing was, he wouldn’t get to bed until all hours now probably, and that might make him late in the morning. And just when he was so tired too.

All he could find to say was a very foolish little thing. “Can’t I go inside first and leave my paper? My wife’s waiting in there, and I’d like to let her know I may be gone for half an hour or so—

The man nodded permission, said: “Sure, I’ll go inside with you a minute, while you tell your wife and leave your paper.”

A life ends, and the note it ends on is: “Can I go inside first and leave my paper?”

On the wall was a typical optician’s sight-chart, beginning with a big beetling jumbo capital at the top and tapering down to a line of fingernail-size type at the bottom. The detectives had been occupied in trying themselves out on it while they were waiting. Most, from a distance of across the room, had had to stop at the fourth line below the bottom.

Normal eyesight. One man had been able to get down as far as the third, but he'd missed two of the ten letters in that one. No one had been able to get down below that.

The door on the opposite side opened and the Novak woman was brought in. She'd brought her knitting.

"Sit down there. We'd like to try you out on this chart, first."

Mrs. Novak tipped her shoulders. "Glasses you're giving out?"

"How far down can you read?"

"All the way."

"Can you read the bottom line?"

Again Mrs. Novak tipped her shoulders. "Who couldn't?"

"Nine out often people couldn't," one of the detectives murmured to the man next to him.

She rattled it off like someone reading a scare-head, "p, t, b, k, j, h, i, y, q, a."

Somebody whistled. "Far-sighted."

She dropped her eyes complacently to her needles again. "This I don't know about. I only hope you gentlemen are going to be through soon. While you got me coming in and out of here, my business ain't getting my whole attention."

The door opened and Gary Severn had come in. Flanked. His whole life was flanked now.

The rest of it went quick. The way death does.

She looked up. She held it. She nodded. "That's him. That's the man I saw running away right after the shots."

Gary Severn didn't say anything.

One of the detectives present, his name was Eric Rogers, he didn't say anything either. He was just there, a witness to it.

The other chief witness' name was Storm. He was a certified accountant, he dealt in figures. He was, as witnesses go, a man of good will. He made the second line from the bottom on the chart, better than any of the detectives had, even if not as good as Mrs. Novak. But then

he was wearing glasses. But then—once more—he'd also been wearing them at the time the fleeing murderer had bowled him over on the sidewalk, only a few doors away from the actual crime, and snapped a shot at him which miraculously missed. He'd promptly lain inert and feigned death, to avoid a possible second and better-aimed shot.

"You realize how important this is?"

"I realize. That's why I'm holding back. That's why I don't like to say I'm 100% sure. I'd say I'm 75% sure it's him. I got 25% doubts."

"What you'd *like* to say," he was cautioned, "has nothing to do with it. Either you are sure or you aren't. Sureness has no percentages. Either it's one hundred or it's zero. Keep emotion out of this. Forget that it's a man. You're an accountant. It's a column of figures to you. There's only one right answer. Give us that answer. Now we're going to try you again."

Gary Severn came in again.

Storm moved his figures up. "90% sure," he said privately to the lieutenant standing behind him. "I still got 10% doubt left."

"Yes *or* no?"

"I can't say no, when I got 90% on the yes-side and only —"

"YES or NO!"

It came slow, but it came. It came low, but it came. "Yes."

Gary Severn didn't make a sound. He'd stopped saying anything long ago. Just the sound of one's own voice, unheard, unanswered, what good is that?

The detective named Rogers, he was there in the background again. He just took it in like the rest. There was nothing he felt called on to say.

The news-dealer, his name was Mike Mosconi, set in jackknife position in the chair and moved his hat uneasily around in his hands while he told them: "No, I don't know his name and I'm not even sure which house he lives in, but

I know him by sight as good as you can know anybody, and he's telling the truth about that. He hasn't missed buying a paper off me, I don't think more than once or twice in the whole year."

"But he did stay away once or twice," the lieutenant said. "And what about this twenty-second of June, is that one of those once or twices he stayed away?"

The news-dealer said unhappily, "I'm out there on the street every night in the year, gents. It's hard for me to pick out a certain night by the date and say for sure that that was the one out of all of 'em—But if you get me the weather for that night, I can do better for you."

"Get him the weather for that night," the lieutenant consented.

The weather came back. "It was clear and bright on the twenty-second of June."

"Then he bought his paper from me that night," Mike Mosconi said inflexibly. "It's the God's honest truth; I'm sure of it and you can be too. The only one or two times he didn't show up was when—"

"How long did it take him to buy his paper each time?" the lieutenant continued remorselessly.

Mike Mosconi looked down reluctantly. "How long does it take to buy a paper? You drop three cents, you pick it up, you walk away—"

"But there's something else you haven't told us. At what time each night did he do this quick little buying of the paper? Was it the same time always, or did it vary, or what time was it?"

Mike Mosconi looked up in innocent surprise. "It was the same time always. It never varied. How could it? He always gets the midnight edition of the *Herald-Times,* it never hits my stand until quarter to twelve, he never came out until then. He knew it wouldn't be there if he did—"

"The twenty-second of June—?

“Any night, I don’t care which it was. If he came at all, he came between quarter of and twelve o’clock.”

“You can go, Mosconi.”

Mosconi went. The lieutenant turned to Severn.

“The murder was at ten o’clock. What kind of an alibi was that?”

Severn said in quiet resignation, “The only one I had.”

Gates didn’t look like a criminal. But then there is no typical criminal look, the public at large only thinks there is. He was a big husky black-haired man, who gave a misleading impression of slow-moving genial good-nature totally unwarranted by the known facts of his career. He also had an air of calm self-assurance, that most likely came more from a lack of imagination than anything else.

He said, “So what do you expect me to say? If I say no, this ain’t the guy, that means I was there but with someone else. If I say yes, it is him, that means the same thing. Don’t worry, Mr. Strassburger, my counsel, wised me up about the kind of trick questions you guys like to ask. Like when they want to know ‘Have you quit beating your wife?’ ”

He looked them over self-possessedly. “All I’m saying is I wasn’t there myself. So if I wasn’t there myself, how can there be a right guy or a wrong guy that was there with me? I’m the wrong guy, more than anybody else.” He tapped himself on the breast-bone with emphatic conviction. “Get the right guy in my place first, and then he’ll give you the right second guy.”

He smiled a little at them. Very little. “All I’m saying, now and at any other time, is I never saw this guy before in my life. If you want it that way, you can have it.”

The lieutenant smiled back at him. Also very little. “And you weren’t on Farragut Street that night? And you didn’t take part in the murder of Sergeant O’Neill?”

“That,” said Gates with steely confidence, “goes with it.”

Gates got up, but not fast or jerkily, with the same slowness that had always characterized him. He wiped the sweat off his palms by running them lightly down his sides. As though he were going to shake hands with somebody.

He was. He was going to shake hands with death.

He wasn’t particularly frightened. Not that he was particularly brave. It was just that he didn’t have very much imagination. Rationalizing, he knew that he wasn’t going to be alive any more ten minutes from now. Yet he wasn’t used to casting his imagination ten minutes ahead of him, he’d always kept it by him in the present. So he couldn’t visualize it. So he wasn’t as unnerved by it as the average man would have been.

Yet he was troubled by something else. The ridges in his forehead showed that.

“Are you ready, my son?”

“I’m ready.”

“Lean on me.”

“I don’t have to, Father. My legs’ll hold up. It ain’t far.” It was made as a simple statement of fact, without sarcasm or rebuke intended.

They left the death cell.

“Listen, that Severn kid,” Gates said in a quiet voice, looking straight ahead. “He’s following me in in five minutes. I admit I did it. I held out until now, to see if I’d get a reprieve or not. I didn’t get the reprieve, so it don’t matter now any more. All right, I killed O’Neill, I admit it. But the other guy, the guy with me that helped me kill him, it wasn’t Severn. Are you listening? Can you hear me? It was a guy named Donny Blake. I never saw Severn before in my life until they arrested him. For pete’s sake, tell them that, Father! All right, I’m sorry for swearing at such a time. But tell them that, Father! You’ve got to tell them that! There’s only five minutes left.”

“Why did you wait so long, my son?”

“I told you, the reprieve—I been telling the warden since last night. I think he believes me, but I don’t think he can get them to do anything about it, the others, over him—Listen, *you* tell him, Father! You believe me, don’t you? The dead don’t lie!”

His voice rose, echoed hollowly in the short passage. “Tell them not to touch that kid! He’s not the guy that was with me—”

And he said probably the strangest thing that was ever said by a condemned man on the way to execution. “Father, don’t walk any further with me! Leave me now, don’t waste time. Go to the warden, tell him—!”

“Pray, my son. Pray for yourself. You are my charge—”

“But I don’t need you, Father. Can’t you take this off my mind? Don’t let them bring that kid in here after me—!”

Something cold touched the crown of his head. The priest’s arm slowly drew away, receded into life.

“Don’t forget what you promised me, Father. Don’t let—”

The hood, falling over his face, cut the rest of it short.

The current waned, then waxed, then waned again—

He said in a tired voice, “Helen, I love you. I—”

The hood, falling over his face, cut the rest of it short.

The current waned, then waxed, then waned again—

They didn’t have the chart on the wall any more. It had done them poor service. The door opened and Mrs. Novak was ushered in. She had her knitting with her again. Only she was making a different article, of a different color, this time. She nodded restrainedly to several of them, as one does to distant acquaintances encountered before.

She sat down, bent her head, the needles began to flicker busily.

Somebody came in, or went out. She didn’t bother looking.

The toecaps of a pair of shoes came to a halt just within the radius of vision of her downcast eyes. They remained motionless there on the floor, as though silently

importuning her attention. There wasn't a sound in the room.

Mrs. Novak became aware of the shoes at last. She raised her eyes indifferently, dropped them. Then they shot up again. The knitting sidled from her lap as the lap itself dissolved into a straight line. The ball of yarn rolled across the floor unnoticed. She was clutching at her own throat with both hands.

There wasn't a sound in the room.

She pointed with one trembling finger. It was a question, a plea that she be mistaken, but more than anything else a terrified statement of fact.

"It's him—the man that ran past by my store—from where the police-officer—!"

"But the last time you said—"

She rolled her eyes, struck her own forehead. "I know," she said brokenly. "He looked *like* him. But only he looked *like* him, you understand? This one, it *is* him!" Her voice railed out at them accusingly. "Why you haf to bring me here that other time? If you don't, I don't make such a mistake!"

"There were others made the same mistake," the lieutenant tried to soothe her.

"You were only one of five or six witnesses. Every one of them—"

She wouldn't listen. Her face crinkled into an ugly mask. Suddenly, with no further ado, tears were working their way down its seams. Somebody took her by the arm to help her out. One of the detectives had to pick up the fallen knitting, hand it back to her, otherwise she would have left without it. And anything that could make her do that—

"I killed him," she mourned.

"It wasn't you alone," the lieutenant acknowledged bitterly as she was led from the room. "We all did."

They seated Donny Blake in a chair, after she had gone, and one of them stood directly behind it like a mentor. They

handed this man a newspaper and he opened it and held it spread out before Blake's face, as though he were holding it up for him to read.

The door opened and closed, and Storm, the chartered accountant, was sitting there across the room, in the exact place the Novak woman had been just now.

He looked around at them questioningly, still unsure of just why he had been summoned here. All he saw was a group of detectives, one of them buried behind a newspaper.

"Keep looking where that newspaper is," the lieutenant instructed quietly.

Storm looked puzzled, but he did.

The detective behind the chair slowly began to raise it, like a curtain. Blake's chin peered below first. Then his mouth. Then nose, eyes, forehead. At last his whole face was revealed.

Storm's own face whitened. His reaction was quieter than the woman's had been, but just as dramatic. He began to tremble right as he sat there in the chair; they could see it by his hands mostly. "Oh my God," he mouthed in a sickened undertone.

"Have you anything to say?" the lieutenant urged. "Don't be afraid to say it."

He stroked his mouth as though the words tasted rotten even before they'd come out. "That's—that's the face of the man I collided with—on Farragut Street."

"You're sure?"

His figures came back to him, but you could tell they gave him no comfort any longer. "One hundred percent!" he said dismally, leaning way-over his own lap as though he had a cramp.

"They're not altogether to blame," the lieutenant commented to a couple of his men after the room had been cleared. "It's very hard, when a guy looks a good deal like another, not to bridge the remaining gap with your own

imagination and supply the rest. Another thing, the mere fact that we were already holding Severn in custody would unconsciously influence them in identifying him. We thought he was the guy, and we ought to know, so if we thought he was, he probably was. I don't mean they consciously thought of it in that way, but without their realizing it, that would be the effect it would have on their minds."

A cop looked in, said: "They've got Blake ready for you, lieutenant."

"And I'm ready for him," the lieutenant answered grimly, turning and leading the way out.

The doctor came forward, tipped up one of Blake's eyelids. Sightless white showed. He took out a stethoscope and applied it to the region of the heart.

In the silence their panting breaths reverberated hollowly against the basement walls.

The doctor straightened up, removed the stethoscope. "Not very much more," he warned in a guarded undertone. "Still okay, but he's wearing down. This is just a faint. You want him back?"

"Yeah," one of the men said. "We wouldn't mind."

The doctor extracted a small vial from his kit, extended it toward the outsize, discolored mass that was Blake's nose. He passed it back and forth in a straight line a couple of times.

Blake's eyelids flickered up. Then he twitched his head away uncomfortably.

There was a concerted forward shift on the part of all of them, like a pack of dogs closing in on a bone.

"Wait'll the doc gets out of the room," the lieutenant checked them. "This is our own business."

Donny Blake began to weep. "No, I can't stand any more. Doc," he called out frantically, "Doc! Don't leave me in here with 'em! They're killing me—!"

The doctor had scant sympathy for him. "Then why don't you tell 'em what they want to know?" he grunted. "Why

waste everyone's time?" He closed the door after him.

Maybe because the suggestion came from an outsider, at least someone distinct from his tormentors. Or maybe because this was the time for it anyway.

Suddenly he said, "Yeah, it was me. I did. I was with Gates and the two of us killed this guy O'Neill. He horned in on us in the middle of this uncut diamond job we were pulling. He didn't see me. I came up behind him while he was holding Gates at the point of his gun. I pinned him to the wall there in the entrance and we took his gun away from him. Then Gates said, "He's seen us now," and he'd shot him down before I could stop him. I said, "He's still alive, he'll tell anyway," and I finished him off with one into the head."

He covered his face with palsied hands. "Now I've given it to you. Don't hurt me any more. Lemme alone."

"See who that is," the lieutenant said.

A cop was on the other side of the door when it had been opened. "The D.A.'s Office is on the phone for you, lieutenant. Upstairs in your own office."

"Get the stenographer," the lieutenant said, "I'll be right back."

He was gone a considerable time, but he must have used up most of it on the slow, lifeless way he came back. Dawdling along. He came in with a funny look on his face, as though he didn't see any of them any more. Or rather, did, but hated to have to look at them.

"Take him out," he said curtly.

No one said anything until the prisoner was gone. Then they all looked at the lieutenant curiously, waiting for him to speak. He didn't.

"Aren't you going to have it taken down, lieutenant, while it's still flowing free and easy?"

"No," the lieutenant said, tight-lipped.

"But he'll seal up again, if we give him time to rest—"

“We’re not going to have a chance to use it, so there’s no need getting it out of him.” He sank deflatedly onto the chair the prisoner had just been propped in. “He’s not going to be brought to trial. Those are the orders I just got. The D.A.‘s Office says to turn him loose.”

He let the commotion eddy unheard above his head for a while.

Finally someone asked bitterly, “What is it, politics?”

“No. Not altogether, anyway. It’s true it’s an election year, and they may play a part, but there’s a lot more involved than just that. Here’s how they lined it up to me. Severn has been executed for that crime. There’s no way of bringing him back again. The mistake’s been made, and it’s irretrievable. To bring this guy to trial now will unleash a scandal that will affect not only the D.A.‘s Office, but the whole Police Department. It’s not only their own skins, or ours, they’re thinking of. It’s the confidence of the public. It’ll get a shock that it won’t recover from for years to come. I guess they feel they would rather have one guilty criminal walk out scot-free than bring about a condition where, for the next few years, every time the law tries to execute a criminal in this State, there’ll be a hue and cry raised that it’s another miscarriage of justice like the Severn case. They won’t be able to get any convictions in our courts. All a smart defense lawyer will have to do is mention the name of Severn, and the jury will automatically acquit the defendant, rather than take a chance. It’s a case of letting one criminal go now, or losing dozens of others in the future.” He got up with a sigh. “I’ve got to go up now and get him to sign a waiver.”

The handful of men stood around for a minute or two longer. Each one reacted to it according to his own individual temperament. One, of a practical turn of mind, shrugged it off, said: “Well, it’s not up to us—Only I wish they’d told us before we put in all that hard work on him. Coming, Joe?”

Another, of a legalistic turn of mind, began to point out just why the D.A.‘s Office had all the wrong dope. Another, of a clannish turn of mind, admitted openly: “I wouldn’t have felt so sore, if only it hadn’t happened to be a police sergeant.”

One by one they drifted out. Until there was just one left behind. The detective named Rogers. He stayed on down there alone after all the rest had gone. Hands cupped in pockets, staring down at the floor, while he stood motionless.

His turn of mind? That of a zealot who has just seen his cause betrayed. That of a true believer who has just seen his scripture made a mockery of.

They met in the main corridor at Headquarters a few hours later, the detective and the murderer who was already a free man, immune, on his way back to the outer world.

Rogers just stood there against the wall as he went by. His head slowly turned, pacing the other’s passage as their paths crossed. Not a word was exchanged between them. Blake had a strip of plaster along-side his nose, another dab of it under his lip. But Gary Severn was dead in the ground. And so was Police Sergeant O’Neill.

And the little things about him hurt even worse. The untrammelled swing of his arms. The fastidious pinch he was giving his necktie-knot. He was back in life again, full-blast, and the knot of his necktie mattered again.

He met the detective’s eyes arrogantly, turning his own head to maintain the stare between them unbroken. Then he gave a derisive chuckle deep in his throat. It was more eloquent, more insulting than any number of words could have been. “Hagh!” It meant “The police—hagh! Their laws and regulations—hagh! Murder—hagh!”

It was like a blow in the face. It smarted. It stang. It hurt Rogers where his beliefs lay. His sense of right and wrong. His sense of justice. All those things that people—some of them anyway—have, and don't let on they have.

Roger's face got white. Not all over. Just around the mouth and chin. The other man went on. Along the short remainder of the corridor, and out through the glass doors, and down the steps out of sight. Rogers stood there without moving, and his eyes followed him to the bitter end, until he was gone, there wasn't anything left to look at any more.

He'd never be back here again. He'd never be brought back to answer for that one particular crime.

Rogers turned and went swiftly down the other way. He came to a door, his lieutenant's door, and he pushed it open without knocking and went in. He put his hand down flat on the desk, then he took it away again.

The lieutenant looked down at the badge left lying there, then up at him.

"My written resignation will follow later. I'm quitting the force." He turned and went back to the door again.

"Rogers, come back here. Now wait a minute—You must be crazy."

"Maybe I am a little, at that," Rogers admitted.

"Come back here, will you? Where you going?"

"Wherever Blake is, that's where I'll be from now on. Wherever he goes, that's where you'll find me." The door ebbed closed, and he was gone.

"Which way'd he go?" he said to a cop out on the front steps.

"He walked down a ways, and then he got in a cab, down there by the corner. There it is, you can still see it up ahead there, waiting for that light to change—"

Rogers hoisted his arm to bring over another, and got in.

"Where to, cap?"

"See that cab, crossing the intersection up there ahead? Just go which ever way that goes, from now on."

Blake left the blonde at the desk and came slowly and purposefully across the lobby toward the overstuffed chair into which Rogers had just sunk down. He stopped squarely in front of him, legs slightly astraddle. “Why don’t you get wise to yourself? Was the show good? Was the rest’runt good? Maybe you think I don’t know your face from that rat-incubator downtown. Maybe you think I haven’t seen you all night long, everyplace where I was.”

Rogers answered quietly, looking up at him. “What makes you think I’ve been trying for you not to see me?”

Blake was at a loss for a minute. He opened his mouth, closed it again, swallowed. “You can’t get me on that O’Neill thing. You guys wouldn’t have let me go in the first place, if you could have held me on it, and you know it! It’s finished, water under the bridge.”

Rogers said as quietly, as readily as ever, “I know I can’t. I agree with you there. What makes you think I’m trying to?”

Again Blake opened and closed his mouth abortively. The best answer he could find was, “I don’t know what you’re up to, but you won’t get anywhere.”

“What makes you think I’m trying to get anywhere?”

Blake blinked and looked at a loss. After an awkward moment, having been balked of the opposition he’d expected to meet, he turned on his heel and went back to the desk.

He conferred with the blonde for a few minutes. She began to draw away from him. Finally she shrugged off the importuning hand he tried to lay on her arm. Her voice rose. “Not if you’re being shadowed—count me out! I ain’t going to get mixed up with you. You should have told me sooner. You better find somebody else to go around with!” She turned around and flounced indignantly out.

Blake gave Rogers the venomous look of a beady-eyed cobra. Then he strode ragingly off in the opposite direction, entered the waiting elevator.

Rogers motioned languidly to the operator to wait for him, straightened up from his chair, ambled leisurely over, and stepped in in turn. The car started up with the two of them in it. Blake's face was livid with rage. A pulse at his temple kept beating a tattoo.

"Keep what up?" answered Rogers impassively.

"Keep it up," he said in a strangled undertone behind the operator's back.

The car stopped at the sixth and Blake flung himself off. The door closed behind him. He made a turn of the carpeted corridor, stopped, put his key into a door. Then he whirled savagely as a second padded tread came down the corridor in the wake of his own.

"What d'ye think you're going to do," he shrilled exasperatedly, "come right inside my room with me?"

"No," Rogers said evenly, putting a key to the door directly opposite, "I'm going into my own room."

The two doors closed one after the other.

That was at midnight, on the sixth floor of the Congress Hotel. When Blake opened the door of his room at ten the next morning, all freshly combed and shaven, to go down to breakfast, it was on the tenth floor of the Hotel Colton. He'd changed abodes in the middle of the night. As he came out he was smiling to himself behind the hand he traced lightly over the lower part of his face to test the efficacy of his recent shave.

He closed the door and moved down the corridor toward the elevator.

The second door down from his own, on the same side, opened a moment or two after he'd gone by, before he'd quite reached the turn of the hall. Something made him glance back. Some lack of completion, maybe the fact that it

hadn’t immediately closed again on the occupant’s departure as it should have.

Rogers was standing sidewise in it, back to door-frame, looking out after him while he unhurriedly completed hitching on his coat.

“Hold the car for me a sec, will you?” he said matter-of-factly. “I’m on my way down to breakfast myself.”

On the third try he managed to bring the cup up to its highest level yet, within an inch of his lips, but he still couldn’t seem to manage that remaining inch. The cup started to vibrate with the uncontrollable vibration of the wrist that supported it, slosh over at the sides. Finally it sank heavily down again, with a crack that nearly broke the saucer under it, as though it were too heavy for him to hold. Its contents splashed up.

Rogers, sitting facing him from a distance of two tables away, but in a straight line, went ahead enjoyably and calmly mangling a large dish of bacon and eggs. He grinned through a full mouth, while his jaws continued inexorably to rotate with a sort of traction movement.

Blake’s wrists continued to tremble, even without the cup to support. “I can’t stand it,” he muttered, shading his eyes for a minute. “Does that man have to—?” Then he checked the remark.

The waiter, mopping up the place before him, let his eye travel around the room without understanding. “Is there something in here that bothers you, sir?”

“Yes,” Blake said in a choked voice, “there is.”

“Would you care to sit this way, sir?”

Blake got up and moved around to the opposite side of the table, with his back to Rogers. The waiter refilled his cup.

He started to lift it again, using both hands this time to make sure of keeping it steady.

The peculiar crackling, grating sound caused by a person chomping on dry toast reached him from the direction in

which he had last seen Rogers. It continued incessantly after that, without a pause, as though the consumer had no sooner completed one mouthful of the highly audible stuff than he filled up another and went to work on that.

The cup sank down heavily, as if it weighed too much to support even in his double grasp. This time it overturned, a tan puddle overspread the table. Blake leaped to his feet, flung his napkin down, elbowed the solicitous waiter aside.

“Lemme out of here,” he panted. “I can still feel him, every move I make, watching me, watching me from behind —!”

The waiter looked around, perplexed. To his eyes there was no one in sight but a quiet, inoffensive man a couple of tables off, minding his own business, strictly attending to what was on the plate before him, not doing anything to disturb anyone.

“Gee, you better see a doctor, mister,” he suggested worriedly. “You haven’t been able to sit through a meal in days now.”

Blake floundered out of the dining room, across the lobby, and into the drugstore on the opposite side. He drew up short at the fountain, leaned helplessly against it with a haggard look on his face.

“Gimme an aspirin!” His voice frayed. “Two of them, three of them!”

“Century Limited, ‘Ca-a-awgo, Track Twenty-five!” boomed dismally through the vaulted rotunda. It filtered in, thinned a little through the crack in the telephone-booth panel that Blake was holding fractionally ajar, both for purposes of ventilation and to be able to hear the despatch when it came.

Even now that he had come, he stayed in the booth and the phone stayed on the hook. He’d picked the booth for its strategic location. It not only commanded the clock out there, more important still it commanded the wicket leading down to that particular track that he was to use,

and above all, the prospective passengers who filed through it.

He was going to be the last one on that train. The last possible one; and he was going to know just who had preceded him aboard, before he committed himself to it himself.

It was impossible, with all the precautions he had taken, that that devil in human form should sense the distance he was about to put between them once and for all, come after him this time. If he did, then he was a mind-reader, pure and simple; there would be no other way to explain it.

It had been troublesome and expensive, but if it succeeded, it would be worth it. The several unsuccessful attempts he had made to change hotels had shown him the futility of that type of disappearance. This time he hadn't made the mistake of asking for his final bill, packing his belongings, or anything like that. His clothes, such as they were, were still in the closet; his baggage was still empty. He'd paid his bill for a week in advance, and this was only the second day of that week. He'd given no notice of departure. Then he'd strolled casually forth as on any other day, sauntered into a movie, left immediately by another entrance, come over here, picked up the reservation they'd been holding for him under another name, and closed himself up in this phone-booth. He'd been in it for the past three-quarters of an hour now.

And his nemesis, meanwhile, was either loitering around outside that theatre waiting for him to come out again, or sitting back there at the hotel waiting for him to return.

He scanned them as they filed through in driblets; now one, now two or three at once, now one more again, now a brief let-up.

The minute-hand was beginning to hit train-time. The guard was getting ready to close the gate again. Nobody else was passing through any more now.

He opened the booth-flap, took a tight tug on his hat-brim, and poised himself for a sudden dash across the marble floor.

He waited until the latticed gate was stretched all the way across, ready to be latched onto the opposite side of the gateway. Then he flashed from the booth and streaked over toward it. “Hold it!” he barked, and the guard widened it again just enough for him to squeeze through sidewise.

He showed him his ticket on the inside, after it was already made fast. He looked watchfully out and around through it, in the minute or two this took, and there was no sign of anyone starting up from any hidden position around the waiting rooms or any place near-by and starting after him.

He wasn’t here; he’d lost him, given him the slip.

“Better make it fast, mister,” the guard suggested.

He didn’t have to tell him that; the train didn’t exist that could get away from him now, even if he had to run halfway through the tunnel after it.

He went tearing down the ramp, wigwagging a line of returning redcaps out of his way.

He got on only by virtue of a conductor’s outstretched arm, a door left aslant to receive him, and a last-minute flourish of tricky footwork. He got on, and that was all that mattered.

“That’s it,” he heaved gratifiedly. “Now close it up and throw the key away! There’s nobody else, after me.”

“They’d have to be homing pigeons riding a tail-wind, if there was,” the conductor admitted.

He’d taken a compartment, to make sure of remaining unseen during the trip. It was two cars up, and after he’d reached it and checked it with the conductor, he locked himself in and pulled down the shade to the bottom, even though they were still in the tunnel under the city.

Then he sank back on the upholstered seat with a long sigh. Finally! A complete break at last. “He’ll never catch up

with me again now as long as I live," he murmured bitterly. "I'll see to that."

Time and trackage ticked off.

They stopped for a minute at the uptown station. There was very little hazard attached to that, he felt. If he'd guessed his intentions at all, he would have been right at his heels down at the main station, he wouldn't take the risk of boarding the train later up here. There wouldn't be time enough to investigate thoroughly, and he might get on the wrong train and be carried all the way to the Mid-West without his quarry.

Still, there was nothing like being sure, so after they were well under way again, he rang for the conductor, opened the door a half-inch, and asked him through it: "I'm expecting to meet somebody. Did anyone get on just now, uptown?"

"Just a lady and a little boy, that who—?"

"No," said Blake, smiling serenely, "that wasn't who." And he locked the door again. All set now.

Sure, he'd come out there after him maybe, but all he, Blake, needed was this momentary head-start; he'd never be able to close in on him again, he'd keep it between them from now on, stay always a step ahead.

They stopped again at Harmon to change to a coal-powered engine. That didn't bother him, that wasn't a passenger-stop.

There was a knock on the compartment door, opposite West Point, and dread came back again for a moment. He leaped over and put his ear to it, and when it came again, called out tensely, making a shell of his two hands to alter his voice: "Who is it?"

A stewardess' voice came back, "Care for a pillow, sir?"

He opened it narrowly, let her hand it in to him more to get rid of her than because he wanted one. Then he locked up again, relaxed.

He wasn’t disturbed any more after that. At Albany they turned west. Somewhere in Pennsylvania, or maybe it was already Ohio, he rang for a tray and had it put down outside the locked door. Then he took it in himself and locked up again. When he was through he put it down outside again, and locked up once more. That was so he wouldn’t have to go out to the buffet-car. But these were just fancy trimmings, little extra added precautions, that he himself knew to be no longer necessary. The train was obviously sterile of danger. It had been from the moment of departure.

Toward midnight, way out in Indiana, he had to let the porter in to make up the two seats into a bed for him. He couldn’t do that for himself.

“I guess you the las’ one up on the whole train,” the man said cheerfully.

“They all turned in?”

“Hours ago. Ain’t nobody stirring no mo’, from front to back.”

That decided him. He figured he may as well step outside for a minute and stretch his legs, while the man was busy in there. There wasn’t room enough in it for two of them at once. He made his way back through sleeping aisles of green berth-hangings. Even the observation-car was empty and unlighted now, with just one small dim lamp standing guard in the corner.

The whole living cargo of humanity was fast asleep.

He opened the door and went out on the observation platform to get a breath of air. He stretched himself there by the rail and drank it in. “Gee,” he thought, “it feels good to be free!” It was the first real taste of freedom he’d had since he’d walked out of Head—

A voice in one of the gloom-obscured basket-shaped chairs off-side to him said mildly, “That you, Blake? Been wondering when you’d show-up. How can you stand it, cooped up for hours in that stuffy two-by-four?” And a cigar-butt that was all that could be seen of the speaker glowed red with comfortable tranquillity.

Blake had to hang onto the rail as he swirled, to keep from going over. “When did you get on?” he groaned against the wind.

“I was the first one on,” Rogers’ voice said from the dark. “I got myself admitted before the gates were even opened, while they were still making the train up.” He chuckled appreciatively. “I thought sure *you* were going to miss it.”

He knew what this was that was coming next. It had been bound to come sooner or later, and this was about the time for it now. Any number of things were there to tell him; minor variations in the pattern of the adversary’s behavior. Not for nothing had he been a detective for years. He knew human nature. He was already familiar with his adversary’s pattern of behavior. The danger-signals studding it tonight were, to his practised eye, as plainly to be read as lighted buoys flashing out above dark, treacherous waters.

Blake hadn’t sought one of his usual tinselled, boisterous resorts tonight. He’d found his way instead to a dingy out-of-the-way rat-hole over on the South Side, where the very atmosphere had a furtive cast to it. The detective could scent “trap” a mile away as he pushed inside after him. Blake was sitting alone, not expansively lording it over a cluster of girls as was his wont. He even discouraged the one or two that attempted to attach themselves to him. And finally, the very way in which he drank told the detective there was something coming up. He wasn’t drinking to get happy, or to forget. He was drinking to get nerve. The detective could read what was on his mind by the very hoists of his arm; they were too jerky and unevenly spaced, they vibrated with nervous tension.

He himself sat there across the room, fooling around with a beer, not taking any chances on letting it past his gums, in case it had been drugged. He had a gun on him, but that was only because he always carried one; he had absolutely no intention of using it, not even in self-defense. Because what was coming up now was a test, and it had to be met, to keep the dominance of the situation on his side. If he flinched from it, the dominance of the situation shifted over to Blake's side. And mastery didn't lie in any use of a gun, either, because that was a mastery that lasted only as long as your finger rested on the trigger. What he was after was a long-term mastery.

Blake was primed now. The liquor had done all it could for him; embalmed his nerves like novocaine. Rogers saw him get up slowly from the table. He braced himself at it a moment, then started on his way out. The very way he walked, the stiff-legged, interlocking gait, showed that this was the come-on, that if he followed him now, there was death at the end of it.

And he knew by the silence that hung over the place, the sudden lull that descended, in which no one moved, no one spoke, yet no one looked at either of the two principals, that everyone there was in on it to a greater or a lesser extent.

He kept himself relaxed. That was important, that was half the battle; otherwise it wouldn't work. He let him get as far as the door, and then he slowly got to his feet in turn. In his technique there was no attempt to dissimulate, to give the impression he was *not* following Blake, patterning his movements on the other's. He threw down money for his beer and he put out his cigar with painstaking thoroughness.

The door had closed behind the other. Now he moved toward it in turn. No one in the place was looking at him, and yet he knew that in the becalmed silence everyone was listening to his slow, measured tread across the floor. From bus-boy to tawdry hostess, from waiter to dubious patron,

no one stirred. The place was bewitched with the approach of murder. And they were all on Donny Blake's side.

The man at the piano sat with his fingers resting lightly on the keyboard, careful not to bear down yet, ready for the signal to begin the death-music. The man at the percussion-instrument held his drumstick poised, the trumpeter had his lips to the mouth-piece of his instrument, waiting like the Angel Gabriel. It was going to happen right outside somewhere, close by.

He came out, and Blake had remained in sight, to continue the come-on. As soon as he saw Rogers, and above all was sure Rogers had marked him, he drifted down an alley there at that end of the building that led back to the garage. That was where it was going to happen. And then into a sack, and into one of the cars, and into Lake Mich.

Rogers turned without a moment's hesitation and went down that way and turned the corner.

Blake had lit the garage up, to show him the way. They'd gotten rid of the attendant for him. He went deeper inside, but he remained visible down the lane of cars. He stopped there, near the back wall, and turned to face him, and stood and waited.

Rogers came on down the alley, toward the garage-entrance. If he was going to get him from a distance, then Rogers knew he would probably have to die. But if he let him come in close—

He made no move, so he wasn't going to try to get him from a distance. Probably afraid of missing him.

The time-limit that must have been arranged expired as he crossed the threshold into the garage. There was suddenly a blare of the three-piece band, from within the main building, so loud it seemed to split the seams of the place. That was the cover-up.

Rogers pulled the corrugated tin slide-door across after him, closing the two of them up. "That how you want it, Blake?" he said. Then he came away from the entrance, still

deeper into the garage, to where Blake was standing waiting for him.

Blake had the gun out by now. Above it was a face that could only have been worn by a man who has been hounded unendurably for weeks on end. It was past hatred. It was maniacal.

Rogers came on until he was three or four yards from him. Then he stopped, empty-handed. “Well?” he said. He rested one hand on the fender of a car pointed toward him.

A flux of uncertainty wavered over Blake, was gone again.

All Rogers said, after that, was one thing more: “Go ahead, you fool. This is as good a way as any other, as far as we’re concerned. As long as it hands you over to us, I’m willing. This is just what we’ve been looking for all along, what’s the difference if it’s me or somebody else?”

“You won’t know about it,” Blake said hoarsely. “They’ll never find you.”

“They don’t have to. All they’ve got to do is find you without me.” He heeled his palms toward him. “Well, what’re you waiting for, I’m empty-handed.”

The flux of uncertainty came back again, it rinsed all the starch out of him, softened him all up. It bent the gun down uselessly floorward in his very grasp. He backed and filled helplessly. “So you’re a plant—so they want me to do this to you—I mighta known you was too open about it—”

For a moment or two he was in awful shape. He backed his hand to his forehead and stood there bandy-legged against the wall, his mind fuming like a seydlitz-powder.

He’d found out long ago he couldn’t escape from his tormentor. And now he was finding out he couldn’t even kill his tormentor. He had to live with him.

Rogers rested his elbow in his other hand and stroked the lower part of his face, contemplating him thoughtfully. He’d met the test and licked it. Dominance still rested with him.

The door swung back, and one of the gorillas from the club came in. “How about it, Donny, is it over? Want me to

give you a hand—

Rogers turned and glanced at him with detached curiosity.

The newcomer took in the situation at a glance. “What’re ya, afraid?” he shrilled. “All right, I’ll do it for you!” He drew a gun of his own.

Blake gave a whinny of unadulterated terror, as though he himself were the target. He jumped between them, protecting Rogers with his own body. “Don’t you jerk! They *want* me to pull something like that, they’re *waiting* for it, that’s how they’re trying to get me! It didn’t dawn on me until just now, in the nick of time! Don’t you see how he’s not afraid at all? Don’t you notice how he keeps his hands empty?” He closed in on the other, started to push him bodily back out of the garage, as though it were his own life he was protecting. It was, in a way. “Get out of here, get out of here! If you plug him it’s me you kill, not him!”

The gun went off abortively into the garage-roof, deflected by Blake’s grip on his wrist. Blake forced him back over the threshold, stood there blocking his way. The gorilla had a moment or two of uncertainty of his own.

Blake’s panic was catching. And he wasn’t used to missing on the first shot, because he was used to shooting down his victims without warning.

“I’ve drawn on him now, they can get me for that myself!” he muttered. “I’m gonna get out of here—!” He suddenly turned and went scurrying up the alley whence he’d come.

The two men were left alone there together, the hunter and the hunted. Blake was breathing hard, all unmanned by two close shaves within a minute and a half. Rogers was as calm as though nothing had happened. He stood there without moving.

“Let him go,” he said stonily. “I don’t want him, I just want you.”

Rogers sat there on the edge of his bed, in the dark, in his room. He was in trousers, undershirt, and with his shoes off.

He was sitting the night through like that, keeping the death-watch. This was the same night as the spiked show-down in the garage, or what there was left of it. It was still dark, but it wouldn't be much longer.

He'd left his room door open two inches, and he was sitting in a line with it, patiently watching and waiting. The pattern of human behavior, immutable, told him what to be on the look-out for next.

The door-opening let a slender bar of yellow in from the hall. First it lay flat across the floor, then it climbed up the bed he was on, then it slanted off across his upper arm, just like a chevron. He felt he was entitled to a chevron by now.

He sat there, looking patiently out through the door-slit, waiting. For the inevitable next step, the step that was bound to come. He'd been sitting there like that watching ever since he'd first come in. He was willing to sit up all night, he was so sure it was coming.

He'd seen the bellboy go in the first time, with the first pint and the cracked ice, stay a minute or two, come out again tossing up a quarter.

Now suddenly here he was back again, with a second pint and more cracked ice. The green of his uniform showed in the door-slit. He stood there with his back to Rogers and knocked lightly on the door across the way.

Two pints, about, would do it. Rogers didn't move, though.

The door opened and the boy went in. He came out again in a moment, closed it after him.

Then Rogers did move. He left the bed in his stocking feet, widened his own door, went "Psst!," and the boy turned and came over to him.

"How much did he give you this time?"

The boy's eyes shone. "The whole change that was left! He cleaned himself out!"

Rogers nodded, as if in confirmation of something or other to himself. "How drunk is he?"

“He’s having a hard time getting there, but he’s getting there.”

Rogers nodded again, for his own private benefit. “Lemme have your passkey,” he said.

The boy hesitated.

“It’s all right, I have the house-dick’s authorization. You can check on it with him, if you want. Only, hand it over, I’m going to need it, and there won’t be much time.”

The boy tendered it to him, then showed an inclination to hang around and watch.

“You don’t need to wait, I’ll take care of everything.”

He didn’t go back into his own room again. He stayed there outside that other door, just as he was, in undershirt and stocking feet, in a position of half-crouched intentness, passkey ready at hand.

The transom was imperfectly closed, and he could hear him moving around in there, occasionally striking against some piece of furniture. He could hear it every time the bottle told off against the rim of the glass. Almost he was able to detect the constantly-ascending angle at which it was tilted, as its contents became less.

Pretty soon now. And in between, footsteps faltering back and forth, weaving aimlessly around, like those of someone trying to find his way out of a trap.

Suddenly the bottle hit the carpet with a discarded thud. No more in it.

Any minute now.

A rambling, disconnected phrase or two became audible, as the tempo of the trapped footsteps accelerated, this way and that, and all around, in blundering search of a way out. “I’ll fool him! I’ll show him! There’s one place he can’t—come after me—”

There was the sound of a window going up.

Now!

Rogers plunged the passkey in, swept the door aside, and dove across the room.

He had both feet up on the windowsill already, ready to go out and over and down. All the way down to the bottom. The only thing still keeping him there was he had to lower his head and shoulders first, to get them clear of the upper pane. That gave Rogers time enough to get across to him.

His arms scissored open for him, closed again, like a pair of pliers. He caught him around the waist, pulled him back, and the two of them fell to the floor together in a mingled heap.

He extricated himself and regained his feet before the other had. He went over, closed and securely latched-down the window, drew the shade. Then he went back to where the other still lay soddenly inert, stood over him.

"Get up!" he ordered roughly.

Blake had his downward-turned face buried in the crook of one arm. Rogers gave him a nudge with his foot that was just short of a kick.

Blake drew himself slowly together, crawled back to his feet by ascending stages, using the seat of a chair, then the top of a table next to it, until finally he was erect.

They faced one another.

"You won't let me live, and you won't even let me die!" Blake's voice rose almost to a full-pitched scream. "Then whaddya *after?* Whad-dya *want?*"

"Nothing." Rogers' low-keyed response was almost inaudible coming after the other's strident hysteria. "I told you that many times, didn't I? Is there any harm in going around where you go, being around where you are? There's plenty of room for two, isn't there?" He pushed him back on the bed, and Blake lay there sprawled full-length, without attempting to rise again. Rogers took a towel and drenched it in cold water, then wound it around itself into a rope. He laced it across his face a couple of times, with a heavy, sluggish swing of the arm, trailing a fine curtain of spray through the air after it. Then he flung it down.

When he spoke again his voice had slowed still further, to a sluggard drawl. “Take it easy. What’s there to get all steamed-up about? Here, look this over.”

He reached into his rear trouser-pocket, took out a billfold, extracted a worn letter and spread it open, holding it reversed for the other to see. It was old, he’d been carrying it around with him for months. It was an acknowledgment, on a Police Department letterhead, of his resignation. He held it a long time, to let it sink in. Then he finally put it away again.

Blake quit snivelling after awhile, and was carried off on the tide of alcohol in him into oblivion.

Rogers made no move to leave the room. He gave the latched window a glance. Then he scuffed over a chair and sat down beside the bed. He lit a cigarette, and just sat there watching him. Like a male nurse on duty at the bedside of a patient.

He wanted him alive and he wanted him in his right mind.

Hatred cannot remain at white heat indefinitely. Neither can fear. The human system would not be able to support them at that pitch, without burning itself out. But nature is great at providing safety-valves. What happens next is one of two things: either the conditions creating that hatred or fear are removed, thus doing away with them automatically. Or else custom, familiarity, creeps in, by unnoticeable degrees, tempering them, blurring them. Pretty soon the hatred is just a dull red glow. Then it is gone entirely. The subject has become *used* to the object that once aroused hatred or fear; it can’t do so any more. You can lock a man up in a room even with such a thing as a king cobra, and, always provided he isn’t struck dead in the meantime, at the end of a week he would probably he moving about unhampered, with just the elementary precaution of watching where he puts his feet.

Only the lower-voltage, slower-burning elements, like perseverance, patience, dedication to a cause, can be

maintained unchanged for months and years.

One night, at the same Chicago hotel, there was a knock at the door of Rogers' room around six o'clock. He opened it and Blake was standing there. He was in trousers, suspenders, and collarless shirt, and smelling strongly of shaving tonic. His own door, across the way, stood open behind him.

"Hey," he said, "you got a collar-button to spare, in here with you? I lost the only one I had just now. I got a dinner-date with a scorchy blonde and I don't want to keep her waiting. By the time I send down for one—"

"Yeah," Rogers said matter-of-factly, "I've got one."

He brought it back, dropped it in Blake's cupped hand.

"Much obliged."

They stood looking at one another a minute. A tentative grin flickered around the edges of Blake's mouth. Rogers answered it in kind.

That was all. Blake turned away. Rogers closed his door. With its closing his grin sliced off as at the cut of a knife.

A knock at the door. A collar-button. A trifle? A turning-point? The beginning of acceptance, of habit. The beginning of the end.

"This guy's a dick," Blake confided jovially to the redhead on his left. "Or at least he used to be at one time. I never told you that, did I?" He said it loud enough for Rogers to hear it, and at the same time dropped an eyelid at him over her shoulder, to show him there was no offense intended, it was all in fun.

"A dick?" she squealed with mock alarm. "Then what's he doing around you? Aren't you scared?"

Blake threw back his head and laughed with hearty enjoyment at the quaintness of such a notion. "I used to be in the beginning. I'd have a hard time working up a scare about him now, I'm so used to him. I'd probably catch cold without him being around me these days."

Rogers swivelled his hand deprecatingly at the girl. “Don’t let him kid you. I resigned long ago. He’s talking about two years back, ancient history.”

“What made you resign?” the other girl, the brunette, began. Then she checked herself. Blake must have stepped warningly on her toe under the table. “Let it lie,” he cautioned in an undertone, this time not meant for Rogers to hear. “He don’t like to talk about it. Probably—” And he made the secretive gesture that has always stood for graft; swinging his thumb in and out over his palm. “Good guy, though,” he concluded. Rogers was looking off the other way. He smiled to himself at something out on the dance-floor just then. Or maybe it wasn’t out on the dance-floor.

“Let’s break it up,” Blake suggested, as one co-host to another. “This place is going stale.”

The waiter came up with the check, and Blake cased his own billfold, down low at his side. “I’m short again,” he admitted ruefully.

“Let’s have it, I’ll pay it for you,” Rogers, who had once been a detective, said to the man he considered a murderer. “We can straighten it out between us some other time.”

Rogers, paring a corn with a razor-blade, looked up as the familiar knock came on his door. “That you, Donny?” he called out.

“Yeah. You doing anything, Rodge?”

They were Donny and Rodge to each other now.

“No, come on in,” Rogers answered, giving the razor-blade a final deft fillip that did the trick.

The door opened and Blake leaned in at an angle, from the waist up. “Fellow I used to know, guy named Bill Harkness, just dropped in to the room. Haven’t seen him in years. We been chewing the rag and now we’re fresh out of gab. Thought maybe you’d like to come on over and join us in a little three-handed game, what d’ya say?”

“Only for half-an-hour or so,” Rogers answered, shuffling on the sock he had discarded. “I’m turning in early tonight.”

Blake withdrew, leaving the door ajar to speed Rogers on his way in to them. He left his own that way too, opposite it.

Rogers put out his light and got ready to go over to them. Then he stopped there on the threshold, half in, half out, yawned undecidedly, like someone else once had, one night a long time ago, on his way out to get a midnight edition of the paper.

He didn’t have to be right at his elbow every night, did he? He could let it ride for one night, couldn’t he, out of so many hundreds of them? He’d be right across the hall from them, he could leave his door slightly ajar—He was tired, and that bed looked awfully good. He was a human being, not a machine. He had his moments of letdown, and this was one of them. Nothing was ever going to happen. All he’d managed to accomplish was play the parole-officer to Blake, keep him straight. And that wasn’t what he’d been after.

He was about to change his mind, go back inside again.

But they’d seen him from where they were, and Blake waved him on. “Coming, Rodge? What’re you standing there thinking about?”

That swung the balance. He closed his own door, crossed over, and went in there with them.

They were sitting there at the table waiting for him to join them. This Harkness struck him as being engaged in some shady line of business. But then that was an easy guess, anyone on Blake’s acquaintance-list was bound to be from the other side of the fence anyway.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

He shook hands with him without demur. That was a thing he’d learned to do since he’d been around Blake, shake hands with all manner of crooks.

Blake, to put them at their ease together, trotted out that same worn theme he was so fond of harping on. “Harkness don’t wanna believe you used to be a dick. Tell him yourself.” He told it to everyone he knew, at every opportunity. He seemed to take a perverse pride in it, as though it reflected a sort of distinction on him. A detective had once been after him, and he’d tamed him into harmlessness.

“Don’t you ever get tired of that?” was all Rogers grunted, disgustedly. He took up his cards, shot a covert glance at Blake’s friend. “No folding money, only nickels and dimes.”

Blake took it in good part. “Ain’t that some guy for you?”

The game wore on desultorily. The night wore on desultorily along with it. Just three people at a table, killing time.

Harkness seemed to have a fidgety habit of continually worrying at the cuff of his coat-sleeve.

“I thought they quit hiding them up there years ago,” Blake finally remarked with a grin. “We’re not playing for stakes, anyway.”

“No, you don’t get it, there’s a busted button on my sleeve, and it keeps hooking onto everything every time I reach my arm out.”

Only half of it was left, adhering to the thread, sharp-pointed and annoying as only such trivial things are apt to be. He tried to wrench it off bodily and it defeated him because there wasn’t enough of it left to get a good grip on. All he succeeded in doing was lacerating the edges of his fingers. He swore softly and licked at them.

“Why don’t you take the blame coat off altogether? You don’t need it,” Blake suggested, without evincing any real interest.

Harkness did, and draped it over the back of his chair.

The game wore on again. The night wore on. Rogers' original half-hour was gone long ago. It had quadrupled itself by now. Finally the game wore out, seemed to quit of its own momentum.

They sat there, half-comatose, around the table a moment or two longer. Rogers' head was actually beginning to nod. Harkness was the first one to speak. "Look at it, one o'clock. Guess I'll shove off." He stood up and got back into his coat. Then he felt at the mangled thatch the game had left in its wake. "Got a comb I can borry before I go."

Blake, mechanically continuing to shuffle cards without dealing them any more, said: "In that top drawer over there," without looking around. "And wipe it off after you use it, I'm particular."

The drawer slid out. There was a moment of silence, then they heard Harkness remark, "Old Faithful."

Rogers opened his heavy-lidded eyes and Blake turned his head. He'd found Blake's gun in the drawer, had taken it out and was looking it over. "Ain't you afraid of him knowing you've got this?" he grinned at Blake.

"Aw, he's known I've had it for years. He knows I'm licensed for it, too." Then he added sharply, "Quit monkeying around with it, put it back where it belongs."

"Okay, okay," Harkness consented urbanely. He laid it down on the bureau-scarf, reached for the comb instead.

Blake turned back again to his repetitious card-shuffling. Rogers, who was facing that way, suddenly split his eyes back to full-size at something he saw. The blurred sleepiness left his voice. "Hey, that busted button of yours is tangled in the fringe of the scarf, I can see it from here, and the gun's right on the edge. Move it over, you're going to—"

The warning had precisely a reverse effect. It brought on what he'd been trying to avoid instead of averting it. Harkness jerked up his forearm, to look and see for himself; anyone's instinctive reflex in the same situation. The scarf

gave a hitch along its entire length, and the gun slid off into space.

Harkness made a quick stabbing dive for it, to try to catch it before it hit the floor. He made it. His mind was quick enough, and so was his muscular coordination. He got it on the drop, in mid-air, in the relatively short distance between bureau-top and floor. But he got it the wrong way, caught at it in the wrong place.

A spark jumped out of his hand and there was a heavy-throated boom.

Then for a minute more nothing happened. None of them moved, not even he. He remained bent over like that, frozen just as he'd grabbed for it. Rogers remained seated at the table, staring across it. Blake continued to clutch the cards he'd been shuffling, while his head slowly came around. Rogers, at least, had been a witness to what had happened; Blake had even missed seeing that much.

Harkness was moving again. He folded slowly over, until his face was resting on the floor, while he remained arched upward in the middle like a croquet-wicket. Then he flattened out along there too, and made just a straight line, and lay quiet, as though he was tired.

Rogers jumped up and over to him, got down by him, turned him over. "Help me carry him over onto the bed," he said, "It musta hit him—" Then he stopped again.

Blake was still stupidly clutching the deck of cards.

"He's gone," Rogers said, in an oddly-blank voice. "It musta got him instantly." He straightened up, still puzzled by the suddenness with which the thing had occurred. "I never saw such a freaky—" Then he saw the gun. He stooped for it. "What did you leave it lying around like that for?" he demanded irritably. "Here, take it!" He thrust it at its owner, and the latter's hand closed around it almost unconsciously.

Blake was finally starting to get it. "A fine mess!" he lamented. He went over to the door, listened. Then he even

opened it cautiously, looked out into the hall. The shot apparently hadn't been heard through the thick walls and doors of the venerable place they were in. He closed it, came back again. He was starting to perspire profusely. Then, as another thought struck him belatedly, he took out a handkerchief and began to mop at himself with something akin to relief. "Hey, it's a good thing you were right in here with the two of us, saw it for yourself. Otherwise you might have thought—"

Rogers kept staring down at the still figure, he couldn't seem to come out of his preoccupation.

Blake came over and touched him in anxious supplication on the arm, to attract his attention. "Hey, Rodge, maybe you better be the one to report it. It'll look better coming from you, you used to be on the force yourself—"

"All right, I'll handle it," Rogers said with sudden new-found incisiveness. "Let's have the gun." He lined his hand with a folded handkerchief before closing it on it.

Blake relinquished it only too willingly, went ahead mopping his face, like someone who has just had the narrowest of narrow escapes.

Rogers had asked for his old precinct number. "Give me Lieutenant Colton." There was a moment's wait. He balanced the instrument on one shoulder, delved into his pockets, rid himself of all the paper currency he had on him. He discarded this by flinging it at the table, for some reason best known to himself.

In the moment's wait, Blake said again, mostly for his own benefit: "Boy, it's the luckiest thing I ever did to ask you in here with us to—"

Rogers straightened slightly. Three years rolled off him. "Eric Rogers reporting back, lieutenant, after an extended leave of absence without pay. I'm in room Seven-ten at the Hotel Lancaster, here in the city. I've just been a witness to a murder. Donny Blake has shot to death, with his own gun, a man named William Harkness. Under my own eyes, that's

right. Orders, lieutenant? Very well, I'll hold him until you get here, sir." He hung up.

Blake's face was a white bubble. It swelled and swelled with dismay, until it had exploded into all the abysmal fright there is in the world. "I wasn't near him! I wasn't touching it! I wasn't even *looking!* I was turned the other way, with my back to—You know that! Rogers, you know it!"

Rogers kept holding his own gun on him, with the handkerchief around it. "Sure, I know it," he agreed readily. "I know it and you know it, we both know it. You hear me say it to you now, freely, for the last time, while we're still alone here together. And after this once, neither God nor man will ever hear me say it again. I've waited three years, seven months, and eighteen days for this, and now it's here. You found a loophole once. Now I've found a loophole this time. Your loophole was to get out. My loophole is to get you back in again.

"Listen to me so you'll understand what I'm doing, Blake. You're going to be arrested in a few more minutes for murder. You're going to be tried for murder. You're going to be—if there's any virtue left in the laws of this State—executed for murder. They're going to call that murder by the name of this man, Harkness.

That's the only name that'll be mentioned throughout the proceedings. But the murder you're really about to be arrested, tried, and electrocuted for will be that of a man whose name won't appear in it once, from first to last, from beginning to end—Police Sergeant O'Neill. *That's* the murder you're going to die for now!

"We couldn't get you for the one you did commit. So we'll try you for another you didn't commit and get you for that instead."

IF THE DEAD COULD TALK

He was in a dim little room off the arena somewhere. He looked so jaunty, in his tunic picked with spangles. He looked so husky, in the tights that encased his muscular thighs. He looked so devil-may-care and debonair, on the side of his face where there was still pink-tan greasepaint. He looked so dead.

There were a pair of clowns there, near the door, with that sad-eyed expression they always have when you're standing too close to them. There was a Roman charioteer there, in a gleaming cuirass and plumed helmet and kilt. There was a bareback rider in a frothy pink skirt. Just for a minute, taking a last look. Then they all turned and drifted silently outside. There was still a performance going on out there. They had to get back. The others stayed.

There was a girl there, a member of his own troupe, a cape around her tights now, looking down at him. Just looking at him. Just standing looking at him, as though she'd never get through. There was a young fellow next to her, a third member of the same troupe, standing holding one arm around her. The other hung stiffly beside him, ending in a mitten of gauze bandaging, as though he'd hurt his hand at some fairly recent performance. He kept looking at her, only at her, not at the still form she was looking at.

No one said anything. What was there to say? It could have happened to anyone.

Last of all, there was a detective there, jotting something in a notebook. He was all through now. He'd done all his questioning, all his looking around and investigating and reconstructing. It was no secret affair. Nearly a thousand people had seen it happen. He'd found out all there was to find out. Found out all anyone could tell him. Anyone living.

* * *

I knew I was going to kill him from the night she said, "I'm sorry, Joe, it's him, not you any more." I knew it from then on. I only didn't know when or how. That's how I am. That's what my blood is, what my nature is. I couldn't change that even if I tried.

I tried to stop myself from doing it, in every way I knew how. But it was no good; I knew it was going to happen anyway, I knew it was coming and there was no holding it back. I knew

I was going to see him kissing her sometime, or even just looking at her in a certain way that meant she was his and not mine—and that would bring it on whether I wanted to or not.

It's queer how those things are. It's the closer you are to a guy that makes you hate him the worse, when he takes something away from you. And no one was ever as close as him and me. We were brothers in everything but blood.

Here's how it was: we both ran away from our homes the same night. We first met each other on the same night, we both ran away. We were both within a year of one another's age—I was fourteen and a little the older. And we were both on our way to join up with the same traveling circus-outfit that had passed through those parts only a day or so before, pitching in his town first, then Crossing the hill and pitching in mine. You can't be any closer than that, for a starter.

I was sneaking down a line of boxcars, stalled in the freight-yards, in the moonlight, keeping an eye open for the

watchman and trying to find one of them that was open, when a hand came out to me and a voice whispered: “Try this one in here, where I am.” I could tell by the sound it was somebody my own age, so I took his hand through the narrow black opening and floundered in. We closed it up again after us and got acquainted in the dark, like runaway kids do.

Tm Tommy Sloan,” he said. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Joe Crosby. Are you on the lam too?”

“I’m heading after that traveling circus, you know the one.”

“That’s what I’m doing too.” It didn’t seem strange to us that we should both have the same idea, and meet like that on the same night we’d both carried it out. What would have seemed strange to us was that one of us should some day want to kill the other.

“I heard ’em say their next pitch was going to be over at Gloversville. This’ll take us there. I know because I overheard one of the yardmen telling somebody that. All we gotta do is lie low and keep our eyes open for it when it passes through.” He hugged his knees in the gloom and shared his last soda cracker with me. “I wanna get in that trapeze-act they got. The one with the man and the lady, and the little girl that they pass back and forth to each other. Gee, them high bars,” he sighed wistfully.

I’d had my eye on that too. It had to be that or nothing, don’t ask me why. That’s how trapeze-artists come into being, I guess.

“Think they’ll take us?” he asked.

“Not right away. You gotta learn how. But maybe they’ll let us string along with them and practice up.”

We both gave a gusty sigh of mutual yearning in the shadows of the boxcar. “I ain’t never going to be anything but one of them trapeze-guys,” he said in a low, dreamy voice.

“Me neither,” I echoed.

A thousand and two kids have said that in their time. We were the two that carried it through.

The line of box-cars jolted, started to crawl slowly forward under us, and the world began.

That's how it was.

When they saw they couldn't shoo us away, and when they found out neither one of us had come from enough of a home to make it worthwhile sending us back to it, they took us with them and trained us. Mom Bissell mothered us. They broke us into the act while we were still pliable and our muscles hadn't stiffened yet. That's the only way you can be broken in; at that age.

We were still in the embryo stage when we lost Mom one night. Not in the ring, in bed, the way she'd always said she never wanted to go. We cried as though she'd been our own mother, him and me both.

Pop took us into full partnership as soon as we went out again after that. He had to, to keep the turn going. We were ready for it by then anyway. It was a proud night for us when we first stood up there on the take-off platforms, tall already but skinny in our new tights, alongside Pop and *her,* and then went sailing out into space on our own, not just filler-ins any more. They say about the stage that once you've been an actor, it gets into your blood so, that you never want to be anything else. Tommy and me, we both found out that night that once you've gone sailing out between the bars, light and fast and sure, you never *can* be anything else.

We were a quartet for awhile. Then Pop went to his rest too. He was getting too stiff and brittle, he had to drop out. He'd taught us all he knew. We used to visit him in the boardinghouse where we'd left him, whenever we got back to town. Then after a couple of seasons, there wasn't any reason to go around there any more. That's the way life goes; death beckons someone out of line, but the line keeps closing up.

Two men and a girl now. We didn’t look lanky in our tights any more, we’d grown into them, and we’d come into our prime. We rearranged the turn. We worked on the blindfolded triple somersault ending in an upside-down hand-grip, that Pop had showed us, until we had it cinched. Then we took the net away. The net was just a state of mind anyway. Nothing was going to happen, once we had it down pat.

They both learned the spinning dive, she and Tommy, just so there’d always be an alternate handy in case any little thing went wrong some night, and we wouldn’t have to leave it out of the turn. We couldn’t do that, it was our showpiece. But in our line it’s always good to figure on any little thing going wrong some night, and having a substitute ready. One of you might eat some last week’s fish and get a folding-pain, or have a hand caught in a bus-door.

So they doubled in it between them, Tommy and her. I was always the brake, the anchor. I was a little too heavy to be able to turn fast enough in the air, but the heaviness came in handy for coupling onto and steadying the plunger hurtling down. I was also a good half-head taller than him, and still taller when it came to her, and that meant either of them could take the three complete turns going down in less time than it took me; have more room left to straighten out for the hand-grip at the end, not have to crowd their somersaults to get them all in.

But Tommy was the one usually did it. She just kept warmed up at it, she was like what they call an understudy in the theater. She looked prettier tying the blindfold around him and getting him poised on the edge of the platform. It looked better like that, than for a girl to be risking her neck while a man stood looking on up there doing nothing. Just showmanship. You have to take those things into consideration.

We got good bookings on the strength of it too. Before we knew it, no more dinky little tent-shows folding up under us

in the middle of nowhere. The big time now, our names on three-sheets, winter quarters in Florida, the Garden in New York, and all the rest of the trimmings.

And meanwhile she got lovelier every season. Natalie. The three of us went around together everywhere, always the three of us; her in the middle, with her laughing eyes and dark-gold hair. That was all right while we were still two boys and a girl. But before we noticed it we weren't two boys and a girl any more. We were two men and a woman. Then it wouldn't work any more. She couldn't like the two of us the same, the way she had till now. We wouldn't have wanted her to if she could.

It happened fast when it happened; all at once, like a flash. She came back to the rooming-house and knocked on my door the night she first found out. I think it was in Toledo. He wasn't with her. He must have stayed out to count the stars somewhere.

She said, "I'm sorry, Joe, it's him, not you any more. I found out for sure tonight. You asked me to tell you, so I am."

I didn't say anything, I just looked at her. "Good night, Joe," she said softly. I closed my door again.,

I didn't know right away how bad it was going to be. That was because I'd only seen her by herself as yet, without his being with her. The poison hadn't been added.

We always shared the same room together, wherever we stopped. It was only when he came in by himself, afterward, and I heard the way he was whistling to himself while he undressed in the dark, that I knew how bad it was really going to be. That I knew I was going to kill him, before I'd let him have her.

I could hold it back tonight yet. And tomorrow night. But sometime before long it was going to get away from me; maybe the night-after-tomorrow. I couldn't do anything against it. It had me.

It came on slow but sure. Awfully sure. Every look they gave each other across a midnight lunch-table, every walk they took together, every hidden handclasp down low at their sides that they thought nobody saw, that brought it a little closer.

It was in St. Louis I bought the gun. I knew a guy there in a little pawnshop across the river in East St. Louis, from when we got stranded there with smaller outfits in the past, and he let me have one without asking too many questions.

Then we moved on, and the next pitch we made I finally got him alone one night, just like I wanted to. I'd been watching and waiting for this. She was supposed to meet him at some amusement park on the outskirts of town. She'd had something to attend to right after the performance, and instead of waiting for her, he left a note for her telling her where he'd be when she got back. That was my chance. I saw him slip it under the door of her room, and as soon as he'd gone on his way I tore it up, so she wouldn't know where to go looking for him when she returned. Then I gave him about ten or fifteen minutes head start, and followed him out there myself. With the gun.

The place was in a big woodland park just outside of town. The lighted-up part of it, where they had the pavilion and things, just occupied a small fraction of it. The rest was pitch-black, natural woods. It was a good place for it. It was a swell place for it. I couldn't have picked a better one myself.

I found him sitting there waiting for her, drinking root-beer at a concession. I told him she'd asked me to find him and tell him she wasn't coming, she felt tired and thought she'd go to bed instead. Right away he wanted to go back, but I managed to talk that out of him. I got him to come for a stroll with me, and little by little, without his noticing, I led

him off away from the lights, deeper and deeper under the trees, until we were far enough in so there were no people anywhere around to see it happen. Or even to hear the shot go off.

I was going to claim it was an accident. It would have been easy enough. We'd been fooling with it, and it had gone off and hit him, while we were looking it over. Or we'd been taking potshots at some stray animal we came across, and he stepped out suddenly from behind a tree and got in the line of fire. They could never prove it wasn't that way.

We stopped finally and sprawled out on the ground side by side in a little open grassy patch under the trees. Even now the fool couldn't keep his mouth shut, couldn't keep from talking about her. Telling me all about how wonderful she was—as if I didn't know—and how lucky he was.

"You're not so lucky," I thought to myself, fingering the gun in my pocket.

I left my cigarette in my mouth, and took the gun out and snapped the safety down. Then I reared up on one elbow and pointed it at him, sort of lazy, sort of slow. He'd been looking the other way. He turned his head just then, and when he saw it, instead of getting scared, he asked me in a sort of friendly, drawling way where I got it, and what I was doing carrying it around with me like that.

I just kept it like it was.

Then he laughed and brushed his hand out at it, like at a mosquito, and said, "Don't, Joe. It's liable to go off while you've got it sighted at me like that." And when I still didn't move it, I guess he thought I was trying to play with him. He bunched a fist and pretended to swing it and take a poke at my jaw, but just let it land light.

I couldn't do it, with his face grinning into my own so close. Things kept getting in the way. I saw, instead of his face, the face of a kid of fourteen helping me climb up next to him into a box-car on a siding. I saw the face of my partner, standing next to me on the take-off platform,

sharing our first spotlight together, the night Pop first broke us into the act. Saying to me out of the corner of his mouth, with a half-scared but awfully proud look, “Are you nervous, Joe?

Boy, my knees are knocking together like triphammers!” I couldn’t do it.

The thing tipped over of its own weight. I jarred to my feet all of a sudden and grunted, “I’m getting out of here, I’m going back!” and I started to walk away from there fast.

He stayed where he was a minute, overcome by surprise. Then he jumped up and tried to come after me like a fool. He didn’t realize how lucky he’d already been once tonight, what a chance he was still taking now. He hollered after me, “What’s the matter, Joe? What’s your rush? Wait a minute and I’ll come with you.”

I turned on him and warned him back in a tight, choked voice. “Keep back! Don’t walk next to me, understand? Don’t walk next to me *until I get out of here!”*

He dropped behind and just stood there looking after me, scratching his head like he couldn’t figure out what got into me. I walked away fast. Boy, how fast I walked away from him! I threw the gun into a little lake I passed along the way out.

She was standing waiting on the rooming-house stairs in her wrapper when I got back. She was standing there waiting halfway down from the floor her room was on, almost as if she’d sensed something was wrong, as if she’d had a feeling something had nearly happened tonight.

Women are funny that way. She must have been standing there like that for a half an hour or more when I came in. Her face was kind of white too.

It got even whiter, when she saw that it was me and not him.

“Joe?” She said his name in a whisper. “He always leaves me a note when he goes off anyplace—”

“I was with him just now,” I said. “He’s all right.”

I passed by her and went on the rest of the way up without saying anything more. And she looked at me, I could feel her looking. All the way up she looked at me from where she was. That's how I think she knew. But maybe I'm wrong.

They got married a week later. Maybe that hurried it up. Maybe not. Maybe she didn't really guess anything. I know he didn't. We were playing a split week in one of the big upstate cities. They were botli late for the Saturday matinee. I got made up and ready, and there was still no sign of either one of them. Our turn didn't come until later, but we'd never missed a grand opening march yet. I went out by the runway leading into the arena, and took my place in the line-up without them. I kept turning my head and looking for them. I knew by now what the reason was.

At the very last minute, all of a sudden there was a lot of shoving and shifting-aside behind me, and the two of them showed up, working their way through the other performers and all out of breath. The seams of his Hunks were all crooked from pulling them on so fast, and he hadn't had time to put any grease on. But he didn't need it. His face was all lit up. I looked down at her hand and I saw the ring on it.

The band blared up and the three of us went on out.

It was coming now sure. The hate choking in my chest and the liquid fire running through my veins told me that I knew this was the last performance I could risk. If I went through any more, it would happen right in the act, and I didn't want that.

I beat it away fast after that show, went off by myself away from the two of them. I went into some eating-place just out of habit, sat staring at a cup of coffee that I didn't touch. Then at my usual time for starting back, I got up and walked outside again, still just out of habit. But when I got out on the street, I turned and walked the other way, away from the big auditorium we were using.

I knew I had to stay out of the night performance. I knew what would happen if I went back for it. I was afraid of being in it with Tommy. I knew my only safety lay in missing it.

It was easy at first, while there was lots of time. I roamed around for awhile. Finally I came to a little park and sat down on a bench. But as the time for getting back started to tighten up on me, it began to get harder and harder, as though an invisible current had set in, trying to pull me back. I could *feel* it, I tell you, feel the pull of it, like when you're in water and an undertow catches you up.

You see, I'd never missed a show yet. It was my food, my drink, my breath.

I tried to hang onto the park-bench I was on, I actually gripped it with both hands along the edges. I kept talking to myself inside, I kept warning myself: "Stay where you are, now. Stay out of the act, now. You know what's going to happen if you don't! Keep the act clean, at least."

It wouldn't work. I tried not to look at my watch, but there was a big clock there facing the park to tell me anyhow. Eight minutes to showtime. You can still make it at an easy walk, from out here where you are. Five minutes. You can still make it, but you'll have to hurry a little now. Four minutes. Three. You ought to have your shirt off already.

I couldn't hold out. I got to my feet, like I was being dragged by the scruff of the neck. First I still tried to go the other way, away from the auditorium. I couldn't do that either. My feet turned around under me and started me back the right way. They were a performer's feet, a circus-man's feet. You couldn't tell them what to do.

First I was walking slow, still trying to hold out, still trying to fight against it. Then faster, faster all the time—until suddenly I was running like a streak, to make up for lost time. And presto, there I was, back in the dressing-room again, all winded and floundering into my chair.

It’s an awful feeling, to know what you’re going to do if you come back to a place, and yet not be able to stay away.

He was sitting there beside me, finishing up. I didn’t look at him.

He didn’t say a word to me about their getting married that afternoon; I guess they’d decided to keep it to themselves for awhile. All he did say was, “Where’d you disappear to? I wanted to blow you to a swell steak dinner tonight. Nat and me, we both looked high and low for you.” So that told me, just the same as if he had.

I sat there in my undershirt; that was as far as I was able to get. I hung onto the edge of the dressing-table hard, the way I had that bench in the park, to try to fight it down. I hung on until my knuckles showed white. I was afraid to be in there with him alone like this. There were so many sharp things around loose. And he had that happiness still shining all over his face, almost like phosphorus.

He got up to make it decent for me. I said, “Leave the door open.”

“There’s women out there.” “Leave it open, I tell you! I can go over in the corner. I can hardly breathe in here.” I caught hold of my own throat.

He was so dumb. God, how dumb a guy is when he trusts you! “Yeah, it is kind of stuffy,” he agreed, with easy-going unconcern. Nothing could have needled him tonight. It was his wedding-night. It was also his—I was in my tights now, but I’d stopped again, I couldn’t go ahead. I kept pleading to myself, “Wait till after the show, if you’ve got to get him. *But don’t do it in the act.* Don’t go out there with him now, or you’re going to do it right in the act!” He was standing looking over at me from the doorway now, from the passageway outside. He saw me sitting there without moving. He said, “What’s the matter?”

I said, “I’m not coming out.” He came in again and stood behind my chair and tried to reason it out with me. He put

his hand on the back of my chair. Luckily he didn't put it on me, on my shoulder or anything, or

I think it would have happened right then.

I didn't hear most of what he said. I was looking at something in the glass. I seemed to see a death's head in the glass, where our two faces were, his and mine. I'm not kidding, I actually saw it there—some trick of the lighting and shadows, I guess. It came on slow, until I could see the deep, greenish holes where the eye-sockets were, and the grinning rows of teeth, and the shiny white dome of the skull. I couldn't see whose face it covered most, his or mine. Then it faded away, slow, again.

He couldn't do anything with me, and the time was getting shorter. He went outside finally and I heard him whispering to someone down the line. I knew what it was; he was putting her up to work on me, to see if she'd have any better luck. I'd been afraid of that. She was the only one that could, and I didn't want her to try.

I got up quick to try and close the door, but she was already standing there before I could make it. She looked so beautiful it hurt. But she had the wrong hand out, against the edge of the door. The one with the ring on it. His ring.

She said, "Is it something to do with the act, Joe?"

I said, "No, it's nothing to do with the act."

She said, "Then if it's something outside the act, keep it outside the act. This is the act, Joe. If there's one thing I've got no use for, it's a guy that'll let the act down."

I had one last plea left in me. Only one, and then no more. I made it. I made it good and strong too. My whole voice shook. I said, *"Don't* ask me to go out there tonight, will you, Nat? You run through it with him. Do what you can. Fake the triple plays. Only, *don't* ask me to go out there tonight."

She reached out and touched the side of my face, kind of soft. I wish she hadn't. Just as his touch would have meant

death, hers meant—“We’ll be waiting for you over by the entrance,” she said. “There goes the fanfare.” The doorway was empty.

I grabbed up my brush and gave a last lick at my hair. My hand stabbed down at the little tube of fixative I sometimes used to shine it up a little. It was a petroleum-jelly base, with a little other stuff added. It was pretty well used up, folded over to within an inch or two of the cap. My hand didn’t break motion. It swept it up and stuck it inside the waistband of my trunks. Then I swung around and out, and down the dressing-room alley after her, to take my place in the show.

It went off like clockwork, the turn, I mean. It always did, it was such second nature to us by now. The precision-climb up the ladders to the two little take-off platforms, me on one side of the ring, the two of them over on the other. We even had that timed to a split-second, so that the two halves of us always got up to the top at the same instant, not unevenly. Then the steadying of the spots on us, the throwing off of the capes, the dramatic flourishes with the hands. And then into the business.

We mixed it up for awhile, and though it might have seemed breakneck to them down below, it was just warm-up stuff to us. “Treading air” from bar to bar, exchanging bars simultaneously so that we passed each other on the fly, turning right-about-face on the wing in midair, from one grip to the next. All that. We’d had that kind of stuff down pat when we were sixteen already. Pop had trained it into us. It was so automatic I could even think while I was doing it. I mean about other things. I didn’t tonight; I didn’t want to.

I did a specialty, and she did one, and Tommy did a lesser one of his own; not the flash-finish yet. Then the three of us

worked together in one. The applause sounded like it always did, coming up from way down below: like giant feet treading on gravel. And that brought us up to the break.

We always broke the turn in the middle, and took a breather. We could have run right through it to the end without stopping, without getting too winded, but that was showmanship again. It made it seem like harder work to the audience if we knocked off a minute and passed the cloth around, while the announcer built up what was coming next over the amplifier below.

We were up to the show-piece at the end now. That was Tommy's. His blindfold dive down to me, waiting up-side-down for him way down below on the middle trapeze. Three complete turns in the air before he reached me. I knew that was when I was going to get him.

We passed the cloth around, lolling on our perches. I got it from him, and I always sent it on over to her after I was through with it. We never changed that. It doesn't pay to vary anything in a precision-act, not even the trimmings, like that was.

While I was twirling it around in my hands, I stuck a finger to my waistband and the tube came up hidden behind the flourishing cloth. I got the cap off with my nail, and pinched, and a coil of it spurted out across my palm. It lay there frozen, like a little twinkling snake. It *was* a snake; a snake whose bite was death. I got the empty tube back into my waistband. I could get rid of it easy enough afterwards. And then, still under cover of the flirting cloth, I greased my wrists up good with it. I saturated the tape on each one, until they were as slippery as a pair of eels. That was where he was going to hang onto me, by the wrists.

It left a sort of cool feeling on my hands, like it always did when I used it on my hair. And that was all. I sent the cloth on to her, and that finished its rounds.

I wasn't in any danger, it didn't matter about me, I used my leg-muscles to hang on by. I'd stay up. Tommy was the

one.

The spiel was through now. They lowered my trap into position, halfway down, far below the others, to give Tommy room enough for three spins. She traveled the bars over to his side and grounded on the platform there, to stand behind him, ready the blindfold, and poise him on the brink.

I turned over lazily on the bar, hung head-down by the crevices of my legs, flexed my arms full-length below me a couple of times, and waited.

He got the spotlight and the play. It was his stunt. It was also his finish.

A big hush fell. This always got them, every time. Well, it should have, it was no phoney.

I don't know if she found out, or if something really did go wrong up there. I'll never know.

Maybe there was something about the feel of the cloth when she got it back from me. Or maybe she got a whiff of a scent that it had left behind, and remembered having noticed it before that on my hair. Or maybe it was just a guess, her instinct. Like that night in St. Louis, on the stairs.

If she did find out, it must have been hell for her. A hell I'd never wished for her. And only seconds in which to know what to do. The spotlight blazing on them both, for a thousand eyes to see. The drums already beginning to roll. She couldn't grab him and hold him back, we'd have been booed out of the ring and finished in circus-business.

But when you love a guy, I suppose there's always a way out.

But maybe it had nothing to do with her at all; maybe it really was a mishap. They'd been married today and maybe they were both a little excited. Or maybe it was just his lucky star.

I missed seeing it at the actual instant it occurred. I heard the gasp go up, and the drums falter. My head was upside-down, and by the time I'd bent my neck to look, his body was already dipping lopsidedly into thin air, off the side of the platform, like when you step into a hole over your head that you're not expecting, He had one hand on the guy-rope, that was all that saved him. Anything might have caused it; an accidental nudge of her elbow, or maybe too much of his heel had gone offside at the rim of the platform.

A great shuddering moan of terror, like wind through the trees, came soughing up from below. He went spiralling down, in a sickening, dizzy corkscrew, all the way to the bottom. *But he never let go of the rope.* That one-hand hold on it he crushed tight into a life-and-death grip that nothing could have pried open. And the rope came searing steadily up through this, taking all the skin with it, I suppose, but at least breaking the velocity of his fall.

He landed in a huddle at the bottom. But then he picked himself right up, before anyone could get over to him. So he was evidently all right, nothing broken. You could tell by the way he stood there, though, head low, hand held tightly pressed between his thighs, that he was in stiff pain, couldn't go ahead. Probably his hand was raw.

She never came down off the platform. She was a natural-born trouper if there ever was one. Before they'd even finished helping him out of the ring, she must have passed some signal that I missed seeing, both to the announcer below and the electrician's box way up high in the flies. Suddenly the spotlight had blazed out on her again, brighter than ever, the announcer was booming out that the event would continue and she was adjusting the blind to her eyes.

So I guess she didn't know, after all, and it was just a star, not her.

There was a split-second in which she signalled me to drop my head and begin the count, with her eyes still clear, then before I could get my own maddened message back—to stop, not to go ahead—the bandage had dropped over her eyes and I was cut off from her.

The drums began their growling thunder. My voice couldn't reach her now.

There was no way to stop those drums. No way but one.

I opened my left leg a little, and I slipped down a notch on that side. I opened my right a little, and I dipped down a little on that side. They couldn't see it yet, nobody but me.

My left leg was starting to slip down by itself now, without my having to open it any more. Now my right was too. The bar was coming free. It was out. I heard the roar from hundreds of throats come shooting up past me, and I knew that was death,

* * *

He looked so jaunty, he looked so husky, he looked so dead.

There was a girl there, standing looking at him. Just standing looking at him, as though she'd never get through. There was a young fellow standing beside her with his arm around her, looking at her instead. There was a detective there, jotting something in a notebook. He was all through now. He'd found out all anyone could tell him. Anyone living.

This is what he jotted:

Name: Crosby, Joseph.

Age: Twenty-five.

Profession: Trapeze artist.

Cause of death: Accidental fall while engaged in giving a performance.

MIND OVER MURDER

Two women were sitting having tea together in a crowded fashionable restaurant. All about them were others like them, that throng such places at that hour in the afternoon, while the men are for the most part busy at work in their offices. There was not a vacant table in the entire establishment, yet there was scarcely a man to be seen in the room. The vivacious hum of dozens of feminine conversations going on at once all over the place filled the air.

Only the beige complexions of the pert little waitresses darting busily about from table to table, the summery hued dresses of the customers themselves, and a certain languorous warmth in the air, betrayed the fact that this was on a tropical island dependency of the United States and not some smart restaurant along Fifth Avenue or Michigan Boulevard. Otherwise it would have been impossible to tell the difference, at least indoors here.

There was nothing to distinguish the two women from any of the others about them. They were smartly dressed, both reasonably pretty, both of approximately the same age: in their late twenties, or at the very most, their early thirties. One was a comely blonde; the other, the smaller of the two, a fair-skinned brunette. The blonde wore a wedding-band upon her finger. The brunette lacked one. There was absolutely nothing about them to set them apart

from all the other women who gather at that hour, in just such places, all over the world, both north and south.

Their conversation, it could be surmised, would be the same as that of all the others; small-talk about the latest styles in hats, about clothes, about ways of doing the hair, spiced with an occasional bit of gossip or scandal. The blonde, Pauline Baron, had been doing most of the talking for some little time past. The brunette, Marie Stewart, had been listening, with an occasional nod of understanding or brief comment of accord such as one gives to one's friends.

Both were entirely matter-of-fact, casual, their attitudes one of graceful relaxation. A cigarette was held between Marie Stewart's shapely fingers. Pauline Baron would occasionally raise her teacup to her lips and take a dainty sip.

The topic of conversation could not possibly have been anything more important than a discussion of what was a good way to stop runs in silk stockings or a recital of one's latest shopping adventures and the bargains one had seen.

Yet if one had stepped closer to the little table, close enough to overhear—

Pauline had stopped talking just then. A brief silence fell, as she concluded whatever her recital had been. Marie delicately tapped ash from her cigarette with one tapered nail. "Then why don't you kill him, if you hate him so greatly, and find living with him so unbearable, and yet he won't let you get away from him?" she suggested, without altering the even tenor of her voice. "Have you ever thought of that?"

Pauline looked at her as though uncertain whether to take her seriously or not. "Oh, many times," she admitted ruefully. But what good does that do? That's as far as it goes —"

Marie nodded understandingly. "Probably everyone has thought of things like that at one time or another. I know I

often have myself. Not with anyone in particular in mind; just theoretically, you know."

Pauline sighed with a hint of regret. "What's the good of joking about it? Even if I were serious, I—I'd never have the nerve. Wives that kill their husbands are arrested and tried, and have to go through all that notoriety, it gets in all the papers—"

Marie shrugged. "That's if they're foolish enough to get caught."

"You're always caught when you do a thing like that."

"That's if you do it in the usual foolish way," Marie said placidly. She took another sip of tea, lit another cigarette. "People always think of violent methods like guns and knives, or even poisons. It's so glaring, naturally they're found out. There are other ways. Now, if I were going to rid myself of anyone, if I wanted to kill someone—" She interrupted herself to ask: "I'm not shocking you, am I?"

"Of course not. We know each other so well, why should we be reticent with one another? I wouldn't discuss this with anyone else, of course—"

"Exactly. It's just theoretical, anyway." Marie poised her cigarette with charming detachment back toward her own shoulder. "The thing to do is find the person's own weak point or weakest point, and turn that against him. This business of shooting someone or knifing them, that's for cutthroats. But a really clever person can commit a murder, and never be detected, if they only use their wits."

Pauline eyed her friend questioningly, lashes upraised. "I'm not sure I know what you mean by weak point."

"Well, let's go at it in this way. Let's take your husband for a model, shall we? What is it that he's most afraid of?"

Pauline's face became slightly downcast. "He's not afraid of anything. He's unusually courageous, as a matter of fact."

"Everyone is afraid of some one thing, no matter how courageous they are in everything else," Marie insisted. "You live with him, you should know if anyone does."

Pauline pondered. “Nothing that I know of. He’s unusually aggressive.”

“There was never a human being yet who didn’t have one thing he dreaded more than others. What is his: think. Fire? Water? Falling from a great height?”

Pauline continued to shake her head reflectively. “I can’t think of anything, unless—Well, there was an incident once—oh, it was nothing to speak of—but that might be it. I think he has a mortal fear of snakes.”

“Most people have an aversion toward them.”

“This seemed to be deeper than just that.”

“Good, that’s what we’d want, then. Tell it to me.”

“We were in a newsreel theatre one night. This was up in New York, before we came down here. A short ‘clip’ was flashed on the screen, taken at some snake farm. It showed them writhing on the ground. Just a brief shot, really; it hardly lasted any time. Nobody else in the audience turned a hair. I noticed he got up suddenly and left his seat. I thought simply he was on his way back to the washroom. But before he could take more than a step or two up the aisle, the scene was already over, it was so brief. He seemed to change his mind; he turned around and came back and sat down again. I noticed him mopping his forehead, though. Afterwards when we got home I asked him what had made him do that, and he admitted he had a horror of snakes, said he couldn’t stand the sight of them. He didn’t tell me what had caused it, and I didn’t ask him; in fact we never spoke of it again from that time on.”

“They are quite common down here,” Marie said thoughtfully. “You don’t see them in town where we are, of course, but the canefields outside are loaded with them.” She tilted her nose, let a smoke-tendril curl from her shapely nostrils without adding breath-pressure to it. “I know an old native woman, sort of a witch-doctor, who catches them by the bushel. Uses them in her cures and remedies, or something.” She let her voice trail off.

Pauline looked down, as though a spot on the tablecloth hypnotized her; with that sort of a fixed stare.

Marie was speaking again. “Carrying out this hypothetical example we’re discussing, that would be the point of attack, then. The Achilles heel. This morbid dream, this phobia, of snakes. If, for instance, he were to think there were one at large, in the house with him—”

“How could he be made to think that? By simply being told that, you mean?”

“That would be second-hand, wouldn’t it? That wouldn’t do. You see, this would be a death by the imagination. And though the imagination feeds on phantoms, it needs a premise in reality to begin with. Then it can go on from there under its own power. No, he would have to be shown one was in the house with him. Then let his imagination go on from there.”

“I still don’t—”

Marie sighed with the tolerance of a teacher toward a disciple. “The sight of the snake, according to our calculations, should bring on a fright-spasm, should it not?”

“Yes, but how would that cause death?”

“It wouldn’t, if allowed to evaporate again. But if prolonged long enough without respite, a thing like that could very easily lead to death. Would, I’m sure.”

“But how could it be prolonged? Wouldn’t the first thing he’d do be to take a stick or gun and go after it, get rid of it?”

Marie lidded her eyes briefly in well-bred impatience. “You must construct the thing so that he doesn’t. You are not being constructive about it. I have given you the opening wedge, the point of attack, but you must construct from there. If you leave him his freedom of action, of course he chases it out, or runs away from it himself; it becomes simply a very bad fright, quickly over. But if you constrict his freedom of action, so that he is held powerless, so that the fright is kept at boiling-point for God knows how long,

then it becomes death, death through the imagination. Do you see what I mean?”

The blond Pauline, the wife of Donald Baron, didn’t speak. She bit inscrutably at the far corner of one fingernail.

“Are there any solid, substantial doors in your house?” Marie purred.

“All of them are. They’re made of this native mahogany, inches thick. It would take an axe to cut through them.”

Marie idly unlidded the teapot, looked in to see if there were any more of it, lidded it again. “Is there a closet in your house that’s dark, that has no light inside it?”

“There’s one under the stairs. It’s the size of a small room, really. It takes up the whole base of the staircase.”

“No one could break out of it, you are sure?”

“No one could, I am sure. Not the strongest man alive.”

“If our theoretical victim should become trapped in that place, then. The imagination is given the phantom fact to feed on that the snake is in there with him. But his freedom of movement is taken away; he can neither get away from it, nor find it to kill him. He is held in a straitjacket of terror. Fright becomes frenzy; frenzy, paroxysm; paroxysm, death. No human being could stand that. Within thirty minutes, forty at the most, he would be dead, untouched by human hand. They could examine him exhaustively afterwards, and what is there to say? Death by the imagination leaves no traces.” She doused her cigarette neatly within her teacup. “There’s your murder—for which no afterprice of punishment is paid.”

Pauline shook her head as though bedazzled. “It doesn’t seem like murder at all, does it?” she marveled.

“Murder is such an elastic term, isn’t it?”

“Wouldn’t his screams, perhaps, be heard outside?”

“Not if there is a radio close by; it could be tuned on rather loud.”

“But he would be found afterward in the closet, and questions—”

“The person committing it could very easily remove him, before investigation got underway.”

Pauline Baron had but one more question to ask, in this theoretical discussion that had proved so absorbing. “But would someone actually die, in that way? I mean, if they survived, it would be worse than if no attempt had been made—”

“Within forty minutes, I guarantee you, he will be dead of acute terror. The heart can stand just so much, and no more.”

A silence fell.

Presently she said, “There is just one possible obstacle. Very few would be strong enough to carry it out. It would be unimaginably cruel, of course. One of the cruelest deaths that have ever taken place. I’m not sure anyone’s hate would be strong enough to inflict that on another human being—”

“The cruelty would come from himself, not the other person. If the snake is not really in there with him at all. There is another kind of cruelty, that goes on for years and years; it doesn’t kill you, but it’s just as bad. As you said, this would be a death of the imagination. And this other kind of cruelty, too, is of the imagination. So it would be a fitting repayment in kind.”

Marie began to draw on a pair of gossamer mesh gloves, with that precision which women habitually bring to the act; slowly stroking downward along each finger, one by one, until not a suggestion of a wrinkle remained. This was a token not of immediate but of eventual departure. “What strange byways one’s conversations can stray into, can’t they?” she murmured apologetically. “Anybody overhearing us just now would have taken us seriously, would have thought we really meant it, wouldn’t they?”

“Wouldn’t they?” echoed Pauline Baron with a deprecating little laugh. She gathered up her own paraphernalia of tableoccupancy, touched a small

powderpuff twice to the tip of her nose and once to the point of her chin. “I really must be going,” she sighed. “What did you say this native woman’s name was?”

“I didn’t say. But I think they call her Mama Fernanda,” Marie drawled negligently. “I only know of her through my maid. You know how they are. You follow the road to the country club, oh, for quite a distance out. And then at one place, there’s a little foot-trail that strikes off from there. Or so I’ve heard my maid say. She has a hut along there someplace. They all go to her for this and that, I understand. She’s quite a specialist in extracting the beneficient qualities from the, er, wild life about her. Toads and frogs and lizards, and, er, snakes.” She was so completely uninterested that she kept looking about her detachedly while she spoke. “She grinds their bones and compounds native cureaIls. Makes charms out of their skins. Milks them and even makes use of their venom in certain instances. Or so my maid tells me.” For a moment her eyes looked piercingly into her friend’s. “My maid’s name is Martelita,” she added quite inconsequentially. Then dropped them again and looked down at her wrist, to make sure she had fastened the catch of one glove.

They shifted their chairs to rise from the table. The conversation was at an end.

“I’ll leave the tip, Marie,” Pauline said. “It’s been very—interesting having tea with you.”

They made their way across the crowded place toward the entrance, moving side by side with leisurely grace. Two smartlydressed women, no different from the many others around them who sat chattering frivolously of hats and clothes and the latest styles in hairdressing.

The oncoming beams of a pair of headlights flowed like quicksilver along the narrow, rutted dirt trail, and the car

behind them pushed aside giant banana-leaves with a hissing sound. A hut of sun-baked mud bricks, thatched with palm fronds, suddenly sprang upright into the silvery wash, as though it had been flat a moment before. A figure already stood in the opening, attracted by the oncoming brilliance, eyes slitted to peer into it under the sheltering shade of one hand. The figure of a gnarled woman with seamed coffee-colored skin, wisps of white hair escaping from under the shawl hooded closely about her head.

The car stopped with a slurring of brakes. The door opened and its occupant stepped down to the ground. She wore a “garden-party” hat with a large, floppy brim which bent downward in front to hide her entire face except for her mouth and the point of her chin. Her arms and throat, however, were milky white.

“The senora has lost her way?” the figure in the doorway croaked. “The country club is on the other road, the one that goes straight on out.”

The arrival reached into the car and the headlight-beams suddenly dimmed, died out. They were left alone in the starlit darkness. “I do not look for the country club,” she said gropingly. “Ido not speak very well. Can you understand me?”

“Speak. Fernanda will understand,” the old woman said encouragingly.

“Martelita sent me. She spoke of you to me. You know Martelita?”

For a moment the crone looked puzzled. Then suddenly she nodded. “Ah, yes. The one who works for the lady from over the sea, in the town.” She came forward helpfully. “The senora is sick?”

“No, I want to borrow something from you. How do you say it? I want you lend me something you have.”

The old woman gestured with flowing arms. “My poor hut is yours.” She opened the wattled door, motioned her into the darkness after her. The visitor, however, remained at

the threshold. A twig was thrust into live embers glowing in a crude fireplace fashioned of flat stones on the floor. When it had kindled she carried it to a clay vessel filled with oil, from which a wick protruded; lit this. A wan, flickering light filled the interior from this point on. The face of the caller remained shadowed under the capacious, downturned brim.

"What is it the senora asks me to give her?"

"One of those things that go like this on the ground." One white wrist made a flurried writhing motion.

The old woman's jet-black eyes sparkled understandingly. "You want my remedy, that is made from them?"

"No, no, alive."

This time there was a pause, brief but eloquent. There was rebuke implicit in it, somehow.

Finally the old woman spoke again. "What does the senora want with such a thing?"

The wrists were busy dipping into a tasselled draw-bag. Silver coins clinked musically. "In my house are many small things. Mice, bugs that crawl, grasshoppers. For just one night or two I want it, to eat them up. Then I will bring it back to you. It must be the kind that is not dangerous, you understand?" She pinched the back of her own hand, then swept her fingers past the place to show it was not serious. "Not dangerous. The bite does not kill."

The old woman nodded alertly. "No poison, I understand. Harmless. No poison."

The old woman removed a quantity of sacking spread out in one corner of the hut. A number of clay jars and jugs of varying sizes were revealed, of the kind used for carrying water from wells. A peculiar dank odor of musk rose into the air.

The woman in the doorway took a slight step backward.

The old woman held the crude lamp over the mouth of one, peered into it. Then the next. At the third, she stopped, thrust a forked stick inside.

The visitor turned her head aside for a moment, as though overcome by unconquerable repugnance. When she had looked back again, the old woman had taken down a flat straw basket that hung from the wall, was dropping something into it from the end of the stick. The basket was fairly wide in diameter but exceedingly shallow, not more than five or six inches in depth. It was lined with flat, dark leaves of some kind.

She came toward the woman with it, holding it with the top left off. The woman's chest began to rise and fall more rapidly, but she held her ground. Within was coiled a glistening silken thing like a polished rubber tube, one end moving a little. Very little.

The caller in the garden hat craned her neck gingerly. "So small? And it doesn't look very—Not a bigger one, perhaps? One that looks more frightening?"

The old hag shrugged shrewdly. "The senora wants the pests eaten, not just frightened, I thought." She went back to the row of water-jars, emptied the basket gently into the mouth of one, thrust the forked stick into still another.

She brought the basket back. An ugly, gray huddle of rags lay in it, almost feathery in its scaliness. Two small horns protruded from one end. The underside was creamy-yellow.

The woman grimaced at the hideous sight, warded up one hand toward her eyes. "It has no poison, you are sure?" she faltered.

"No poison. Look, I will show you—" The old woman deliberately extended her gnarled, scrawny arm above the basket, while she shook it slightly with her other hand, to rouse its occupant.

The purchaser-to-be quickly stopped her, horrified. "No, no—for heaven's sake, don't! I don't want to see—"

The old woman fitted the flat lid over the basket. A leaf or two protruded around the edges, giving it the appearance of containing fruit or some such delicacy.

"He is a new one," she murmured fondly. "I only caught him a few days ago. He is a little sleepy now from eating. When he gets hungry he will wake up. When he wakes up he is quick and fast." She held the basket toward her flatly, with both hands.

The woman in the doorway instinctively recoiled.

"The senora wants me to carry it outside for her?"

"No, I—I'll train myself not to be afraid. Just stand there with it a minute, like that. Give me time to get up my courage."

She thrust out her hands, finally, a little shakily, and placed them on the rim of the basket. The coffee-colored ones withdrew. The transfer was effected.

The new owner took a deep breath.

"Nothing to be afraid of," the old woman said reassuringly. "Just hold it even, like that, so it doesn't spill out."

"When I want to pick it up, how do I—Must I use my hand?"

"No, a stick. Look, like this." Mama Fernanda showed her. "Flat on the ground, so. Underneath it. But always in the middle, not too far at one end, not too far at the other. Then lift, straight. It curls itself around as it goes up. Or else it hangs straight."

"Here. Here is some money. Is that enough?"

"Oh, that is too much!"

"Take it anyway." The woman in the floppy hat moved carefully back to the car, holding the basket out before her. She placed it on the outside seat, went around to the opposite side and got in beside it. The headlight-glare splashed up again, bleaching the scene.

The old woman stood once more in the doorway of her hut, shading her eyes against it. "Bring it back when the

mice are gone," she called out as the car began to move off backwards down the dirt lane.

A note of harsh, satiric laughter sounded from the obscured driver's seat, behind the flaming head-lamps. "I'll bring it back when the mice are gone!"

There were candles on the table, and Mr. and Mrs. Donald Baron sat at dinner. In the candlelight their faces were like two parchment masks against the shadowy background of the walls. Eyeless masks, with the eyelids permanently lowered against the sight of one another. Under each a V-shaped shield of white peered out; in her case, the low decolletage of her dress; in his, the bosom of his dinner-shirt. Other than that, their forms above the table-line were hidden against the darkness, for both wore black.

There was complete silence at the table, save for the occasional whispered tread of the little maid who brought in or removed some dish or other. Neither spoke. Neither had spoken. Neither would speak. There is nothing more terrible than the stony silence of hatred.

He had a book open at his elbow, was reading in the uncertain light while he ate, in an attempt to forget her presence opposite him. She was silently fluttering the fingers of one hand against the table-edge, over and over.

He looked up from the book finally, shot a look of impatience over. Not at her, simply at the restless hand. She dropped it to her lap and it lay still, like something dead. He looked down again, his forehead ridged with annoyance.

She made a slight motion with her hand, and the little serving girl slipped out of the room, left them. He lit a cigarette, turned a page. She was worrying her wedding-ring now, but down below the table where he could not see it. Twisting it around on her finger, endlessly, as though it were something that she were screwing off.

Suddenly she rose, moved away from the table, left the room by the same door the maid had just taken. She went into the kitchen, cheerful and bright by comparison with the torture-chamber she had just quitted. The maid and the fat cook had been whispering together. They jumped apart as she appeared.

“Something was wrong with the dinner, senora?” the cook asked anxiously.

“No. What is your night for going out?”

“Wednesdays.”

“I change it. Go tonight. You too, Pepita. Go at once, both of you.”

They were both overwhelmed by this sudden generosity. “Thank you, senora, thank you.”

“Never mind the sweet. We have finished.”

She reentered the pall-like dining-room again. He shifted the other way in his chair as she did so, cradling the book on one arm now, so that his back, or at least one shoulder, was turned toward her.

Her eyes sparked briefly, lidded themselves again. “Does it annoy you even if I come into the same room with you?” she murmured with leashed ferocity.

He didn’t look up at her, as though he hadn’t heard. “Everything about you annoys me,” he answered, in an equally quiet voice to hers. “Even to look at you annoys me.”

“Then why don’t you let me go? Why do you keep me chained to you? Why must you torture me like this, day after day, week after week?”

“The door is open. I have told you many times, go. You are the one who stays.”

“You know I can’t just walk out into the streets here. I am thousands of miles from home. I have no money of my own to get back.”

“You will have to stay, then. I stick to my bargains, even the bad ones. I will not be a party to breaking up my own

marriage.”

“You don’t love me—”

“I know, but I found that out too late.”

“For the last time, let me go. I will never ask you this again. Donald, while there is still ti—” She stopped suddenly, went on: “Donald, before something happens, let me go.”

He traced a line he was reading with the point of his finger, as though he only half-heard her. “Must you talk to me? I can’t stand the sound of your voice.”

She rose from the table, moved across the room to a massive carved mahogany sideboard, with a mirror above it. She stood there for a moment, with her back to him, watching him in the mirror. He continued to read, turned full-back to her now.

She removed a small key from the bodice of her dress, unlocked the lower section of the sideboard, opened one of the thick slabs. Within were several fat-bellied bottles of imported cordials that they habitually kept locked-away from the servants. She continued to watch him in the mirror. He went on reading, head inclined.

She relocked the slab, turned away. A flat circular straw-plaited basket stood on top of the sideboard now.

She reseated herself at the table, put a cigarette to her lips, drew one of the candles over toward her to light it by. The hand that held it shook a little. A shadow fell across his face for a moment as she did so, then cleared again as she replaced the candle with the others.

He looked up, annoyed at the momentary eclipse.

“I beg your pardon,” she breathed coldly.

Silence fell between them. Neither one moved after that. The only signs of life in the entire room were three: the occasional turning of a page, the unraveling thread of smoke that rose from her neglected, waiting cigarette, and from time to time, a flicker from the candle-flames

A quarter of an hour went by.

He looked up at last and glanced toward the kitchen-door, as though belatedly noting it had not opened for some time past.

“I want some fruit,” he said curtly. “Where is the maid?”

“She has gone.”

“I thought she went on Wednesdays.”

“She took tonight instead. One of her relatives is sick. She asked me if she could, and I told her yes.” She feigned a motion to rise. “I will get you some fruit.”

“I don’t care to have you do anything for me. I will get it myself.” He got up and went toward the sideboard in the gloom.

He placed his hand on the lid of the basket.

She let the cigarette fall from between her fingers, flattened both her own hands against the edge of the table. Otherwise she did not move.

He turned away and came back again. Picked up one of the candles and returned to the sideboard a second time.

“What is in this basket? It looks as though it might have some in it.”

“I don’t know what that is. One of the servants must have brought it in and left it there by mistake. Something they wanted to take home with them, maybe, and forgot.”

He held the candle aloft, raised the lid with his other hand.

The flame of the candle streaked downward through the air like a small comet, went out on the floor. He gave a scream like the whinny of a horse. The lid of the basket settled back into place again as his hand flew off it. He staggered backward, until the edge of the table against his back had brought him up short.

“There is a snake in there!” he said hoarsely.

“You must be mistaken,” she said calmly. “The shadow over there fooled you. How could there—?”

He had rolled around forward against the table, was leaning heavily on it with both hands, breathing with

difficulty.

“I saw it with my own eyes! It opened its mouth and reared at me as I—”

He was holding his stomach now with one hand, covering his eyes with the other. “I—I can’t help it—they do something to me—” he coughed.

“Pull yourself together. You are ill.”

She was at the sideboard now in turn. There was the quick click of a key. He was too overcome by nervous shock to watch her. She gave the hinged kitchen-door a quick push with the flat of her hand that set it swinging lightly to and fro, as though she had just passed quickly in and out again.

“It’s gone. Look. See for yourself. It’s not there. I took it away.”

“When I was a kid, one got into my bed,” he panted. “I knew enough not to move, and I lay there all night long with it twined around my leg, waiting for them to come in to me the next morning. They managed to kill it without my being bitten, but the experience scarred my mind for life—”

“It’s gone,” she murmured again.

“I’m going upstairs and lie down. For God’s sake, see that all the screen doors are closed tight. It may—it may come back in again in some way.” He staggered out toward the stairs, as unsteady as a drunk. “I won’t get over this for nights now. It’s the first one I’ve ever been that close to since the first time it happened. My hand was inches away, I could almost feel the current of its breath against my thumb —”

She watched him go up the stairs. How right she was, she thought remorselessly. How utterly right!

She heard him being sick upstairs. Then presently the sound of his shoes dropping off, and the creak of his bed-frame as he threw himself down upon it.

She waited a long while before doing anything. There was so much time, the night was so long. She went back to the

table and sat there once more, alone now in the candlelight. She played with the idea in her own mind, worrying it, turning it over like a cat does a mouse.

She opened a small silver compact and looked at her face in ts mirror. I am still guiltless, she thought, I have not done it yet. But I will look the same when I have done it; nobody will know the difference by looking at me. She touched the little puff twice to her nose and once to her chin. She closed the compact and put it away.

It was quiet upstairs now. He had stopped tossing and turning on the bed, he had fallen asleep.

She rose. It was time. She made her preparations slowly. With a calm detachment that had neither tension nor guilt in it. She carried a candle to the closet beneath the stairs first, examined the inside of that. Tested the lock, to make sure that it was in good order.

She went back to the sideboard then, removed the lethal basket. She left it there untouched a moment, went looking for something that might serve as a substitute receptacle. When she came back she had a large empty cannister she had found on the kitchen-shelf, that had once held flour or meal or something of the sort. Also a pointed stick that the cook used to poke up the fire in her stove apparently, for it was slightly charred at one end.

She placed the two side by side, basket and cannister, opened both. She was not afraid. She had long ago overcome her original repugnance. You grew used to them, just like anything else. The knowledge that it was harmless, of course, helped. And then, this was not her focus of fear, as it was his.

It didn’t move. It must have been his imagination that had made it seem to rear and widen its jaws.

It was hard to get the stick under it, for it was coiled now, not stretched out flat upon the floor. Twice it dribbled off it. Then, briefly, it did open its mouth each time, but the gusts of anger were quickly over and it lay supine again.

The third time she managed to clear it full-length from the basket, holding it like a ribbon up at full-length, doubled over the stick. She quickly transferred it, let it slither down into the cannister, put the lid back on. Its tail got in the way and the lid wouldn't close over it altogether, but that didn't matter, she left it that way. It would draw itself completely in in its own good time.

She carried the empty basket to the closet now. She separated the two halves. The lower part she placed in one corner, upsidedown, so that its emptiness could not be immediately perceived, would remain questionable. The lid she placed over in the opposite corner. That gave two foci of danger to contend with, one on each side. He could not retreat from one without drawing near the other. He would be held riveted between the two.

Either disk, revealed by the brief flare of a single match, might have covered something. Something already as good as released, since the two halves were not separate from one another.

She went upstairs to where he was now, moving softly. He lay there asleep, twitching, murmuring unintelligibly in inner torment. He had taken his jacket off. His matches would be in that, that was where they always carried them. She found a folder of them, stripped them all away but one. One she left him, to confirm his own danger by, to illuminate for a brief moment his doom. That and the sandpaper for striking it on. But even that one she shortened to half its length by tearing it in two, reducing its burning-time by that much.

She stiffened, as he turned and moaned a little in his sleep, lips parted in anguish, tormented by some dream that, had he known it, was but a premonition of what was to come. But no dream could hope to equal the reality that would soon—

He lay motionless again after that, and her own rigidity unlocked. She went from the room backwards, a step at a

time, like a threatening spectre in her black gauzy dress. A spectre, though, that even as it retreated became more threatening. Then turned and sidled down the stairs at a biased angle, hand behind her back glancing along the rail.

She went back to the closet-opening and struck one of his own matches and explored closely all along the door-frame on the inside. She found at last what she wanted, something that glittered minutely like a pin-head. It was a small nailhead, not quite even with the woodwork. It could scarcely have been called a projection, it protruded so very slightly, but it was sufficient for her purposes. It was at the right height too.

She drew her shoulder close to it, so that she stood in the closet-opening facing outward into the room. In other words, so that it was just behind her back. Then, working behind her back, sought to catch or snag the lacy material of her dress on it, in such a way as might have happened had she brushed carelessly by it on her way out of the closet.

The fabric would not stay on. Twice she had to trail it along the frame before the little metal projection finally pierced it, clung tenuously by a single looped thread drawn out from the rest. The slightest move would have severed it, and freed her. She didn’t want to sever it. She wanted him to.

She stood thus in the opening, half in, half out, and waited. Waited patiently.

She looked around the room. There was nothing there that menaced; it was sterile of threat. A clock that ticked the minutes of the night away. A radio, to bring in cheerful, chipper music playing hundreds upon hundreds of miles away, in the land he had taken her from and she would be able to return to now, once she was—his widow. A cannister upon the sideboard over there, its lid a little slanted, that was all, but nothing to show what lurked in it. How simple death without weapons was. How safe for the killer.

She was going to call up to him, first, but she knew he would not answer. He would hear her but he would not come. That was part of his torture of her. One night she had returned without her key, and though he had been upstairs at the time, had heard her below, had even looked out, he had made no move to admit her; she had to stay there huddled on the doorstep until the servants came early in the morning.

She made her summons an indirect one, therefore. There was a small bench against the wall, just beyond the closet-opening. She hooked her toe beneath it, tilted it, straight up, then let it upset itself legs upward. It struck the floor with a shattering clap that resounded through the silent house.

She heard him jolt upon the bed, start upright. She had roused him now, he would come down to see. She heard him come out to the head of the stairs in his stocking feet.

“What’s that? Who’s down there?” he called down in a voice blurred from recent sleep.

Instead of answering, she gave the overturned stool an added prod that made another wooden clamor. This brought him down to the foot of the stairs; he turned there and could see her. She was no longer motionless now, she was writhing, one arm bent behind her back as if in a vain effort to locate the hindrance and free herself.

“What the devil are you doing there?” he asked surlily. She continued to writhe and wince facially in time with her supposed efforts. She had once hoped to bean actress, before she had met him. She could never have hoped for a part such as this. “The back of my dress, somewhere, is caught on a nail. I can’t reach it.”

He didn’t come toward her at once. She had hardly expected him to. Hate had long ago withered all consideration between them. But he could be lured to coming to her aid without realizing it, that was what she was counting on. Lured to coming to his death.

He crossed the room to where there was a humidor, stopped by it, took out a cigar. He passed this absently back and forth below his nose, lengthwise, inhaling its fragrance. Then he bit the end off. He felt for matches, noticed he had left his jacket upstairs. She saw him look over at one of the lighted candles, and sudden fright welled up in her. He went over to it, held it, lighted the cigar by it.

She hadn't expected this. That candle could save his life. If he retained it in his hand, went in there with it, it could show him there was nothing—

She swore within her own mind in maniacal silence. Even the crime without weapons had its pitfalls.

She was deathly afraid now; she didn't want him to come over, not while he was holding that candle.

He said to her over his shoulder, "What are you going to do, stand there all night? Why don't you just pull it?"

"I'm afraid of ruining my dress. It's the last good one I have. If I could only find it, I could work it off gently—" She continued to hitch in a half-circular movement, like a muscle-dancer in a sideshow.

"What were you doing in there anyway?"

"I stepped in for a minute to look for something." Why didn't he put it down! His cigar was lit now. Why didn't he put it down!

He turned, took an impatient step toward her, candle in hand. He was bringing it over with him, the very thing she had wanted him to do least of all! "What am I, your servant?" he muttered disobligingly.

"Don't bring that candle near me!" she called out sharply. "You'll set fire to me! This dress is all fluffy, and I just had it cleaned with benzine!"

To her surprise it worked. She hadn't expected it to. He set the candle down, placed his lighted cigar in a dish beside it, and came on without them. He'd discarded the only thing that could have saved his life. He came on to his death, empty-handed.

“Stand still a minute,” he ordered brusquely. He stepped inside the closet-opening, went around to the back of her. She was between him and the outside room now.

The rest was as instantaneous as the shuttering of a cameralens. She suddenly whisked herself out of the entrance, the door swept around in a cyclonic arc, crashed into the frame, the lock fell shut automatically, and he was trapped.

The candle-flames spread out flat with the wind, then straightened again. Death had begun. No, not yet. Death had been unleashed. It still had not found the weak spot, the crevice, by which it was to enter.

Knowledge, now, came next. She would impart it. That would be the only weapon used in this from first to last; her voice, her message through this door. And how could such a weapon ever be found, ever be traced afterward?

She moved close to the door, already vibrating under his first trapped onrush. She moved so close to it she seemed to be pressing her face against it, though she was only aiming her lips at the seam, so he would not fail to hear her.

“Donald, do you hear me? Donald.” Then waited a moment. “Are you listening? In the pocket of your trousers, in the right-hand pocket, is a single match, and a tab of sandpaper. Take it out and light it a minute. I want you to see something.”

He must have thought she was trying to help him. There was a faint orange wink for a moment, along the seam. That and no more.

“Look over your shoulder. Look over into the corner. Now into the other corner, quick—while it still lasts.”

A curious moaning sound, like wind heard through a tube, came faintly through to her.

“Don’t move. Stand still, and you’ll be all right. It’s—it’s in there with you. I wanted to put it someplace where you wouldn’t see it, and the basket dropped out of my hands and rolled. I—I think it opened. Donald, don’t move,

whatever you do. Stand perfectly still, that's your only chance."

A hollow voice as from a tomb groaned. "The match just went out. I'm in here in the dark with it." She heard his head go forward and strike the door.

And now death had begun. The weapon had been used. The weapon that no detective would ever find.

It was time to cover up the sounds it might make. The sounds that would come as soon as the first swooning vertigo of terror had passed away. It might take a long time.

She turned and came away from the door, smiling. Not very much, not in broad humor; just a tiny little pinched uplift at each corner of her mouth. She looked around the room. The clock was still ticking peacefully. The candle flames were still pointed jewellike toward the ceiling. His cigar was still consuming itself on the dish where he'd left it just now. It was just as though nothing had happened. And what had, after all? A door had closed.

She pressed the radio-switch, sank down into a chair close by it. Not one of the stiff upright ones they used at dinner, a sloping overstuffed one that was his favorite for lounging in. The depression from his body was still in its cushioned seat and back. She crossed her legs and clasped her hands at the back of her head and lolled there in supine indolence.

Just a woman listening to a radio. A woman in her own home, with nothing to do, listening to the radio.

She had said: "You could not hate anyone that much—" She was mistaken. What did she know? She felt so good right now, this must be hate, what else could it be?

Pattering native music came on thinly, from the country club nearby. She didn't want that stuff. She wanted her own country. She turned on the short-wave dial. That country he had taken her from, to torture and revile her.

There it was now. It was like a breath of heaven. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is N'Yorleans, beamed

on a special shortwave broadcast—”

Something kept throbbing every once in a while, as though there were some sort of dynamo or generator bedded under the floor of the house. And muffled sounds like static, that didn’t come from the loudspeaker. Her own name, in ghostly echo. “Pauline! Pauline!”

It would have to be made a little louder. It, the other thing, was still coming through. She gave the dial a delicate little adjustment, sloped back again.

The music came into the room moderately loud and diamondclear. It was a good night for reception. Her old favorite, Honeysuckle Rose. She caught herself tapping her toe lightly against the floor in time with it. And then something new, that must have come out since she’d been away.

There was a reading-lamp there, over to the other side of her. They had electricity in the house, of course; it was just at his morbid insistence that they always used candles. So that he wouldn’t have to see her so clearly, he’d once explained when she had asked him. This wasn’t lighted now, but the chain-pulls dangling from it kept swaying a little, as though there were some unnoticeable vibration going on near at hand. Otherwise you couldn’t tell anything. Only when there was a pause for station-identification could you hear anything discordant.

Sometimes a hurried scratching, like a cat trying its nails on a door. Sometimes a garbled screaming, as if from far away. “Pauline! Pauline! Take a gun to me. There’s one upstairs in my bureau-drawer. Bring it down and put it to my head, and end me fast! Only in the name of common ordinary humanity don’t leave me in here like this—”

The cigar was intact, had retained its recognizable torpedoshape on the dish beside her, but slowly the brown of the tobaccowrapping was being eaten away by the corrosive white of the advancing ash. Her eyes rested on it thoughtfully, as if it were a symbol. A cigar. A life.

The chain-pulls of the lamp kept up their intermittent jittering. Less often now than before, but more violently when they did. The radio kept up its jingling patter of monotonous two-four time notes, one combination of them scarcely distinguishable from another. The clock kept up its remorseless pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat. Time, the enemy of life.

The listener brooded, hand cupped to chin, face slanted downward, eyelids lowered. She had gotten New Orleans first. That was the closest of the home-stations. She shifted the wavelength a little, and Atlanta came in. It went like this:

"Male voice: "And now we'll hear from little Dixie Lee, our silver-voiced vocalist. Hello, Dixie, honey; what're you going to sing for the folks this evening?"

Female voice: "Got any suggestions?"

Male voice: "Fine. All right, folks, now you're going to hear Dixie Lee singing 'Got Any Suggestions?' Hit it, boys."

Female voice: "No, no, wait a minute! Let's get together on this. That isn't the name of my next number. That's what I asked you."

A third voice, faintly: "Mercy! Have mercy! I can't stand it! I can't stand it, I say!"

Male voice: "Pardon me, Dixie, my error. Now what's it going to be this time?"

Female voice: "Gimme a Little Kiss, Will Ya, Huh?"

Male voice: "Sh, not so loud! My wife's out there in the audience."

A third voice, indistinctly: "Take it away! Take it away from me! I can feel it sliding across my shoe—!"

Male voice: "Here we go, folks. And this time we're really on our way, all kidding aside."

Orchestral introduction. Then female voice, nasally: "Gimme a little kiss, will ya, huh? What're ya gonna miss, will ya, huh—?"

The listener sat motionless.

Something attracted her eye suddenly, some flurry of motion on the floor, offside to where she was sitting. She wasn't quick enough to catch what it was. As she turned her head to identify it, it seemed to merge with the shadows under the table, draw in under there. Either that, or else she had imagined it in the first place, it hadn't been real.

Some afterthought made her look inquiringly over at the cannister. The lid had become entirely dislodged, it wasn't on it at all any more. She got up and went over closer to examine it. It was empty. It wasn't in it any more. It had made its escape, unnoticed.

She wasn't unduly frightened by the discovery. It didn't matter so greatly. It was harmless. It would have to be found and put back, that was all.

She took up the stick she had used the first time and went looking for it. She picked up one of the candles and held it so that its light penetrated below the table, where she thought she had seen that receding scrap of motion just now. She peered under there.

It was down there. She located it almost at once. She got it on the stick the way the old woman had showed her and dredged it out. The table was an impediment, or something. The head hung too close to the hand with which she grasped the stick. It suddenly slashed at her. The pain was very little. Like jabbing yourself with a pin.

There was nothing to be frightened of. The old native woman had even offered to let it bite her on the arm as a test of its harmlessness, she remembered. She was annoyed, but that was all. She had a momentary impulse to fling it away from her, but she didn't give in to it. She didn't even drop it. It had slashed a second time before she could get it back into the cannister. Then it writhed a little and lay still. She replaced the lid, tightly this time, and went back to her former chair.

The back of her hand itched a little, where it had struck her. She scratched it, and her scratching reddened the skin

slightly.

Female voice: “—will ya, huh? And I’ll give it right back to you.”

A sobbing voice: “Light. Light. Just a little light. Just for a minute. Just enough to show me where it is—” Sounds of violent threshing, as of something heavy caught in a trap.

The clock: Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat; forty-six seconds, fortyseven seconds, forty-eight seconds—Time, the enemy of life.

She adjusted the wave-length once more. Then sat back again. She rubbed the back of her hand against her dress, to quell the insatiable tickling that seemed to afflict it. A five-pointed vermilion star was faintly visible on the back of it; with a white core, like an over-sized mosquito-bite.

A panting sound, as of a voracious animal tracing its muzzle close up against the seam of a door, came through. But not from the loudspeaker.

She had New York, her own town, now. The town he’d taken her away from. “This is the National Broadcasting Company, W-E-A-F, New York—” In her mind’s eye she could see the big double triangle, the lower half Times Square, the upper Longacre, with the crowds moving slowly along; Loew’s State, and the Astor, and Seventh Avenue splitting off from Broadway—

The clock: Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat; fifty-eight seconds, fiftynine seconds, sixty seconds—Time, the victor.

The white ash had reached the biting-end of the cigar now. There was no more unincinerated tobacco left to be consumed; there wasn’t anywhere further for it to go. It was a cold cylinder, a dead cylinder. A ghost-cigar. A memory.

The chain-pulls on the lamp hung in a mathematically-straight line, utterly still now.

The listener reached forward suddenly, there was the click of a switch, and the radio went off.

It had lasted fifty-five minutes.

She listened carefully first, without moving, eyes still in that downcast position.

Complete silence. Only Time, the enemy, the victor, the eternal, still going pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat.

Finally she stood up with calm deliberation, moved slowly forward, in the careful way of a woman trying not to arouse someone who is sleeping. She went toward the sealed door, stopped close against it, stood motionless, head inclined. There was no sound.

She reached out, rapped questioningly on the inscrutable woodwork. There was no answer.

She was smiling as she turned away. That same smile as before, only at the corners of her mouth. She came back closer to the light and took out the silver compact and opened it once more. She looked at herself in its mirror.

She looked the same. You couldn't tell anything. She looked no different than before. She wondered what they meant about a guilty conscience.

The telephone rang, and for a moment it startled her almost to the point of dropping the compact, the sound was so unexpected in the new, the final, silence that had now fallen.

She went over to it, hesitated for just a moment, then picked it up. It was a woman's voice, and for a moment she had difficulty recognizing it.

"Pauline, this is Marie Stewart—"

She was impatient to the point of brusqueness. She didn't want any witnesses, any accessories, who might later be dangerous.

"Why did you call me now?"

"I had to. Pauline, listen to me. That old woman we were talking about the other day, you know the one I mean?"

Oh, no, you don't, she thought; she wasn't going to get her to incriminate herself that easily. "I don't know what you mean. We didn't talk of any old woman. Will you excuse me now?"

“She has just been to see my maid. She walked all the way in from out there, to look her up. There was no other way she knew of reaching you. And my maid just came running to me a minute ago with what she told her, frightened out of her wits. I had to reach you right away. Pauline, don’t touch that thing you took from her. Don’t go near it. There has been a terrible mistake.”

“A mistake? Marie, what are you trying to say to me? What is it?” Her own voice had become hoarsely unrecognizable now.

“That—what you went there for. She gave you one of the wrong kind. She only found out after you were gone and it was too late. If it bites you, nothing can save you. You will be dead within fifteen minutes. There is not even a serum for it.”

It had bitten her fully thirteen to fourteen minutes ago. Something started to swell up inside her head; it felt like a balloon.

“No one has ever been known to survive, unless they got immediate treatment, and that means amputation if it was on a hand or leg—”

The rest of the message went rushing upward toward the ceiling, with the voice speaking it, with the telephone, with the table that held it—and she was down upon her hands and knees, like a felled ox slowly buckling to the ground under the effects of a mallet-blow.

She lay there flat for a minute, mouth open an inch or two above the floor, unable to scream. Then she turned and began to crawl with a maddened patter of bare palms upon the floor, that carried her along it crabwise, sidling like some maimed thing.

She couldn’t get up on her feet. She couldn’t scream. There was no one, nothing, to scream to. There was a door there she wanted to get to, a door that might have help beyond it. When she’d reached it, she reared up against it on her knees, like a clever quadruped, a dog or cat, seeking

egress. Her breath was raucous in the stillness, like a bellows. Huff, huff, huff.

Then she fell flat again on the other side. She'd have to go on still further now. Help was so far away. And she had so little time.

They found her there when they arrived. She was still warm, but she was dead. They had arrived within a few minutes. They were used to many bad sights, but this was a bad one such as they had never seen yet; even their faces paled when they saw what she had done. She lay in a pool of blood on the kitchen-floor. The meat cleaver had dropped to one side of her. The severed hand, with the wedding band still on it, had stayed up on the edge of the table she had used for a chopping block.

They found him too, presently. He fell out upon them when they opened the closet-door. He must have remained sagging half-upright against it. He too was still warm. But he was much more difficult to recognize than she was. The thing they carried out through the closet-opening was scarecrow-like. Tatters of torn shirt fluttered from it here and there. Gray dust was ground into its bared chest and forehead. Cobwebs festooned its eyebrows and matted hair. And the hands were wide-splayed, fingertips worn to the quick, skinless, all but nailless, slow drops of blood oozing from each one, drop by drop.

They found the snake, last of all.

They were mystified. They couldn't understand how it had got where it was. How he, the man, had got where he was. How she had come to do what she had.

They performed an autopsy, of course. The medical examiner's office reported by telephone to the police at five that afternoon.

“The amputation was unnecessary. She must have thought she had been bitten by a deadly variety. That species of snake, of course, is absolutely harmless, as we recognized immediately. Just to make sure, however, we have tested it with several rabbits. All have survived the bite unharmed.”

And the expert reporting went on, “The man through some accident became locked fast in the closet. The wind may have slammed the door on him. Or she may even have done it herself, playfully, as a sort of practical joke. Before she could release him again, the snake-bite had already occurred, and her terror robbed her of all further presence of mind, so that she forgot to unfasten the door. The frantic efforts he made to get out and go to her aid show him to have been blameless in whatever it was that occurred.”

“Then the amputation was the cause of death, are those your findings?”

“On the contrary, the amputation was not the cause of death. We arrived quickly enough afterwards for her to have been still alive if it were simply a question of the amputation, even though she might have been weak or unconscious from shock and loss of blood. Our examination shows death to have been instantaneous. What caused it was a heart-attack, induced more by the terror of thinking she had been fatally bitten than by any amputation. It is what you might call a death by the imagination.”

Two heads close together in an invalid chair. A brunette one, and one streaked with white, the overnight white of shock. A man, resting on the chair itself, and a woman, perched on the arm of it, with her head close to his. Marie Stewart and Donald Baron.

“You will be better soon. Every day you get a little better, grow a little stronger. Soon you’ll be over it altogether. It

may have even helped, terrible as it was; it may have even cured you of that old fear, as a sort of shock-treatment would."

"I think what helped me to pull through was I lost consciousness altogether toward the end, and unconsciousness can be a great blessing. That way I escaped the full effects. You've been wonderful to me, Marie. Being with me, nursing me every day. Why have you been so good to me?"

"I've always loved you. I already loved you when I first knew you, back in the States, before your marriage. I loved you so much that—there isn't anything I wouldn't have done, to be with you like this." She stopped, then asked with a little flare of curiosity: "Donald, what happened to her that night? No one seems to know."

He didn't answer. She knew he'd never tell her that his wife had tried to kill him. He'd always kept it a secret from her, let her go on thinking that he'd accidentally locked himself in the closet. He was loyal that way, even to the memory of one who had tried to destroy him.

And looking at her, as she lay there nestled so fondly against him it was impossible to guess that she too might have a secret from him.

The clever person can commit a murder without weapons, she had once said to someone.

But there's a cleverer one still who can get someone else entirely to commit it for her—and pay the price at the same time.

LEG MAN

HE HAD it all lined up ahead of him, like a flight of steps. First step would be a by-line over his piece. Over all his pieces. “By Clint Burgess.” Maybe in a year. Maybe even in six months. Next, a feature of his own, with a little boxed photo of him at the top. By the time he was in his thirties. Next, the city desk, where Herrick hung out now. By the time he was in his forties. Then managing editor. And then the top step—owner of the whole rag. He’d be old by then, fifty, but he wouldn’t raise a belly like the present old man, and he wouldn’t make a fool of himself on the links, and he’d treat his staff human, and—

“Burgess!”

He bounced all the way down the steps, owner, managing editor, city desk, feature, by-line—and there he was down at the bottom again. Just a leg man. A guy that dug ’em up and phoned ’em in, didn’t even write his own stories.

Herrick said dryly when he came over to the desk: “Yeah, I know you’re not appreciated, and I know you could do much better in this chair than I’m doing—saw you looking wistfully over at it just now—but in the meantime let’s keep it to ourselves just a mite longer.” The big sea-lion actually went coy on him, laid a finger across his lips and went: “*Sh!* And while we’re getting ready to turn over the paper to you, and while they’re painting your name on the old man’s door in there, suppose you haul your moss-grown behind

outa here and earn the thirty-five bucks blackmail you're shaking us down for every Saturday!"

The last couple of couplets boomed out like something over a loud-speaker. A copy-boy snorted somewhere in the background.

Burgess said: "All right! All right! If a guy busted an arm covering an assignment for you, he'd still be a lazy bum 'cause he didn't bust both arms."

"Naw," said Herrick dryly, "he'd just be damn careless, that's all. Now, to be more specific, chase over to a place called Mike's Tavern, I think it's somewhere along Blake Street. A tip just came into the office a few minutes ago that there's been somebody killed over there. Find out what there is to be found out. Nothing fancy. Just facts, I want, facts. Get 'em straight and keep 'em straight. It's probably just another dime-a-dozen bar hold-up and killing, so it's worth maybe a paragraph on the second page, if nothing better turns up. It just happened, so lift your feet. In fact, if you were any kind of a leg man at all, you would have been over there already before it happened and not have to be sent around after it's over by your hard-working editor."

"Gee, what is a guy supposed to be, a mind-reader?" grumbled Burgess as he closed the door after him, to the accompaniment of another snicker from the copy-boy.

Herrick buckled his arms threateningly at the latter. "He's a better newspaperman than you'll ever be, brat. He's got it in him. The only guys I insult around here are the guys I like." Then he added threateningly: "You go back and tell him that and I'll break your neck!"

"Ghee!" said the kid, ducking out, "I guess you must like me too."

Burgess, meanwhile, was stemming his way to his assignment, muttering to himself every once in awhile: "Just facts he wants. All right, just facts he'll get."

Mike's Tavern, at nine-thirty in the morning, wasn't very convivial-looking. In fact, it wouldn't have been very inviting

even apart from the fact that a murder had just taken place in it. There was a detective squad car in front of it, and the unmistakable and slightly repellent shape of a morgue ambulance drawn up alongside that, with a stretcher partly protruding from it like an avaricious tongue. There was a very thin crowd, not large at all, with a single harness cop to keep it divided in two with a wide swath through it from curb to doorway. At that, its interest was only half-hearted. Even as he arrived it was already beginning to melt away. People had to work at that hour.

A second cop stopped him just inside the tavern entrance. Burgess showed his press card and the cop still kept on stopping him. “How’s chances?” Burgess wheedled.

“I’ll see what he says,” the cop condescended.

He dipped his head and one shoulder inside, pulled them out again. “He says all right,” he said.

Burgess went inside. It looked as dim and depressing as only the inside of such a place can look at such an hour. There were plenty of men there, but they weren’t drinking and their presence did nothing to liven it up any. Small leaded panes of colored glass, red, blue, and green, made the bright morning outside seem like twilight. They had a pair of high-powered lights rigged up now, but without them it would have been impossible to look in from the street and see anything. A large clock high on the wall over the bar said 9:32. A small tab sticking up in the indicator of the cash-register said “20¢.” A detective said: “All right, stand back and let him take those glasses now!”

There were two glasses standing in lonely abandonment on the bar, on the customers’ side of it and fairly close together, as though the vanished drinkers had stood elbow to elbow. There was also a man groveling bodily atop the bar, like a monkey, on his knees and forearms, sighting some sort of a camera apparatus down into the narrow well between counter and wall. A bright blue flash went off, and then he turned around and jumped down, on the outside.

He sighted at the glasses next, dipping down so that he'd be on a level with them. Another blue flash went off. Then he straightened up and departed, brushing by Burgess and mumbling something as he went that sounded like: "That's all the pretty pitchers for today."

Two men came in with a morgue basket between them. They went around behind the bar, through a little opening at the far end, where it joined the wall. After that, you could only see them from about the ribs up. They had a hard time doing whatever it was they were doing. The first one rose a little, then went down again, as though he had scissored his legs widely to step over something. Then he turned and faced the other way, back toward his stretcher-mate. Then they both looked down and scratched their heads, as though faced with a problem in hydraulics.

"Put it down on top of him and then turn 'em both over together—that's the only way to get him in," one remarked to the other.

They both dipped down below the bar and stayed out of sight for several moments.

When they bobbed up again, they were both roundshouldered, as though borne down by considerable weight. There was a slight concussion against the shelves caused by some inadvertent movement of theirs, and a bottle of Jamaica rum that had been standing too close to the edge toppled over and went down.

All the onlookers jumped a little with nervousness, Burgess included, but the shattering crash that they were expecting never came. The bottle never struck the floor. A moment later it had reappeared, still intact, and was replaced in its former position on the shelf. "Right in the breadbasket," one of the transport agents commented to the other.

They maneuvered their way around the end of the bar out into the open again and proceeded rapidly to the street, carrying something covered-over between them, that was

rounded in the middle like a shaky plate of jelly. A pair of shoe-tips stuck up at one end. Burgess didn't try to uncover it and look as it went by. He was willing to take their word for it the man was dead.

"How much did they take the place for?" he asked the detective in charge of the case, whom he'd overheard them calling Lyons.

"It wasn't a cash-killing," the latter said, relighting a cigar that he'd allowed to expire under pressure of his duties. "There's no take in a bar-till at this hour of the day. We figure it for a grudge-killing. They knew his habits, knew they could get him alone in the place right after he opened up."

"Any idea—?"

"Nobody saw them come, nobody saw them go. The barman came in and found him lying there like that, still warm, with a slug in his back, around behind the bar where he couldn't be seen from the street."

"I thought he was the barman—who was he?"

"Naw, he was the owner. Mike Oliver. Used to come in and open up himself every day. That's the barman standing over there."

Burgess went to work on him next. He'd taken him to be a third-grade detective breaking in at his first murder-case, until now. He'd had that air of trying to be helpful but not knowing exactly what to do that such a novice would have had.

Burgess used an old one that had never yet failed to work, human nature being what it is. "I don't suppose you mind if I mention you," he said deferentially. "This is for the papers." The barman thawed. In fact he even turned into a gushing stream of garrulity.

"What sort of a guy was he?" Burgess suggested.

The barman glanced around toward the now-vacant aisle behind the bar, screened the side of his mouth with the flat of his hand, as though his late employer was still

somewhere around likely to overhear him. “He was a very unpopular guy. Hardly anybody got along with him at all. He had these ways, y’know, that don’t take with customers. He wouldn’t carry anyone on the cuff. He was tight like this.” He packed a close fist and showed it to Burgess. “Any time I tried to pass out a round on the house, he’d give me a dirty look that would take all the good spirit out of it. Customers are quick to notice a thing like that, y’know. And worst of all, he had a very bad habit of collecting for the drinks right as he put them down, instead of waiting until after. He’d stand there with his hand out, and if they didn’t shell out, he’d mention the amount and make sure they did before they had a chance to hoist them.”

“A guy like that must have made plenty of enemies,” Burgess acquiesced.

His informant nodded vigorously. “I remember one night, only about a month ago, he had a terrible row with a guy in here, that only started about some little thing like that. No first-time stranger, either, but a good steady customer that had been coming in here regular for years past. The guy handed him a ten-dollar bill. There was a big rush on that night, they were lined up three deep, and in his hurry the boss didn’t look at it close enough. He only gave him back change for a five. The guy kicked, and the boss called him a liar to his face. I saw what was going to happen, and I tried to take him aside and reason with him. I said: ‘He’s been coming in steady for years. Even if he’s wrong about it, his trade’s worth more than five dollars to you, boss. Give it to him.’ But he wouldn’t listen to me. The guy called him a crook, so the boss jumped over the counter then and there and threw him out. He was a big, husky guy, you know. The guy picked himself up off the street and came back as far as the door and hollered in: ‘I’m going to get you for this! I’m going to get you if it’s the last thing I do!’ Everyone in the place heard him. Then he went off. I thought sure he was

coming back with the cops any minute, but he never showed up again any more that night."

"So then when he didn't, the boss says to me with a knowing grin: 'That proves he was lying, and he knows it himself! If he was really gypped out of five dollars, he would have been back here with a cop.' I said to him: 'I'm not so sure about that.' " Burgess looked thoughtful. "I'm not so sure about it either," he murmured. "There are other ways."

"So the punch-line on it is this," the barman went ahead. "That night when we tallied up, we found we were five dollars ahead of the register. There was an extra five in the till that wasn't accounted for. The boss didn't give a rap. All he did was shrug and say to me: 'If he shows up again, give it back to him.' But he never did. He's never been here again from that night on."

"Did you tell them that?" Burgess asked, dropping his voice a little and hitching his head toward the detectives in the background.

"I had to," the bartender said uncomfortably. "You can't keep anything back from them guys when they start asking you things. I had to tell them his name too. We'd gotten to know him by name, he'd been coming in here so long. Chuck Hastings was his name. I had to tell them that and what he looked like." He drew a deep breath. "They wanted to know."

Burgess saw him down at headquarters later on the same day. They were just bringing him fresh out of Lyons' office but he looked pretty wilted. He was a very badly frightened guy. Burgess couldn't help feeling a little sorry for him. He looked as though he'd been severely mauled and even more severely grilled. He was question-drunk. Somebody'd already passed the word to Burgess who he was, that was how he knew him.

A minute or two later the door opened again and Mike's bartender came out. Evidently an identification had taken

place in there. He went by without recognizing Burgess and the latter didn't tip himself off to him.

Lyons let him come in after that, while he was catching his breath between more important things he had to do.

"I see you've got yourself a suspect already," Burgess began.

"Nope." Lyons crumpled a paper cup and threw it away under the water-cooler. He shook his head decisively. "We've got the culprit. Solid. He's cooked, washed and bottled. His prints were taken and they match those on the death-glass left on the bar. And that, I might add, was practically tapestried with them."

Burgess put a pencil to the back of an envelope, which was just a mannerism with him. He didn't jot anything. "Has he got any kind of an alibi?" he asked.

"Don't they all? Only his is deaf and dumb, can't even talk for him. His bed. Claims he was in it all morning. He was still letting on like he was asleep in it when we went for him."

"Who was behind the second glass?"

Lyons smiled bleakly. "You can't expect him to admit he knows that, when he's denying he himself was behind the first. At least not right off. But we'll get that out of him. If we don't today, we will tomorrow. If we don't tomorrow, we will Thursday." He picked up an unsigned confession lying on his desk, flourished it, dropped it again. "He'll change his mind about signing this too, before were through. We got lot of time. We're not in any hurry. But those are just odds and ends left over. The case is closed. He goes up before the Grand Jury end of next week." He tipped from his eyebrow to Burgess. "Be seeing you, reporter."

Burgess opened the door, and then hung around it.

Lyons looked up from the desk at which he'd sat down and busied himself once more. "What's the matter, the hinges need oiling?" he suggested pointedly.

“Don’t you think it’s funny about the second glass not having any prints on it at all? It was standing there emptied out, so somebody must have lifted it. It’s all right about the second guy having gloves, but then Mike Oliver’s own fingerprints would have still been left on it. He must have set it down on the bar, it didn’t fly down by itself. If it didn’t have any prints on it at all, then it looks as if it must have been wiped clean on purpose. Well, then, if one of the death-glasses was wiped clean, why wasn’t that done to the other too?”

“One of the two guys had more presence of mind than the other. One remembered to, one forgot—showing which of the two it was who fired the shot. The guy who forgot to. Now close the door.”

A cop stepped over and did it for him, swinging it so that it ended up an inch from Burgess’ face.

“Well, if he said you can see the pictures, you can see them,” the custodian of the police photographic files said wearily. “I’ll just get his O.K. on it.” He reached for the phone.

“No, don’t bother him about it now,” Burgess said hastily. “He’s busy, that’s why he sent me around to you myself. I was just in his office, I only left it this minute. Not the body, you understand. Just the background shots, the bar itself.”

The attendant wearily took down a large folder, opened it. “You was in the place yourself this morning, what d’you want to look at pictures of it for? Why don’t you just go back there and take another look at it instead?”

“I want to see it like it was, not like it is now. I thought I saw something then, and I want to see if I was right, and it’s still on the pictures the way I thought I saw it at the time.”

The custodian watched him bend down close to the prints, poring over them with his face an inch away as if he were nearsighted. “Well, are you? Is it?” he demanded at last.

“Yeah,” Burgess said excitedly, straightening up. “I am! It is!”

“Well, what is it?” the man in charge asked, letting curiosity get the better of him for a minute.

“Thanks a lot,” Burgess called back, and let the door swing closed after him.

He used one of the public telephones right there in the corridor of the headquarters building to call his office.

Herrick was wroth. “It’s about time!” he barked. “You’ve only been out all morning and half the afternoon! I could have written the history of Rome in that time. What d’you think were doing down here, piece-work? Half the working day for every two lines that gets tucked in where a column winds up short!”

“Yeah, but it’s not over yet.”

“All right, four words takes care of that. ‘An arrest is expected.’ You don’t have to stay out and wait for it to happen!”

“The arrest has been made already,” Burgess faltered. “They made it at eleven this morning, but—”

“Well, is it the guy that did it?”

“They say it is, but—•”

Herrick rumbled like a volcano. “Well, do *they* say it’s over?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then who says it isn’t over?”

Burgess swallowed hard. “I do.”

He could hear Herrick leave his creaky swivel-chair and then hit it again. It took him a minute to get his larynx hooked up again. “Why? Because he hasn’t been executed and buried yet? We’re running a daily newspaper, not an annual. Listen, I didn’t send you out to solve detective cases, I sent you out to get facts. If the police say he did it, then it’s over! I’ll give you ten minutes to get back here and get to work!

“But listen, boss, if you’ll only give me time to explain what I noticed, something I’ve found out that I think they missed seeing themselves, you’ll understand why I think they’re holding the wrong guy—”

A feminine voice cut in at this point. “Ti-yum is up. Deposit another nickel, pal-lease.”

Burgess began to grub desperately at the linings of his various pockets with one hand, hanging onto the receiver with the other. Pennies turned up, quarters turned up, even a half-dollar turned up, but no nickel. “Hey, wait, don’t cut —” he pleaded.

Herrick’s voice was fading away like distant, rolling thunder. “Remember, ten minutes, or you don’t need to come back at all!” Something went *clunk* and the connection was cut.

Burgess hung up and used both hands to go over himself this time. He stepped outside the booth, where there was more elbow-room. Suddenly it turned up, the lone Jefferson-head that he’d known he had somewhere or other all along.

He tossed it up and down in his hand a couple of times, pondering. Then he shook his head, put it back again where he’d just found it. “I better act like I didn’t have one anyway,” he muttered to himself. “If I call him again he’ll only tell me to come back, and I can’t—not just yet, not till this thing is over.”

He went back to Mike’s Tavern. It was still open for business, surprisingly enough, either going along under sheer momentum or because it would take a few weeks to dispose of the lease and the stock on hand. But it wasn’t doing well, no one was in the place. People evidently didn’t feel at ease hanging around premises where there had been a violent death so recently.

“Gimme two fingers,” Burgess said.

“You’re the newspaper guy from this morning,” the barman recalled. “I thought I seen you before.”

Burgess held up his glass as though he were scanning the drink. As a matter of fact, he wasn't, he was scrutinizing what held it in. "Do you keep count of how many glasses like this you have in stock?" he asked idly.

"Oh, sure. I got it right at the end of my fingertips. You have to in this business. We got in three dozen of 'em only a couple weeks ago."

"Lost any through breakage since then?"

"No, I'm pretty careful. You have to be, working for a guy like Mike."

"Then you ought to have thirty-five, not counting that one the police impounded, that right?"

"Thirty-five, and eighteen that we were down to before we reordered, that makes it fifty-three."

Burgess reached into his pocket. "I'm not one of these betting guys," he said, "but I got nothing to do right now, and you got nothing. Here's a dollar bill says you haven't got fifty-three in stock right now. Fade me."

"That's an easy way to double my money," the barman said scornfully. He put down one of his own. He picked up a flat stick used to scrape the head off beer. "I'll hit 'em so they sing out, you can keep count with me as I go along. They're all lined up here even, except that one in front of you."

The stick started to sound off flutelike little musical notes, *ting, ting, ting,* while Burgess kept score out loud. "Fifty-one." *Ting.* "Fifty-two." *Ting.* "Fifty-three."

There was a pause. Then the stick went *ting* one last time. They both said it together. "Fifty-four!"

The barman straightened up. He scratched his head. "There's one over. I musta miscounted."

"No, you didn't miscount," Burgess said, without explaining further. He split the kitty up again. "Keep your dollar, I don't want it." He pocketed his own. "Let's talk about something else."

“Sure,” said the barman, relieved at not having to forfeit his share of the ante. “What’ll it be?

Burgess groped around, eyes vacant, as if in search of a topic. “I suppose you knew the ins and outs of your boss s personal affairs pretty much.”

“Better than my own. I been working for him for fifteen years.”

“Everybody makes enemies. Who hated him pretty much?”

“Who didn’t?” was the succinct answer.

“Pretty long list, huh? Well, now this is just rambling talk, but who out of the many would you say hated him enough to kill him?”

The barman scraped his chin. “First off, this guy Chuck Hastings, I’d say.”

That, Burgess knew, was auto-suggestion pure and simple. Hastings was already being held for the murder, therefore his name was the first to occur to the Solon of the lager schooners. “Who else, after him?” he encouraged. He poised pencil to one of his reliable envelope-backs. “Let’s see if we can’t rig up a sort of list, between the two of us. Something like this: if Hastings hadn’t been the one to kill him, who would have been the one likeliest after him to do it?”

“This is good,” the barman chuckled. “It’s kind of like a crossword puzzle.”

“Kind of like,” Burgess assented.

It took time. Time and patience and dexterity. But when he came out of there, six drinks, two gift-cigars, and ninety minutes later, he had this list on the back of his envelope (he hadn’t bothered transcribing motives, just names):

1. Hastings
2. Big Tim Leary
3. Cosentino
4. Edge

5. Poletti

Herrick had been just on the point of leaving the office on his way home. Burgess could tell that by the length of time it took him to come back to his desk and answer the phone. He was usually sitting right beside it.

“Listen, boss,” Burgess began ebulliently. “I’ve found out there’s one glass too many at the tavern where the shooting —”

That was as far as he got. Herrick could be surgically cutting when he wanted to be. He was now. “Who’re you?” he asked, puzzled.

“Aw, boss, don’t. This is Burgess, you know who—”

“There’s no one by that name on the staff now.”

“At least give me a rewrite man, if you won’t listen to me yourself,” Burgess pleaded.

Herrick was regretfully polite. “Only guys on the payroll are entitled to rewrite men. I can’t give strangers rewrite men.”

“But boss, I’ve got a list of five possible suspects, and one of them—”

“I thought the police already had the guy that did it, and that it was finished.”

“Naw, because he didn’t do it.”

“Sorry, but it’s never been our policy to accept tips from outsiders. And you were fired, as of two hours and twenty minutes ago,” said Herrick with unimpeachable logic.

There never was a newspaperman yet, who when fired, didn’t take it out in drink. And Burgess immediately set about running true to form. He went from the telephone straight out into the opening stages of what had all the earmarks of being a progressive, night-long binge. But the similarity ended there. The average person will stay in one place until he gets a good edge on. Burgess, on the contrary, didn’t even give himself a chance to get warmed up in any one place. He kept moving from bar to bar, at a

ratio of one short drink to a spot. Furthermore, he hardly took more than a sip of each individual drink. He just dipped his gums once each time and called it a slug. He seemed to have a sort of geographic formula for getting high, as though he were following a roadmap. He drank his way down the left side of Sycamore Avenue. Then back along the right side. Then he moved over one block, and drank his way down the left side of Central Avenue. Then back along the right. Then he moved over one block, and did the same thing on the next thoroughfare.

In each place he'd ask a question. Just one. "Was a jigger like this taken from your bar within the last few nights? He kept getting no's and shakes of the head, shrugs and stares. "Who would take a thing like that? Are you kidding, mister?" He'd turn around and walk out again without pursuing the subject any further. He had a lot of ground to cover and only a limited time at his disposal.

At about the third place on the right side of the third avenue, with time running close to midnight and his mouth flaming from the dry cleaning it was getting, there was a sudden variation in the result. He got a double-take from the bartender, after he'd already gotten the usual no and had started over toward the door on his way out. "Hey, wait, mister, what was that you just asked me?"

He repeated it. "I said was one of these jiggers swiped from your bar here within the last couple of nights?"

The barman nodded. Slow at first, then faster. "Yeah. Come to think of it, one was." Then the man's mouth opened into an oval of mystification, stayed that way. "But how did you know that? Who told you?"

Burgess closed in again, avidly. "Got any idea who took it?"

"I don't know who he was, if that's what you mean."

"But you did see him?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I did."

Burgess went up on his toes a little, palms to bar-edge. “What did he look like? Gimme an idea, quick.”

“He was medium height, on the slender side. Let’s see now. Dark hair, and skin a little bit sunburned, he was peeling up around the forehead.”

“A cast in one eye?”

“Yeah, one eye a little squinty, like there was something the matter with it.”

Burgess had sunk back to dead floor-level even before he’d heard the answer. His shoulders slumped over frustratedly. The description was that of Chuck Hastings, whom they had for the murder anyway.

“You didn’t see him take it, actually, though, did you?” he asked dispiritedly.

“No, I didn’t. But it was his jigger, so he must have. When he walked out, I went over to where he’d been standing, to clean up, and there was no glass there to put back. His chaser-glass was still there big as life, but no jigger. I couldn’t figure it. I even leaned over and looked down on the outside to see if it had tumbled off, but there was nothing on the floor, either broken or whole. I couldn’t get over it. It’s a thing that never happens, you know. They’re not worth a damn, them little things.”

They’re not worth anything in money, Burgess reflected without answering, but they can cost a life.

Lyons looked at him as though he thought he was crazy. “Why should I let you go in and talk to him? What do you think this is, Old Home Week in the detention cells? The guy’s being held on murder charges. People can’t just walk in off the street and visit with him.”

“I only want to get a little of his background, for a human interest story I’ve been commissioned to write. How can that hurt any?”

“Well, go get your background out in front of the building someplace.”

“What, are you afraid if I talk to him a couple minutes I’m liable to find out the guy’s innocent and you’re holding the wrong party? You must have a pretty shaky case.”

“Why, you—!” Lyons half-rose from his desk, shot his sleeves back as though he meditated taking a swing at him. “I ought to . . .” Then he changed his mind, sank down again. “I suppose if I don’t, you’ll write it up your own way, make us out like heels,” he growled. “I know you guys.” He called someone in. “Take Pencil-Happy back and give him five minutes with Hastings. He wants to hold hands with him or something. Vacuum him good first.”

“I had a hard time getting in here,” Burgess began without preamble as soon as the gratings had clashed closed on the three of them.

“I didn’t,” Hastings said gloomily, without looking up from the bunk.

“And they’re not giving me much time, so I’ve got to talk to you fast.” He speared his thumb at the cop glaring down watchfully at the two of them with his back to the grating. “Never mind him, I’m not going to ask you anything that it can hurt for them to hear. Only, please answer me straight, will you? That’s the only way I can help you.”

“What d’ya want to know?” Hastings answered surlily. “Who’d you shake hands with last night?”

Hastings straightened up a little on his elbow, looked at him askance. “What are you, a little dippy or something?”

“Who’d you shake hands with last night? That’s what I said. Who’d you shake hands with in a bar, the night before you were arrested for the killing?”

Hastings brushed his hand thoughtfully across his mouth, eyed him vacantly. “I don’t—I didn’t meet anyone I knew, any friend, all that night. I was by myself the whole time.”

“Wait a minute. You were in a place called Sullivans, on Union Avenue. That much is right, isn’t it?

Hastings nodded. “Yeah. But I went in alone, and I came out alone. I wasn’t in there over ten, fifteen minutes at the most.”

“You didn’t shake hands with anyone while you were in there? Think, man, will you?”

Hastings came perfectly erect at last. Wait a minute. I didn’t shake hands with anyone of my own accord. But somebody did grab my mitt and pump it at one time, I remember that now. There was one of these souses next to me. You know the kind—the whole world was his long-lost brother. The kind you can’t get rid of, once they fasten on you. First he apologized for slopping over against me. Then he wanted to buy me a drink. I told him no thanks, I was checking out as soon as I finished the one I had in front of me. Then he said, ‘No hard feelings,’ and reached down and pumped my hand about sixteen times. After that, he didn’t pester me any more. That what you wanted?”

Burgess gave a grim duck of his head to show it was. “Did you notice your hands when you got home last night?”

“What d’you mean?” Hastings said impatiently. “They were still with me, I didn’t leave ’em nowhere.”

“No, no, I mean did you wash them before you turned in, did you happen to look them over? Was there anything on them?”

Hastings stopped short, took a hitch in his breathing. What are you, psychic? There was something! There was a couple of spots of grease on them. On one, the right. Axle-grease or something, stuff that was hard to get off. That lush I told you about must’ve been working around a car or in a machine-shop.”

Burgess suddenly slammed him hard across the chest with the back of his hand. “I’m on the right track!” he exclaimed jubilantly.

He leaned forward intently. “Was he anyone you ever saw before?”

“Naw, I never saw him before in my life. He was a big, bulky guy, from what I can remember. I didn’t look at him very close. I think he had on dungarees and an oiler’s cap, but I’m not sure. He was just some stray lush.”

He wasn’t stray and he was no lush, but never mind about that now.” He got out his old standby, the envelope and pencil. “Hastings, who hates you pretty much?”

“The whole world, the way it looks tonight.”

“I don’t, and I’m asking you. What do I get out of it? I’m only trying to help you. Who hates you enough to frame you for a murder?”

“How you going to tell about that?” was the disgruntled answer. “Sometimes you don’t know it when they do.”

“You usually have a pretty fair idea.”

When he left him he had this list:

1. Harlan
2. Strickland
3. Edge
4. Al Vogel

He sat down on a bench on his way back to Lyon’s office, took out the other one, the list he’d obtained from the bartender at Mike’s Tavern, and held the two side by side. Then he took his pencil and drew a line through each name that appeared only once on the two.

When he got through, he had this, on both:

4. & 3. Edge.

“Throw the guy out,” Lyons said wearily. “You give these newspaper guys an inch and they take thirty-six miles.

Burgess ducked in under the arm of the cop as the latter turned his way to throw him out. -

“Look, I admit I’m not a detective and I’m not trying to be,” he said, straining forward while the cop tried to drag

him out by the back of the collar and the slack of the coat. “I’m just trying to get the facts in this case. I’ve got who did it.”

“Let him alone, O’Keefe,” Lyons said contemptuously. I want to hear this. It ought to do me good. I haven’t laughed all week.”

He made a steeple of his hands, leaned comfortably back in his chair. “Well, where is he?” he asked, pretending to scan the hallway in back of Burgess.

“I don’t know where he is, I haven’t got him with me! But I do know who he is. He’s a guygiamed Edge. He’s in the wholesale Hquor business. But that’s just a front for what amounts to a big ring putting on the squeeze-play pretty much as the old bootleg rings did in the prohibition days. The only difference is that they can distribute openly now, it’s not against the law. But the squeeze is pretty much the same. If the retailer gets tired of paying what they soak him, and tries to switch to some other distributor—well, it’s just too bad for him. And according to Mike Oliver’s barman, Mike cancelled his orders several months back and refused to continue letting Edge’s outfit supply him.”

“Very interesting,” said Lyons sarcastically. “What does he look like?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen him in my life.”

Lyons addressed the cop. “He doesn’t know where he is, he’s never even seen him, but he’s sure he killed Oliver. That s what I call a strong circumstantial case.”

“You’re convicting Hastings just on the strength of that one glass, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, and you’re trying to get us to convict Edge just by pulling his name out of a hat. We got fingerprints on the glass at least. You got nothing.”

Burgess rushed on: “There’s also a revenge-motive there, I mean on Edge’s part against Hastings. Edge used to operate a speakeasy in the prohibition days, and Hastings was an employe of his at that time, worked for him. They

were raided and federally tried. A lot of inside evidence turned up mysteriously from somewhere, that helped convict Edge, as though somebody had ratted, made an arrangement with the authorities. He was never able to find out where it came from, but there was one thing noticeable when the trial ended. He got a stiff sentence, and Hastings, for some peculiar reason, got off with a remarkably light one."

"Prohibition ended in 1933," Lyons said dryly, "and he waits until 1943 to get even with him." He hiccoughed scornfully. "Good snappy work."

"Motives are one thing that never grow stale."

"You've got from nothing," Lyons told him. "All you've got is a couple of say-so's, second-hand. A guy that's already under arrest himself—and you know how they'll grab at any straw—remembers a guy that didn't like him ten years ago. And a barman, who admits his boss was unpopular with everyone in general, remembers someone who didn't like *him.* So that's enough for you. You've got the guy who did it, right away. Bertillon wasted his time inventing the system of fingerprints." And he cinched it with what on the face of it was an insuperable argument. "Just let me point out something. I don't like you, at this minute. In fact, I dislike you so intensely that I am yearning to throttle you with my own bare hands. But that don't mean I'm going to murder you. Far from it. See the difference?"

Burgess scrubbed the back of his neck in exasperation. "What do I have to do to convince you?" he asked.

"Get the guy to break down and confess out of his own mouth," Lyons jeered. "Then maybe I'll pay some attention."

"I don't even know where to reach him," Burgess murmured in a helpless undertone.

"Go ahead, O'Keefe, you can finish throwing him out now," Lyons said. "That was funny enough to last me the rest of the week."

Burgess took the furled directory from the bar into the phone-booth with him, keeping his finger on the name he'd found, to make sure of not losing his place again. He dropped a nickel in and asked for the number. A man's voice answered. "I want to speak to Joseph Edge," Burgess said.

"Who is it and what about?" the voice said inhospitably. "He doesn't know me, and it's strictly personal."

Another voice got on, a little suaver than the first.

Burgess said: "Is this the Joseph Edge who is in the liquor distributing business?" He'd already tried two who weren't.

"This is Joe Edge, and that's my ra—my occupation. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing. I figured maybe there was something I could do for you." He waited a minute. "You were in Mike's Tavern early this morning, around nine, nine-fifteen," he said flatly.

The voice showed no dismay. Only bland interest. "Mike's Tavern? Where's that?"

"That's where the shooting was. Where you were when the shooting took place."

The voice was silken, unruffled. "I don't get you."

"I'll explain. I was the first customer in there this morning.

I went in a minute or two after the place was opened up, almost at the heels of the owner. I went back to the men's washroom, right after I entered. I was in there when you came in. I saw the whole thing through the crack of the door. You didn't think to look in there. That was your mistake."

"Don't waste my time. Tell it to the marines."

"That would hardly be worth my while, they're too busy in the Solomons."

"Tell it to the cops, then."

"The only drawback is, they don't pay you.'

"Oh, a shake, is that it?" The voice was amused.

“I haven’t got any job or anything. I’m pretty well broke. Matter of fact, I been saving this for a rainy day. Well, it’s pouring cats and dogs right now.

The voice laughed heartily. The voice was very sure of itself. “Hate to disappoint you, but it’s dry and sunny at this end.”

“You don’t believe I was in there, do you? I’ll draw you a picture. There was another guy with you, two of you came in. You stood up against the bar on the right-hand side, as you come in. He stood on the left. After the shooting, one glass was wiped off clean. The other . . .” He dropped his voice a little, spoke close to the phone. *“Now* is it clouding up a little at your end?”

There was a pause at the other end. Burgess knew what the cause of it was. It wasn’t due to fear, nor loss of presence of mind. It was due to a momentary muffling of the phone, while an order was being given in the background: “See where this is coming from.”

The voice came back again. “Who’s in on this with you?” it asked, almost affably. Burgess could tell it was playing for time. He didn’t mind playing along with it, he was a willing dupe.

“Nobody. Just me by myself.”

“Maybe you did see that. You sound convincing enough. But how do you know I’m the same person you saw in there?”

“I made it my business to find out. What d’you suppose I’ve been doing all day?”

There was another pause. The call had been traced. Probably a slip of paper had been thrust before the speaker, for him to read.

“So you’re in this by yourself,” the voice resumed. “Well, your proposition interests me. About how large an umbrella would it take to keep you dry?”

“About a five hundred dollar one.”

“That’s a pretty large umbrella.”

“This is a pretty heavy rainstorm.”

“All right,” the voice acquiesced. “No harm in getting together and talking it over. I usually get shaved the first thing in the morning at a barbershop called the Empire. It’s on Central Avenue, you can’t miss it. It has a pole out front, on the sidewalk. You be standing up alongside that, about nine o’clock. Have you got that, now?”

“I’ve got it,” Burgess said. He didn’t bother jotting it down. He knew it was an appointment that would never be kept. It couldn’t be, for it was an appointment between the living and the dead. One party to it wouldn’t be alive any more by that time.

He hung up. He consulted his watch, then he retrieved the directory, once more traced his finger down it until he had located Edge’s number. This time it was the street-address given with it that interested him, though. “About ten minutes to get here,” he murmured under his breath. He fished out one of his ubiquitous envelope-backs and jotted something on it. Then he folded it over small and stuck it back in his pocket.

He came out of the booth and moved back to the bar again.

“What time do you close up?” he asked the man behind the counter.

“Four o’clock, the usual time.”

“About twenty minutes to go,” Burgess murmured.

The place was emptying out by degrees. He stayed by himself at the far end of it. In ten minutes he looked at his watch again. Then he turned his head slowly and eyed the door. Nothing happened. No one came in. He packed a fist and swung it low toward the bar, under cover of his body, then pulled it short—as though his calculations had gone wrong, and he felt like taking it out on somebody.

The barman started putting out some of the lights. The last of the other customers had drifted out by now, there was no one at all in the place but Burgess. The barman

came back toward him to give him the hint. “Care for a nightcap before I put the corks back in for the night?”

Burgess nodded. He took out a bill and put it into the barman’s hand. “No change,” he said.

“Gee, thanks,” the barman beamed. Then he started to look down into his own palm.

“Don’t look at it, just take it over to the register with you,” Burgess said out of the comer of his mouth.

The barman went over to the register, stole a look of curiosity back toward him as he stood there before it.

Burgess got up and walked slowly toward the front entrance. He stood there a minute and buttoned up his coat tight. He shivered a little, as if he found it chilly-looking outside from where he was standing.

“Goodnight,” the barman called after him.

“Good-bye,” Burgess answered. He had a feeling that that was the right word to use. He pushed out into the eerie blackness of the street, pulled his hat down low, started to trudge away. It was now four o’clock in the morning. He wouldn’t have taken even odds on his chances of seeing five roll around, like he’d given the barman at Mike’s on the extra jigger.

Rubber whispered insidiously up alongside him before he’d moved half-a-dozen feet away, and a hooded car was there, slowly pacing him. A voice spoke from it. “Buddy, could we trouble you for a light?”

His breathing changed, but he didn’t give any other sign of knowing what this was. He reached in his pocket, then turned aside and went over to it.

He still couldn’t see anyone, it was like a coffin on wheels. They must have had the shades drawn. A hand reached out and took the matches, but they weren’t used, the flare from inside never came.

“Say something, buddy,” the voice urged.

“What d’you want me to say?”

“Just that, that’ll do nicely.” A second voice spoke from the depths of the car. “That’s him. I know him by his voice. He’s the one.”

“Here’s your matches back, buddy.”

Burgess looked down at where the hand had come slightly forward through the door-gap again. “That’s a gun you’ve got there,” he remarked calmly.

“It says ‘get in and make yourself comfortable.’ ”

A second door opened rearward to the first and he got in. Both doors closed tight and the wheels started to pick up pace.

It was pitch-black. He could feel someone on each side of him, but they were just formless masses of darkness, without faces or anything else. A voice spoke to his left. “You called up a certain party about a certain matter, a little earlier tonight, didn’t you?”

“Every call is to a party, about a matter,” Burgess parried. “You don’t have to be afraid, buddy. There’s a nice umbrella in it for you. All we gotta do first is find out if you’re a phony or on the up.”

“Where we going to do that?” Burgess asked quietly.

“To a warehouse where they store liquor. Was you ever to a warehouse where they store liquor? It’s very instructive.”

“You’ll frighten the guy,” a voice on the other side of him remonstrated with mock solicitude.

“No, the guy isn’t frightened,” Burgess answered imperturbably. He had to quirk his neck to get the words out freely, but they didn’t see that in the dark.

“Oh, the guy’s brave, huh?” was the jeering reply. Something white showed up in the blackness in front of him, and he instinctively shied away from it. “Just hold steady, buddy, this goes around your eyes.” The nudge of a tubular gun-muzzle into the cleft between two of his ribs added a note of persuasion. A blindfold was pulled tight around him, fastened at the back of his head.

“What for? I can’t see anything even without it.”

“Well, with it you can’t see. twice as good, that’s what for.” The car ran up some sort of a trucking ramp, then gave off a hollow, echoing sound, as though it had entered some sort of a vast enclosed place. Then it stopped, the doors latched open, and he could hear them getting out.

“All right, buddy, end of the line. Down you come.”

He missed the car-step, and flopped inertly against someone. He was shoved back, then steadied, gripped by both arms, and hustled forward, to the accompaniment of a small battery of other footfalls all around him, striking on wooden planking. “You stay out there with the car, Muggsy,” a voice ordered. The rest kept going.

Presently it spoke again. “Are we all in? Turn on some lights.” A thin line of yellow showed up along the bottom of Burgess’ blindfold. “Take the blinkers off him.”

The bandage was whipped off. He blinked helplessly a couple of times before he could get his eyes into focus. He was in some sort of a huge cavernous place, its ceiling so high it was completely ought of sight in the gloom. A shaded light brooded down on the floor, and on the four men around him, none of whom he had ever seen before. There was a shadowy background of packing cases dimly discernible, with aisles left through them here and there.

Four pairs of eyes stared at him with flinty inflexibility. One of their owners spoke at last. “Now there’s four of us here. You say you saw two guys come into Mike’s Tavern and shoot him, yesterday morning. All right, pick out the two you say you saw.”

He knew his life depended on the answer. “Give me a minute’s time,” he stalled. “Give my eyes a chance to get used to the light. I had a couple drinks back there, and I want to be sure what I’m doing.”

“Yeah,” the spokesman echoed mordantly. “You want to be sure what you’re doing.”

Burgess stared hard at the first one, on his left. The man stared back at him, evil eyed and granite-faced. He passed

on to the next, stared at him. The man tiled to stare back. His jaw twitched a little. His eyes dropped momentarily, then he recovered, went ahead staring.

"Come on," somebody said. "Either you do know or you don't!"

"I do know. I want to figure out what it's best for me to say."

The fourth man took out a sheaf of bills, left them lying in front of him on a corner of the packing case, without saying a word. There must have been at least a thousand dollars worth in the crumpled mass.

Burgess took a deep breath. "The two guys I saw come into Mike's Tavern and shoot Mike Oliver were you, the second guy, and you, the fourth," he said quietly.

Nothing happened for a minute. Then the man who had produced the money emitted a soft sigh of regret in the silence. He smiled a little with it. "That was the wrong answer."

"You two were the ones that were there, what's wrong about it?"

"Sure we were. And that's why it's the wrong answer. If you'd picked the wrong two, we'd have known you were guessing. You would have probably walked out of here alive. You picked the right two, so we know now you were really there. Too bad, but you'll have to take your five hundred in capsule form now."

A gun came up in his hand. "Move him out a little," he instructed. "It's liable to go into one of the cases, and that's my best four-star stock you've got him standing in front of."

Two of them grabbed Burgess each by an arm and started to swing him out further into the aisle.

"And put that down yourself," an authoritative voice suddenly bellowed from further back in the shadows, "or it's liable to go into something else besides that!"

Edge swung around to face in the new direction, and hitched the gun up to shoot. The crash, however, came from

the other end of the target-line, and he went slapping back into one of the cases with a wooden thud.

Inspector Lyons came forward, wallowing through the haze of his own shot. “You should always do as you’re told the first time,” he said grimly, “when it’s a police order.” He plucked the gun out of his hand, and Edge went sidling down to the floor, leaving a thin red streak across the stenciled signs on the packing-cases that said: “Edge’s Four-Star Bond.”

There was a cop or detective standing at each of the four aisles converging on the open place where Burgess’ execution had been slated to take place, blocking it off. The remaining three profited by the demonstration they had just been given. They obeyed the order the first time it was given, and showed their empty palms.

Lyons came over to where Burgess was hanging onto the edge of one of the cases by the backs of his elbows for support. “Are you O.K.?” he asked him.

“I’m all right,” Burgess answered, mopping his forehead. “My legs are just kind of rubbery, that’s all. Did you hear him? Were you close enough to hear him? You said if he convicted himself out of his own mouth—”

“I heard him, all right!” Lyons assured him. “And so did the whole squad I brought with me.”

“Then that’s all that matters. I guess I’ll sit down now.”

Burgess let himself down to the floor, knees reared. “Give us a cigarette,” he said limply. “I’m no hero.”

“No?” answered the inspector dryly. “You just gave an imitation good enough to fool me.”

Burgess struggled to his feet again. “I gambled heavy,” he explained. “I didn’t know if the bartender would take me seriously or not. I didn’t want to phone you before anything happened, because I had a hunch you wouldn’t pay any attention.”

“Guess I wouldn’t’ve,” Lyons admitted sheepishly.

“I couldn’t talk to him across the bar, for all I knew they were watching me from outside. So I scribbled on the back of an envelope for him to call you as soon as I left and tell you it was Edge, and that if I turned up croaked to blame it on him.”

“He did better than that. He got so curious after reading what was on it that he followed you to the door and watched you go—with the lights out behind him, of course. He saw the car pick you up and he even got a look at its number. He phoned that in to me. I sent it right out on the radio and a prowl-car spotted it on the way and tailed it here. Then all we had to do later was come where they’d told us.”

He went over and supervised the removal of Edge, prone on a stretcher, came back again.

“Is he dead?” Burgess asked.

“Naw. He’ll live to cost the state money on its electric bill. He thinks he’s dying, though, and he just admitted he did it, a second time over. Then in a couple days he’ll go into the second stage they all pass through, retract it again. That’s all right, we’re used to that. Let’s get back now, I want to sapolio the rest of these guys.”

On the way over to headquarters he remarked: “Those must have been a tough few minutes there, when they put you to the test.”

“Sure they were, but not in the way you think. The tough part was to guess the right ‘wrong answer,’ as he put it. I knew I could save my skin by guessing wrong, but that wasn’t what I was after. I’d never seen any of the four of them before. What I was scared of was picking the two that hadn’t been there, and getting let off instead of being given the works.

“You see how it was worked now, don’t you?” he went on. “It was a case of two birds with one stone. Or I guess you should say, one bar-glass. Edge had a long-standing grudge against Hastings. And a more recent and even hotter one

against Mike Oliver for daring to stand up to his liquor-distributing ring and refusing to be hijacked by it any more. So he figured one murder should be enough to take care of the both. He had one of his men, with grease on his hand, put on a souse-act and follow Hastings into a bar the night before. He shook hands with him, and Hastings printed his own tips all over the glass he was using, without knowing it. Then the would-be souse swiped it and brought it to Edge, probably wrapped up in a cloth or something. Edge took it in to Mike's with him, and switched glasses, left it behind there to damn Hastings, and carried his own out and threw it away. The guy with him wiped his own off clean before they left, but that one wasn't touched. The gun, I suppose, was taken apart and scattered all over the landscape. I tried to tell you about an extra glass turning up in the stock at the Tavern, but you wouldn't listen—"

Afterwards, back at his own office, the preliminary drycleaning of the suspects concluded for the time being, Lyons said to him: "The mechanics of the thing is clear enough, the switch of glasses and all that, but there's one thing I'd like to know. One thing that we missed up on and that you evidently didn't. What was it first started you off thinking the glass was a plant, and there was something phony about the whole set-up? There must have been something you caught that we didn't."

"That was a small thing. I didn't even bother mentioning it to you, because I was sure you'd seen it for yourselves. Edge, as often happens in such cases, in spite of the fact that he's dealt in liquor all his life and made all his money out of it, is not a whiskey-drinker himself, never touches it. So he went in there and ordered. He made one little slip. He didn't think it mattered what that last order was, that death-order. He already had Hastings' glass in his pocket, ready to leave behind him there. And he was taking his own out with him, no one would ever see it. So he must have figured what difference did it make whether he ordered

champagne or vodka or whatever it was? So habit reasserted itself, and he ordered beer. And the monkey with him, acting under the sort of autosuggestion that often crops up at such times, seconded his order. But Mike Oliver had a peculiar habit of insisting on payment first, his own barman told me that, and he beat the bullets into the cash-register with the coins they'd given him. The evidence was still there when I came into the place, half an hour later. And to make sure I wasn't mistaken, I looked it up on your own police photographs and I saw it over again. There was a whiskey-jigger and a beer-glass standing on the counter, and yet the indicator over the cash-box said '20¢.' You can't break that down into a whiskey and a beer. There's no whiskey in town that sells for ten cents a slug. Even arguing that the beer was just a chaser for the whiskey—and it wasn't, because they were both on an even line at the edge of the bar, and two customers' width away from one another—the price for the cheapest brand that Oliver's place carried in stock would have been twenty-five cents for one shot."

Lyons drummed his fingers on the edge of his desk. "Do you know of a good optician?" he said. "There's a few of the men detailed to me I'm thinking of sending around to one. And it wouldn't hurt for me to go myself."

He had it all lined up ahead of him. He'd just been given a by-line over his piece, so that was one step accomplished. Next a feature of his own. Then the city desk. Then managing ed—"Burgess!"

He bounced all the way down the steps, and there he was at the bottom again.

"Suppose you haul your petrified person out of here and earn the fifty bucks blackmail you're shaking us down for every week! Now to be more specific, I understand there's a woman on a window-ledge over on Franklin Street, threatening to jump—"

Burgess slammed the door on the stentorian tirade. “Well, at least I got a fifteen-buck raise out of it,” he grumbled.

DIPPED IN BLOOD

How two men—Moylan, the Big Guy, and Hammond, his henchman—bought a fountain pen with three gold bands and a small gold monkey's face at the top and bottom . . . a fountain pen that looked ordinary but carried death with it . . .

THERE WERE IN A BASEMENT somewhere, just the three of them, and it was late at night. The place was full of shadows, and the shadows made six of them, one extra for each.

There was Moylan, better known as the Big Guy, and Hammond, one of his henchmen, and an individual known simply as the Screw, with that bull's-eye appropriateness that underworld nicknames often have.

They had a dummy rigged up for the sales demonstration, on the order of a football-tackle dummy, swinging from a hook under the basement rafters. It had a patch pocket stitched to the upper left-hand side of it, about where the breast pocket would be in an ordinary suit of clothes.

The Big Guy was bending over a table, studying two objects under the light. They were two fountain pens, both identical, with marbleized casings, three gold bands of

diminishing widths, and a small gold monkey's face studding each end of both barrels, top and bottom.

"They're mates to the one Keller carries around, with him," Hammond assured the Big Guy. "I found out where his came from, ordered two more like it, and then brought them over for him to go to work on them."

The Big Guy glanced sourly at the Screw. "It took you long enough," he growled.

"I wanted to do it right," the Screw protested in a high-pitched, quavering voice. "You sent word there was no hurry."

"Maybe so, but I don't want the party to die of old age in the meantime. That ain't the idea at all."

"He won't die of old age," the Screw promised. "Not after he's tried using one of these. Let me have one and I'll show you what they do." Moylan quickly shifted his hands behind his back, one pen in each. "Wait a minute. I'm not taking any chances on them not being both alike. You pick one sight unseen."

"They're both alike," the Screw said. He tapped Moylan's right arm, and Moylan gave him the one in that hand, retained the other.

The Screw carried it over to the dummy, inserted it carefully into the patch pocket, so that it stood upright, as it would in a vest or breast pocket.

Then he carefully moved the worktable back against the far wall, out of harm's way. "Stand back there against the wall yourselves," he advised.

"What about the place here?" Moylan asked, glancing upward at the ceiling. "Anyone likely to hear it?"

"There's no one else in the building but me—it's vacant. That's why I do my work down here. They rent out the basement to me."

He held up something invisible in his hands. "This is a loop of horsehair," he explained. "I'm going to slip it over the refill lever, like this. This is the dangerous part." He

took several moments doing it. “All right, don’t worry, it’s on now,” he assured them.

He then took out a long coil of string from his pocket. Unlike the horsehair, it was thick enough to be plainly seen from where they were.

“Then I tie the string onto the horsehair. That’s because it’s too thick to go around the refill lever itself, without starting it open. All right, I’ve got it hooked up now.”

He started to move away from the dummy backward, carefully paying out the string as he went, until he was at about the same distance they were, at the far end of the oblong basement.

“It’s very simple,” he said. “Works on the same principle as an ordinary cigarette lighter. I have a tiny wheel of flint attached to the lever, on the inside of the pen, where the stuff is. When you pull up the lever to feed ink into the pen, it strikes a spark. *Boom.* No more hands, no more face. No more torso much either, at least, not all in one piece. The lever is the only detonator. You can push down as hard as you want on the point, and nothing happens. You can even drop it, as long as it don’t land too hard, and still nothing happens. It’s when you flip the lever out of its groove—”

His high-pitched, gleeful cackle and the way he chafed his hands together were unmistakable stigmata of latent insanity. But that was no deterrent as far as the Big Guy was concerned, as long as he was getting what he was paying for. “Never mind the lecture,” he said gruffly. “Just does it work or doesn’t it?”

“Watch and see.” The Screw started to lift the string, so that the slack was taken up. “Take care of your eyes. The pen casing is liable to—”

Both men raised their bent arms as shields, pressed themselves flat against the wall. The Screw gave his arm a sudden, vicious jerk. There was a flash of unbearable brightness that lighted up the whole basement. There was a

blast of concussive air that slapped their faces and sealed their eardrums for a minute.

Then, and only then, a dull throbbing roar followed, that seemed to last a surprisingly long time, like rolling thunder. The place was obscured with smoke for a few moments, that only gradually thinned to a point at which they could see each other once more.

They stared at one another dazedly for a moment through the haze. The dummy had vanished completely. Particles of it adhered to the walls. The hook that had supported it was swaying empty. Some of the plaster had come down from the ceiling directly over where the dummy had hung.

The Screw was the first to speak. “Satisfied?” he asked triumphantly. “It has about the same force as a hand grenade, only twice as compressed.”

Hammond was coughing strangledly, and wiping a bloody fleck from his cheek, where one of the fragments of the pen barrel had nicked him.

“Let’s get out of here,” Moylan choked. “Give him his five hundred dollars, and come on!”

“Sure the other one has just as much kick?” Hammond asked the Screw.

“I used the same proportion for both. You saw for yourself just now. And what’s the natural position to take when you stick a pen into the neck of a bottle of ink, for instance, and pull up the lever so it’ll drink up the ink? You hold your face down over it, close down over it, and watch it, to see if it’s taking in the ink. Well, the blast goes up. Like I told you, no more—”

“Come on,” Moylan urged impatiently. He had the door open already.

Hammond handed some money to the Screw. “It’s all there. Keep your mouth closed about this, now.” He closed the basement door and followed his chief up the stairs and outside into the night.

They strode across a vacant, rubble-filled lot to where a car stood waiting on the edge of a rutted, unpaved roadway. They got in. Hammond took out keys and made a motion to turn on the ignition.

Moylan stopped him with a chop of his hand. “Take your time. Let’s sit here a minute first.”

They sat in silent watchfulness for a moment or two, peering into the darkness around them.

“Guess nobody heard it.”

“Nobody around to hear it. Nothing but vacant lots and junk heaps all around here.”

They exchanged a look of perfect, unspoken understanding. Hammond unlatched the door and got out again.

“Use your own,” Moylan suggested quietly.

Hammond disappeared in the direction from which they had both just come. Moylan waited where he was, lightly tapping his fingers against the steering wheel.

Once a muffled thud sounded, from some distance away. As if somebody had carelessly dropped a hefty box or packing case, nothing more.

Suddenly, Hammond reappeared beside the car, completely self-possessed.

“Hear it?” he asked, getting in once more.

“Not much. Nothing to speak of.”

“I closed the cellar door to keep it down all I could. Here’s your five hundred back.”

Moylan coolly put it away in his inside pocket.

“He didn’t die right away,” Hammond mentioned casually. “He fell down and he laughed. I asked him what he was laughing about. But he just laughed some more, and then finally he croaked.”

Hammond pressed down the accelerator and they glided off—two men who had just bought a fountain pen.

The car was motionless again. The same car, the same two men. It was daylight now. Sunlight slanted across the sidewalk alongside which the car stood parked.

“There he goes,” Hammond murmured.

Neither one moved. Their eyes were staring fixedly at the rear-sight mirror.

“I told you he’d go in there,” Moylan answered. “He goes in to get shaved every morning regular.”

“Wouldn’t you think he’d take a bodyguard in with him?”

“He’s forgotten about me. I don’t think he even knows I’ve been let out yet. More important still, he doesn’t know I’m wise to who turned State’s evidence. They kept that undercover you know. I only got tipped off through the grapevine after I was already up.”

They contemplated the little wedge of mirror with the patience of cats watching a mouse hole. A small barber pole was reflected on it, far back along the street, reduced to the scale of a stick of red-and-white peppermint candy.

“You’ll have to go in there after him. I can’t—he knows me. He’s never seen you.”

Hammond nodded. “I’ll take care of it for you, boss.” He reached for the door handle.

Moylan stopped him with a negligent pass of his hand. “Take your time. He goes for the works. Give him a chance to get under the hot towels first, so he can’t watch you too close.”

They waited in relaxed silence—two men killing time in a car.

Presently, Moylan asked, “Did you get a good look at him when he went in? You saw what he was wearing, now?”

“Dark-blue suit.”

“All right, hit it, Hammond. He ought to be ready for the towels about now.”

Hammond opened the door and got out. They exchanged a brief look through the car window, then Hammond struck out down the street at a pace that was neither too hurried

nor yet too desultory—at a pace that was simply that of an ordinary man on his way to a barber shop.

He turned in at the pole and entered a small, neat-looking shop that had four chairs. There were two barbers and two customers in it. One was upright, getting a haircut. His legs, in gray slacks, were crossed underneath the voluminous bib that swathed him.

The other customer was stretched out, his face a twisted mass of steaming toweling. A pair of dark-blue trousered legs were thrust full-length to the chair's tilted footrest.

The head barber glanced negligently over as he came in. He gave him the professional, "You're next," and went on working.

Hammond doffed his own coat, hung it alongside the dark-blue one on the wall—so close that they were partly superimposed, one atop the other. Then he sat down on the chair directly underneath the two.

A short interval went by. The man under the towels spoke in blurred tones through the small orifice left for him to breathe through. "Don't take too long, Angelo. I've got a heavy day ahead of me."

"In hell," concurred Hammond silently.

Both barbers had their backs to him. One customer was sightless under a second and final application of towels. The other was cut off from a view of him by the intervening form of the barber attending him. It was a quadruple play that was not likely to occur again for the rest of the day.

Hammond stood up inconspicuously and matter-of-factly, as if he had just decided he would like to smoke while waiting. He reached into his own inside coat pocket for a cigar. He extracted two objects with the one movement—a cigar and a fountain pen. They had been side by side in readiness.

He pinned the two coat lapels together with his free hand, so that while he seemed to be holding one back out of the way—his own—he was in reality holding the two. The

adjoining dark-blue coat formed a sort of lining to his own. Its inside pocket was exposed in turn. The head of a fountain pen was revealed, held by its clip.

He withdrew that, replaced it with the one already in his hand, and let the under coat lapel fall back in place. Then he thrust the remaining pen into his own pocket, let that curl back, to the wall, and sat down again.

It was all deftly and quickly done. The positions of the other four had remained unchanged in that brief minute or two. None of them had looked over at him. The switch had escaped notice.

He bit off the end of his cigar, held a match to it. He allowed himself a single long-drawn puff.

Then he stood up again, as though he had just remembered something—an errand he had to attend to or a call he had to make. The head barber looked over and saw him shrugging into his coat.

“Right with you,” he promised.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Hammond answered. “Keep my turn.”

He walked out just a split second before the barber started unwinding the towels from the face of the man wearing the dark-blue trousers.

Outside, there was the faint sound of a car driving off from somewhere close at hand, unnoticed by the four within the shop. It must have been going in an opposite direction, for it never passed the place.

The junior barber was now holding a rear-view mirror up for the approval of the haircut customer. A moment later he had stepped down and begun leisurely to refasten his collar.

At almost the same time the other customer got through. The barber whisked the bib off him.

The two crossed one another’s paths, going toward their clothes on the wall. The man in dark-blue trousers went toward the seedy, faded sweater hanging limply from One of

the middle hooks. The man in the gray slacks went toward the dark-blue coat.

He put it on and went out.

The barber flicked a whisk broom to the shoulders of the other customer. “Your clothes don’t match today, Mr. Keller,” he remarked with friendly interest. “How come?”

“I was in a hurry, so I didn’t bother. My wife must have put my coat where I couldn’t find it. I only came out to get shaved and I’m going right back again, so it don’t make any difference.”

He shrugged on the topcoat he had used to cover up his ill-matched attire, and he went out, too.

The man in the gray slacks and blue coat was nervous. Three times he passed the bank entrance, coming and going, before he summoned up enough courage to go in. It was Friday and he was supposed to go in.

Every Friday he came here to the bank like this, and cashed a small check for his employer—a personal check to cover his employer’s weekend expenses. He should have been used to it by now. But today was going to be different.

He went in finally and got on line. It was a pretty long line. That was good—better for him. The teller would be rushed, and he wouldn’t notice. All they did was take it over to the file cards and compare it with the master signature.

Nothing to worry about there—the signature was genuine. The whole thing was genuine—all but the two extra zeros on the end of the amount. And it’s awfully hard to tell about zeros—they all look alike.

They couldn’t even phone the office and check on it. His boss wouldn’t be there any more. His boss was over at the railroad station, waiting for him to bring the expense money to him right now. His boss went out of town every week-end, from Friday to Monday. That was the beauty of it, that was

why it was so easy. And by Monday morning, he himself would be three days away. You can pack a lot of distance into three days.

The line crept forward. Whoever was on it behind him was in a big hurry. He kept shifting from foot to foot. He growled, “Come on, wake up, keep moving.”

The man in the gray slacks didn’t look around to see who he was. He didn’t want to get into any arguments with anyone, not now of all times.

He was one down from the window now. He still had time to back out, drop off the line. Stay honest, stay safe. He knew he wouldn’t, not now. He was too close to the point of carrying it out. He was being drawn forward, as by a magnet. There was no turning back. Nothing could save him.

The man behind him gave him an impatient dig. He sure was in a hurry, whoever he was. But again he refrained from looking around.

His turn now—he was up to the window.

The teller nodded to him. The teller knew him by sight, from other Fridays. He handed the check over. It was done now.

The teller looked at it, surprised.

The two extra zeros. The word “hundred” that he’d put in on the second line, where there hadn’t been anything at all before—not even that long dash that’s supposed to be streaked across the face of a check to keep just such things from happening. When you’re in a hurry to make a train, when you have a dozen other things on your mind at once, you grow careless; you don’t take time to put in the hundredths symbol that stands for cents and should come right after the amount, nor the long dash that follows. When you keep on doing this Friday after Friday, that’s how ideas are born in other people’s minds.

The teller came back with it, after checking the signature. He couldn’t make up his mind. The man in the gray slacks

was perspiring where it couldn't be seen, down under his collar. The man behind him was shifting from foot to foot and swearing under his breath.

Suddenly, the teller shoved it back at him again, face down. "I suppose it's all right," he said, "but just initial it under your boss's indorsement. The amount's bigger than usual this time."

They had pens and ink over against the wall. But he would have lost his place in line if he went over there. He knew if he ever did that, he wouldn't have the courage to start all over again.

He reached into his pocket for his own fountain pen, tried to keep his hand from shaking. He brought out the pen, reversed the cap. Then he stopped and looked at it, astounded.

It was a strange pen he'd never seen before. How had it got into his pocket?

That was all the time he was given. The man behind him now suddenly moved in on him, jarred him out of the way with a heave of his shoulder and side, and took over his place at the window without waiting any longer for him to get through. Moreover, he blocked off the wicket by leaning close up to it, so that nothing could be seen any more except the very top of the teller's head.

The unexpected shove sent the man in gray slacks staggering two or three paces away, off balance. He left the loosely grasped pen behind, ownerless, on the glass slab. As a matter of fact, it was now pinned down securely underneath the aggressor's heavily planted forearm, without his noticing it. A fraction of it, the tip, no more, peered out from underneath his sleeve. He had both arms squared off possessively around the sill, in a sort of dog-in-the-manger attitude, that at the same time effectively concealed what he was doing.

The check, because it was lighter, paper weight, had stayed in its owner's grasp when he was sent lurching

aside. He was still holding it between two fingers.

But something occurred to take his mind off pen and check alike.

Something seemed to be going on all around him, right under his eyes, and yet he couldn't be sure just what it was. It was being done very quietly, very unnoticeably, and he was hypnotized by it into a sort of frozen disbelief.

He could see a part of the teller's face over the shoulder of the man standing there before him. The part that he could see looked strangely white, he thought. The teller's eyes had a glassy look.

The people on line behind the man in question, accustomed to long waits in these flourishing times, were docilely uncomplaining, staring idly this way and that, with blank faces. Besides, the frosted glass paneling, along which they were strung out, obstructed their view to the inside. They couldn't see the teller at all from where they were standing.

The man in the gray slacks had a slantwise view—he was up front and out a little from the orifice. They were in closer and standing one behind the other.

There was a bank guard across the floor, but instead of coming over to inquire what the hitch was, he was standing up against the wall, stiff and still. Somebody had stopped before him, as if to ask him a question. But the question seemed to continue indefinitely. Neither one of them moved. They just stood there like that, eye to eye.

The man in the gray slacks took an incautious step forward, to try to close in again on the wicket from which he'd just been ousted so brusquely. Instantly, there was a man standing at his elbow who hadn't been there until now. He hadn't been on line, either. Where he'd come from, the man in the gray slacks had no idea.

The newcomer was holding one hand negligently to his inner pocket, as if in the act of reaching for a cigarette. But the cigarette never came out. His hand just stayed that way.

“Wait your turn, buddy,” he said tonelessly. His lips hardly moved.

“But it was my—”

“Don’t answer back, buddy. This is no time to be answering back. I mean it for your own good.” The hand bedded under his lapel stayed very still. Everything about him stayed very still.

The man in the gray slacks didn’t answer back. Something told him not to. He could feel thought waves of death all around him in the air, and wondered where they were coming from. No one seemed to be doing anything. It was a good time to stand very still, and not move your hands or your feet or your jaw, just stay in one place, not even breathe any more than was absolutely necessary.

Neither the teller’s hands nor the customer’s were visible—they were down too low. But their shoulders were moving busily, indicating surreptitious motion. The teller’s were flinching, as though he were shoving something forward through the opening down at hand level. The customer’s were contracting and expanding, as though he were sweeping something toward him, and coming back every minute for. more. Then there was a muffled slapping sound, as when something keeps falling into a canvas bag or sack held open to catch it.

The tip of the fountain pen suddenly disappeared from under the arm that had been clamped down on it, like something swept up and carried along in a flowing tide going by where it had been resting.

There was a strange stillness all over the bank. A sort of lull. Though there hadn’t been any noise before, there was even less now.

The customer who had hogged the wicket turned away, started toward the entrance, a small canvas bag with a double grip swinging low at his side.

Then, suddenly, all hell seemed to break loose.

An alarm bell started to jangle raucously, all over the place at once. A shot crashed out, another, a third. Then a hail of them.

The waiting line crumbled away like sand. People broke and ran, then changed directions and ran back the other way again, bumping into those who were still running the first way.

The man in gray slacks dropped down to a shoelace-tying level, knee to ground and head low, and stayed that way, but without tying his shoelaces.

Then it ended—just as suddenly as it had begun. Those on the floor picked themselves up and looked around dazedly. There was a thin haze of smoke all over the place. There were cops and more of them were coming in every minute.

The man who had been crowding the bank guard for so long now stood with his back to the wall in turn, very straight and very still, with a gun pointing out of a cop's hand to keep him that way.

The man who had been reaching for his cigarettes for so long had finally brought his hand out. But no cigarettes were to be seen. And something red was running down all over his hand from under his sleeve.

The canvas sack stood quietly on the floor, not more than five yards from the entrance. The man who had been carrying it lay flat on his back beside it, in a neat ruler-straight line. One hand was still twisted through the double grip. Otherwise, he'd changed his mind completely about taking it outside with him.

The man in gray slacks was white and shaky when he finally came out of the bank about a quarter of an hour later. The fountain pen was still lying beside the canvas sack squatting inside there on the floor. He hadn't even asked for it back. Let it stay there; he didn't want it. It wasn't his anyway.

He hadn't cashed the check either. He'd brought it out with him; it was still in his hand.

He tore it into small pieces as soon as he was safely outside. Then he tore the small pieces into smaller ones. He'd tell his boss he'd lost it in the excitement. His boss wouldn't mind so much. It had only been for twenty-five dollars—without the two extra zeros.

He went away from there in a hurry, without looking back. What was that old saying? "Crime doesn't pay." It sure didn't. He was going to be honest the rest of his life.

The guard came in and put the fountain pen on the bank manager's desk.

'They found this next to the getaway bag, he said. "The inspector told me to bring it in to you.'

"It must belong to the teller."

"No, sir, they've already asked him."

"One of the customers dropped it in the excitement, then. Leave it here. I'll hold it until someone claims it."

The guard closed the door and went out. The manager hadn't fully got over his fright yet. He gulped down an aspirin, mopped his forehead, then sat down and scanned some papers with a jittering hand. He took up one of his desk pens, dipped it to sign the papers.

It came up dry. His desk well hadn't been filled.

He saw the fountain pen lying there, reached for it. But there was no ink in that either.

His nerves were taut. He put it down with considerable asperity and pressed a buzzer.

He was still uncomfortably warm under his collar. He swung around and snapped on a switch. An electric fan, facing his desk from over in the corner, whirred on.

All the papers on the desk reared up a little along one edge, shifted over an inch or two. One of them nudged the pen barrel. The pen rolled lazily over, just once. Then the clasp on the outside of it stopped it, acting as a brake.

A girl opened the door.

"After this, will you please see that there's ink on my desk before I come in every day?"

The draft of the open door, added to the current coming from the fan, sent a spurt of tail wind playing over the desk.

The pen stirred, took another swing over, playing leapfrog over its own clasp. Again the clasp would have braked it—only this time there was no more desk top left for the clasp to snag on.

The pen went over. It landed in a yawning wastebasket, paper-choked and directly under with a very light impact that was drowned out by the hum of the fan.

She came in after everyone else had gone. She always did. She was a very tired-looking woman, painfully thin.

It was quiet and her footsteps echoed weirdly in the silence, but she wasn't frightened. She was used to empty places. That was her job—empty places. Sometimes she was the only living thing in a whole building.

She took out her passkey, opened the door, and put on the lights. Then she brought in her pail and brush, got down on her knees, and went to work scrubbing the floor.

She went around the man's desk, and under it. Her thoughts kept time with the endless swiveling of her tired arm. Tommy was graduating today. He was all she had. That was why she was doing this, for him. She ought to have a present for him. It didn't seem right.

She picked up the wastebasket, to take it outside and empty it. Then she saw what was lying in it, right on top of all the papers. She reached for it and lifted it out. It looked almost brand-new.

A fountain pen. That was what you gave them; that made the best kind of graduation present.

She examined it, and she was no fool. She could tell right away its being in there like that was an accident. It must have fallen in by mistake. People didn't throw anything like

that away, with three gold bands on it. Even if it didn't work quite right, they would have it repaired.

She oughtn't to do it. It belonged to someone. She ought to put it back on the desk, or turn it in downstairs when she clocked out. She'd never done anything like this before.

But Tommy was graduating today. She didn't have any present for him. The man who owned this office must be rich. What was a fountain pen to him? Besides, it was in the wastebasket, wasn't it? She was entitled to whatever was in the wastebasket.

She fumbled underneath her apron, and the fountain pen disappeared.

Then she went ahead grimly, scrubbing. Ail right, so she'd taken something that didn't belong to her. But Tommy was going to have a present today for his graduation. She hummed a little under her breath while she worked.

Hammond brought Moylan's kid to the office with him right after the graduation was over.

"Well, here's the young perfessor back," he announced. "Graduated and all."

Moylan was proud of him. "I bet he knows more than we both do now," he said to Hammond. "I quit when I got up to 4A."

"Why weren't you there, Pop?" the kid wanted to know in a shrill voice. "All the other kids' fathers were there."

Moylan got sort of red in the face and tight around the collar. He couldn't seem to find the right answer right away.

"Is it because you were up at that place, Pop?"

"Shut up," Moylan said gruffly. He became very busy suddenly, rifling through papers on his desk. "Now clear out of here. I got work to do. Take him home with you, Hammond."

“Hey, sign your name in my autograph book first, will you, Pop?” The kid opened a small autograph album someone had given him. “I got everyone’s name in here but yours—all the kids’ in my class and all the teachers’. Wait’ll I get some ink in this first.”

He leaned across the edge of Moylan’s desk from the outside, trying to reach the set-in inkwell with a fountain pen that had materialized from one of his pockets.

Moylan was sitting very still suddenly, unnaturally still. His color started to drain off as though he were hooked up to a transfusion tube. His eyes started to get bigger and to come out forward in his head. His lips parted over silence; the voice that was supposed to come through log-jammed somewhere down below. When it finally did make it all the way up and out, it was scratchy and full of sand.

“Where’d you get that pen? That’s the one! Three gold bands and a monkey’s face on the top and bottom. Put it down!”

The kid had it harpooned into the ink by now, but he’d had to raise his feet clear off the floor in order to reach it. The desk was the size of a pool table.

“I pinched it off a guy in school,” he said. “His old lady gave it to him for a graduation present. He never even felt me take it. What’re you so scared of, Pop?”

“Hammond!” his father screamed. “Take it away from him.”

Moylan couldn’t reach him across the desk from where he sat; and he couldn’t escape from the swivel chair on either side—the kid had him hemmed in. There was only one way to get farther away from it than he was already, and that was backward.

Hammond took one look. Then he cringed, shrank back. He was brave enough when it came to shooting down an unarmed crackpot in a basement, for instance. But he didn’t have nerve enough to take a chance on getting over to the kid before that refill lever went up.

Instead Hammond threw up his arm to shield his face, and backed away, cowering. He retreated to the threshold, on across it, and out into the hallway beyond the office. He kept backing until the far wall out there stopped him.

The kid had a perverse streak in him. Maybe it was a trait that had come from Moylan himself. He saw that something about the pen scared the wits out of his father. He'd never seen his father scared before.

He lifted the pen from the ink and lunged at his father with it, point foremost.

Moylan reared up against the back of the chair, his arms a flurried frenzy, his voice a howl now. The chair was swivel-topped. When weight went to the back, the chair went to the back. It gave a sudden crazy lurch, as though its stem had broken.

There was a window behind him. It was closed, but it was glass.

There was a shattering explosion—not from the pen, but an explosion of window glass. Particles snapped all over the place, like hailstones.

There was no more window. There was just a frame, rough-edged with a lot of jagged glass splinters studding the inner sides of it. The chair teetered empty, tilted all the way back.

A scream went winging down somewhere outside, burning itself out with the velocity of its own descent long before it had hit anything to stop it.

The office was on the twenty-second floor.

Keller and his junta were sitting around their usual table at Dinty's Restaurant, late that same night, when the news first came in. It was their regular nightly gathering place. They were always to be found there, from midnight until two or three in the morning.

There was a new member present tonight, someone who was being broken into the group. He was very anxious to please his new boss and show himself worthy of the privilege of being admitted to the inner circle.

Frankie, the blind newsman who peddled at Dinty's, came in with a batch of the early-morning edition under his arm. Frankie was Keller's pet charity. He always bought as many papers as there were members of his crowd seated around the table. He always gave Frankie a five-dollar bill in payment, and then refused change.

There were six of them at the table tonight besides himself. "Six, Frankie," he said, and gave him the usual bill.

"Thanks, Mr. Keller! Gee, thanks!" the newsman babbled, and after going around the table and dealing out six papers, he trudged on his way.

Everyone began to read—everyone, that is, except Keller himself. He sat back comfortably puffing on a cigar, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

"Hey, boss, here's something you're going to like," somebody exclaimed.

"Yeah? What?" asked Keller benevolently.

"Remember Moylan? It says here he isn't with us any more."

Keller brought his eyes down to table level, chuckled contemptuously. "No kidding? Read it to me. That's the kind of an obituary I enjoy listening to."

"It says he took a fast freight out of an office window twenty-two stories up."

The new member thought he saw a chance of ingratiating himself with his chief. He'd been watching for something like this all evening. Quick as a flash he stood up in his seat and offered his own paper across the table to Keller. "Here y'are, boss, take mine," he said eagerly.

Keller didn't seem to hear him at first. In fact, he didn't even seem to see the paper, although it was pointed straight out toward his chest.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a minute. No one seemed to know what to say. Somebody coughed uneasily.

The neophyte, however, was not sensitive to nuances. He repeated his offer. “Go ahead, boss, help yourself,” he urged. “Read mine. I don’t need it.”

This time he got results. A thunderous scowl darkened Keller’s recently jovial face. “Shut up,” he growled, “you young squirt!”

Somebody kicked the offender’s shin under the table, and he sat down as abruptly as he’d risen.

The strained pause in the conversation continued. Keller got up finally, his face still flushed with displeasure. “Be right back, fellows,” he said tersely. “Think I’ll go over and get a fresh light for my cigar.”

The moment he was gone, the question that had been sticking in the novice’s throat burst out unchecked. “What’d I do?”

“You dope,” was the scathing answer. “Don’t never go offering him a newspaper or a magazine in front of everybody, like you just did. Didn’t anybody wise you up? He can’t read or write! Not even his own name. And he hates for anyone to catch on.”

The culprit’s mouth dropped open and stayed that way.

“But . . . but he carries a fountain pen around in his pocket. I saw it with my own eyes only a minute ago, when he was sitting here.”

“Oh, sure,” was the reply. “He’s been carrying that around for years. But he’s never once used it yet, and he never will. It’s just a bluff. Like I told you, he don’t like anyone to catch on. He’s sensitive about it, see? People that don’t know him very well—it fools them.”

“He didn’t die right away,” Hammond had said to Moylan. “He fell down and he laughed. I asked him what he was laughing about. But he just laughed some more.”

THE LIGHT IN THE WINDOW

Night, and the soldier stood under the lamp-post watching. High up over his head the arc-light was like a motionless flare-shell, blinding, dazzling, sending out rays; but standing still up there, not settling slowly to the ground the way a flare-shell would. And then down where he was, on the pavement, there was a big round disc of ghost-light, like a thin dusting of talcum on the ground, with him standing in the middle of it, like a phantom spotlight. Halfway down the tall post, between the two, the arc-lamp and him, two flanges stuck out, like a clothes-peg spread wide open. One said ‘14th Avenue’, and it pointed behind his back. One said ‘Second Street’, and it pointed the way he was looking.

He stood there like a statue. Only statues don’t feel. He stood there like a chunk of wood. Only chunks of wood don’t hurt so much.

His back was pressed up against the post; the post was what was keeping it up straight. He had one arm looped behind him, giving him an added grip on the post. The other hung slack. He was young, as soldiers are. But not a boy any more. There were lines on his face that had come too soon. His cheekbones were too pronounced; his jaw needed a little easing. His eyes were steady, and slitted with distant sighting. They never moved, they never wavered. They were on a certain window, diagonally opposite, a number of houses down. They never once left it.

On the ground at his feet there lay a number of things. Things that must have fallen, that didn't belong there. A cone of thin green tissue paper. The paper was so flimsy it had burst a seam with its own fall, and the head of a rose and a sprig of fern were peering out through the rent. Then there was an oblong box lying there too, also wrapped in paper, with a tinselled string securing it, the way a candy-box is secured. Then there were two or three cigarettes. The peculiar thing about them was they were all still full-length; that is, unconsumed. The tip of each was just a little charred from the first touch of flame. As though they had been dropped by awkward handling in the very act of lighting them, before they had served their purpose, and not just been thrown away.

He didn't seem to notice that they had fallen. His eyes never left that window.

It was the ground-floor window. It lay alongside the door. Over it there were others in a straight line, a second, a third, a fourth, but he paid no heed to them; it was that one, and that one alone, that held his fixed gaze—his haunted stare.

It was dark, dead, lifeless. It gave him back nothing, not a sign. The one over it, on the second, was lit, was cheerful, was alive. There was even a pot of geraniums on the sill of that one, as if to dress it. But that wasn't the one he was watching, that couldn't do anything for him. Then over that, the third was dark again. And then the fourth in turn was lighted. They seemed to alternate. One floor light, the next dark. But those weren't the ones he was watching. The first, the ground-floor one, was dark.

She was out. But she'd come home soon. He'd watch for her to come home. And then just as she was about to enter he'd call to her and say . . .

No, that would frighten her. Too sudden, too unexpected after three years; out here in the dark, on the empty street. She'd think she was seeing a ghost. Well, she was; there are

ghosts of flesh and blood, just as well as the other kind. Who should know that better than he? He'd wait for her to go inside. He'd let her get in first. He'd know when she was in by the way the window lit up. That would tell him. Then he'd go in after her and knock on the door. Softly, quietly, in order not to alarm her. Then she'd open. Then she'd see him. Then hurting would stop.

He should have told her that they'd brought him back. He should have written and let her know, all these weeks, that he was already over here, in a hospital on this side. But he'd wanted to wait until he was all right, to make it even better, to make it more complete. They'd told him he would be. And now finally he was.

She'd come along soon. Better get ready. He'd have to pick up the candy first, he'd have to pick up the flowers. He started to; he started to bend over slowly towards them. He couldn't quite make it, though. He went back flat against the post again. Well, not right now, then; in another minute or two, instead. He'd rest up some more first, before doing it. Funny how tired you got. Battle fatigue, they called it at the hospital. They said it would wear off; they said, "You'll be all right now."

Under the lamp-post the soldier stood watching.

A car horn gave a sharp tweak as it glided past behind him, and he recoiled against the lamp-post, his head went back and hit it, and the hollow stem sounded with a lazy brazen *bong.* Then he let out his breath slowly, and it made a soft hiss. He moved his arm, he drew his sleeve across his forehead, and he was all right again.

He said to himself: 'I think I'll try again. I'll try lighting another of those. So that by the time she comes I can show her I have it licked.'

He had only one of each left, one cigarette, one match. He took the cigarette out and put it in his mouth. That part he could always get. Then he pulled off the match and struck

it. That part he could do all right too. It was bringing the two of them together.

He started to move the flame closer. He was afraid of it. It was like that one that had burst right in front of him up front that day. It touched the tip of the cigarette, and he couldn't help it, his face jerked back. The cigarette dropped.

'I guess I won't smoke right now,' he decided ruefully. 'She'll light one for me when she comes, and we're in there together. Like she used to. Only in those days I didn't *have* to have it done for me.'

She ought to be home soon now. She ought to be home soon. *Please.* Out here alone in the dark.

Suddenly his eyes were wide. Something had happened to the house front. The window, *the* window, had bloomed yellow. And she hadn't come in from the street. No one had gone in. He'd been right here watching. His eyes hadn't once left it. She must have—she must have been in there all the time.

In the dark?

There was no other room, only that one overlooking the front; no second room for her to have been in. He'd been in there lots of times before he went away.

It must be—not there. He blinked to make it go away. It stayed bright yellow. He backed his hand across his eyes and held it off a moment, then took it away and looked again. It stayed bright yellow. The one above had gone out by now, but *it,* the one that mattered, it stayed bright yellow.

It even made a pale reflection out before it on the street, and only real things can make reflections. Something can fool you itself, but if it has a reflection it's *there.*

The front door swung out, dropped back, and a man was standing there in front of it.

I'll wait until he's out of the way, the soldier said to himself, then I'll start for over there. He'll go away in a

minute.

The man just stood there, enjoying himself. You could tell he was enjoying himself. You could see his head go back and his chest go out, while he took a deep breath of the fresh air, and held it for a while appreciatively, and then let it go again.

He gave his hat a little shift to make it sit more jauntily. He straightened the shoulders of his coat to make them fit more closely. Then he straightened his tie conceitedly. Then at last he struck out and came down the steps to the sidewalk.

He turned towards the corner the soldier watched from, instead of the other. He was still on the opposite side at first. Then he left it. He was crossing diagonally towards the soldier now, approaching that pallid spotlight of his vigil.

The soldier didn't move, he stayed there, back to post. He'd be out of the way in a minute, this passer-by, and behind him the window still waited.

He passed behind the soldier, to the rearward of the post, for that was out at the edge.

The footsteps stopped short. Then they came back a pace or two, as if to regain perspective from the side.

"Hey, wait a minute—"

The soldier hadn't moved, it was just rhetorical.

"Aren't you Mitchell Clark? Sure. Mitch; that was it. They used to call you Mitch."

The soldier turned his head and he was standing there right beside him looking at him.

"I thought I knew your face," he exulted. Then a momentary shade of concern crossed his own. "Don't you remember me? Art Shearer, from the old neighborhood." He held out his hand.

"Oh," the soldier said. He did now; he hadn't at first. "Oh, sure." He shook the other's hand.

"How long is it now? Must be four, five years." He didn't wait for the answer. "You're looking good. Must have

agreed with you. Rugged grind, hunh?" He didn't wait for the answer. "Back for good, or just temporary?" He didn't wait for the answer. "What are you doing around here, holding up this post?" He glanced briefly up towards the flanges. "Oh, waiting for a bus, I guess. I don't envy you, brother; you're going to have *some* wait, these days."

He brought out cigarettes, as a spur to sociability.

"Have one."

They had black bands encircling their waists, up near the tips.

"What are they?" the soldier asked curiously.

"They're called 'Black-and-Whites.' Funny brand, hunh? You don't often run into them. I stick to them because I got used to them."

He was prodding into his pockets.

"Gee, I lost my lighter. Or left it somewhere. Can't find it." He clicked his tongue worriedly. "What d'you think of that? Never mind, I think I've got a match. Yeah, here's one."

The small flame, bedded in Shearer's two hands, yellowed both their faces for a moment as they inclined towards it. The soldier's eyes came to rest on Shearer's cheek, at a point offside to his mouth, remained fixed there.

"There's something on your face."

"Where?"

"Right there. No, there."

Shearer took a handkerchief out, touched it with the tip of his tongue, dug at his face. Then he peered at the handkerchief. The smear had transferred itself.

"That stuff gets all over the map," he smirked, pleased with himself.

Mitch Clark tilted his nose slightly and sniffed. "What's that?" Then he looked dubiously at the cigarette he was holding.

"What? Oh, that. That's not the cigarette. It's probably on me." He hoisted his coat lapel up towards his own nose, sniffed in turn. "Yeah, it's all over me," he admitted ruefully.

“Whew! It’s called ‘One Hour Alone.’ Can you imagine; so strong it even gets on you secondhand.” He wagged his head deprecatingly, but he was still pleased, none the less.

Mitch Clark kept his eyes down. He didn’t want to look at the other man. He didn’t want to look at the window, lighted, waiting, there in the background behind him.

He edged his foot forward. The candy box went over the edge of the kerb and into the gutter below. It was damp there. The paper stained dark in patches as it soaked in the moisture. It was no good now.

“What was that?” Shearer asked, glancing down. “Something for the garbage-collector’s truck, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Mitch Clark answered dully. “Something for the garbage-collector’s truck.” He kept looking down.

“What’re you looking at?” Shearer asked finally, following the direction of the look with his own eyes a second time.

Mitch Clark’s mouth twisted briefly, then resumed its normal outline. “You’ve got your—left shoe on your right foot and your right on your left. The hollows are on the outside.”

Shearer chuckled. He waited deliberately for the soldier to look up at him, meet his eyes. Then when he had, he winked portentously at him. “I have?” he drawled, with complete lack of discomfiture. “Well, what d’ya know?”

Mitch Clark shivered a little, bunched his shoulders defensively. “Chilly tonight, isn’t it?” he mumbled.

“Chilly?” Shearer gave him a look of roguish surprise. “Blamed if I can notice it. Don’t ask me to tell you. Not when you’ve just been treated like I have.”

He wanted the soldier to know. He wanted him to get it. He wanted to brag about it. He wanted to hammer it into him, by every means except the direct statement.

He even turned his head and glanced briefly over his shoulder, towards where he’d come from. Then when he’d brought his face forward again, there was that smirk of self-esteem all over it.

It faded slowly. His audience wasn't appreciative enough. This conversation hadn't been any fun.

"You've changed some, haven't you?" he let Clark know critically. He threw his cigarette away rather curtly. "Well, I guess I'll be moving. No use hanging around here all night." He didn't offer his hand in parting. Then, from a pace away: "Hope you get your bus. Take it easy."

The soldier didn't answer, didn't move. He heard the footsteps dilute with distance, blur and expire. Silence all around him now. His back wasn't upright against the post for its entire length any more; the upper part was curved forward, as if it had started to peel off it. But he hadn't answered; didn't move.

Only his thoughts moved. But not in a straight line; circularly, round and round, like wisps of bunting caught in the wings of an electric fan. I'm more tired than I was before. I've got to get away from this post. I've got to go. But where? Turn, go back, before you know. You don't know yet. Turn, go back, before you do. No, it's too far away. And they don't want you to come back, they said you were all right. You'll have to—go forward, across the street, that's much nearer. But then you're liable to *know.* Isn't there *any* place where you can go except just those two, forward and back? No, none. Some people have so many places to go, and you have just two, and you don't want to go to either one of them. Why did you, how did you, happen to run out of places, get lost like this? . . . I'm more tired than I was before. I've got to get away from this post. Like this. That's it. Now *pull.* Pull hard—

He broke from it, and was on his own. He went the way the other man had come, diagonally towards the far side. He staggered twice, but he made it. He got up on to the opposite kerb. He wanted to stop again, but there was no post handy. He went over to the steps that led up to the door and stopped there, bending his stomach over the ornamental iron knob that flanked them.

He stopped a long time. I've got to get away from these steps. I've got to go *in.* In there, right in front of me. He went up the three or four steps and then he stopped again, this time leaning against the door embrasure, head down as if he were listening to the stone.

Then suddenly he made a neat, deft little move, an economical half-turn, on one shoulder against the stone, and went in, slipped in like a shadow. Like a shadow when the light changes on a stone facing and drives it away.

The door was white. A pure colour, an innocent colour. The push button beside it was white too; of bone. His finger, held rigid to the push button, was white—with pressure, with strain. The nail was white, all the blood had been forced away from under it. Across the knuckle were livid white cicatrices, ugly to look at, produced by the flattening tension.

The sound of a bell ringing mutedly came through the wood; it was curiously like the whimpering of a sick, puny child.

Over the button there was a card held fast in a rack. On it was printed 'Miss Constance Sterling.' It, the card, would have been a blameless white too, but for one single blemish. The print of somebody's grimy thumb had been left on it; had soiled it, marred it, stained it. It stood out across the 'Constance', dimming it somewhat. It was large, could only have been the print of a man's thumb.

His finger trailed off the push button; his whole arm dropped to his side, and swayed with its own weight, then hung inert. The puling sound behind the wood stopped.

He let his head sink forward until his forehead touched the door. It was as though he were saying a prayer.

He heard something and drew it back.

The door opened and a girl stood there, her face now where his had been only a moment ago.

Her hair was dishevelled. On one side of her face it stood too far forward, almost enclouding one eye. On the other side it was pushed too far back. It was as though her head had been reclining sideways upon a pillow, in sleep or—indolent dalliance. The lower part of her form was enshrouded in soft clinging drapery, that fell too slack, overhanging even the tip of her foot; that had not yet been adjusted properly to her figure, for above it failed to cover one shoulder entirely, and clung to the outermost curve of the other by sheer grace of accident. Her hand was busy with it, trying to support it, to retrieve it.

Two fever-spots of red stood out upon her cheeks that were not rouge, for they were too sharply defined, not graduated enough about their edges.

Her eyes were large with fright. White ships pierced with tremendous black holes, and about to sink at any moment.

They danced about, trying to get in step with his, the man's, as though there were a form of dancing performed by the eyes alone, in which, just as in the bodily form, the man led, the woman followed. She was out of step in this dance.

They stood there, faces close. So close that only a kiss could have brought them closer. There was no kiss.

"Why don't you speak to Mitch?" he said poignantly. "Why don't you say hello to Mitch?"

"Mitch," she answered. She was all out of breath, even with just that one word, so it must have been something else that had robbed her of it.

She panted a little, lightly. "For a minute I thought I was seeing a ghost."

"Maybe you are," he said quietly. "I don't know." His jaw was still tight, and it made the words come out flat. Everything he said had a toneless, pressed quality to it.

"Are we—just going to stand like this?" he said.

She moved backward, and drew the door with her. Two sides of a room expanded into view, like a strip of picture postcards being opened to form a single scene.

In the corner stood the bed. It was tortured, had been used. One pillow overhung the side, as if all but swept off with the sudden inquiring departure of its occupant. The other was reared slightly upward against the headboard, in opposite direction to the first. Orange light leered dimly over it, from under the silk shade of a lamp that stood low beside it. This shade had a single rent or ‘run’, as in a taut silk stocking, close beside one of its supporting ribs, and there the light came through less dissembling, less evasive, in a clearer tone of yellow.

A still-kindled cigarette lay under the lamp, causing the orange light to seem to flicker at times as its invisible exudation filmed it. A book lay there too, on its face in sudden discard, pocket-sized and paper-covered, its backbone reared and not heavy enough to force itself flat.

“I shouldn’t let you in,” she said. “Like this, the way I am. But you’ve been away to war. You’ve been hurt.”

“You shouldn’t let anybody in,” he said tightly. “Not just me; anybody.”

He moved slowly past her, through the gap she allowed him, she offered him, and then she closed the door behind him.

“Here, sit down here,” she said, and her hand speared at a chair, sketchily readying it for him. Some pinkish garment that had been slung across its back whipped rearward from sight and never reappeared again, as though done away with by sleight of hand.

“Just let me—fix this,” she said, and sat down before the mirror of a dresser, at the opposite wall from the bed. She drew the garment higher about her shoulders and fastened it with something, some pin or something, in front, out of his sight—her back was to him—so that it stayed primly secured from then on.

She took a comb and touched it to her hair in a place or two, then set it down, and touched the places she had touched with it with her hand instead.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she said. “The last letter, you were still over there. Why did you walk in like this?”

He was fumbling for a cigarette. He didn’t answer.

She must have seen him in the mirror. “There are some over there,” she said.

He got up and went slowly to the place she had pointed out. He found the package. There was only one left in it. He took that one out. But then he kept looking at the package, even though it was now worthless, empty. He did everything very slowly, as though he were infinitely tired and had scarcely the energy to do it.

Again, she must have seen him in the mirror, for she didn’t turn her head.

“What’s the matter?”

“Do you always smoke this brand?” he said thoughtfully. “ ‘Black-and-Whites’ ?”

“Oh, those—” The way she stopped, for a moment he had an impression she was almost as surprised as he at their being there. “No, I—” Then she said: “It’s the first time. They were all I could get. I had to take what he’d give me. There’s been a shortage, you know.”

He picked up an ashtray and looked at it pensively.

“Why are you doing that?”

He put it down again. He said dully, as though it were entirely unimportant: “You must have smoked some with your lipstick on—and some without it. Some are pinkish at their tips. And some are still white.”

She turned round and looked at him over her shoulder, ingenuously blank. “Some must be from earlier in the evening, when I first came home and still had it on. Then after I cleaned it off I went ahead smoking, and those are the others.” She laughed apologetically. “I should have emptied it out.”

“That’s a good answer,” he said sadly. And then he agreed wistfully, “Yes, you should have.” His fist slowly closed, and the empty cigarette package pleated into a curlicued pod, and then dropped from it.

He watched it intently even after that, as though expecting it to re-form and fill out to its original shape again. Then he seemed to notice that he was still holding the cigarette in his hand. For he looked at it, in a rather helpless, dubious sort of way, as though wondering what it was there for, wondering what was meant to be done with it.

“Wait,” she said eagerly. She jumped up from the mirror. “Let me. Like I used to. Remember? You go and sit down. I’ll do it for you.”

He returned to the chair.

“I was trying to outside on the street before, and I—”

She was standing before him now, holding a small enamelled lighter. She bent over towards him with fond intentness, flicked her thumb against it a number of times. Only an arid spark resulted.

“Oh,” she said impatiently, “it’s always out of fuel just when I want it. Wait, here’s another.” She had gone, was back again. A generous, spiralling flame leaped up this time.

“That’s a man’s, isn’t it?” he said indifferently.

It was squat, bulky, coated with rough-grained simulated leather.

He smiled astringently, raised sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes towards her. “What are you doing with it?”

“I don’t know whose it is. I found it. I was coming home one night, and it was lying there, big as life, outside my door there in the hall. So I picked it up and brought it in with me. There’s nothing on it to show whom it belongs to.”

“No, there isn’t, is there?” he agreed forlornly. “Not a thing, not the slightest.” He shook his head, as if in melancholy accord with her negation.

He had neglected to raise the cigarette to proper position. She was waiting, inquiringly. “I don’t want to smoke,” he said muffledly. He let that fall from his fingers, as the package had before. Then he stroked them unnoticeably against the side of his thigh, as if he were wiping them, or removing some foreign, unworthy tincture from them.

She quenched the flame with a click and put the little implement aside. Then she turned her face back towards him again, querulously worried.

“I know we’re a little strange to each other yet. Just at first. They told me it might be like—But—we’ll be all right, won’t we, Mitch?” She brought her face closer, her lips towards his. “Don’t you want to—say hello to me, the right way? Our old way? You haven’t yet, since you first came in, you know.”

Her hand went up and traced his hair back, lingeringly. Then when it rose a second time to repeat it, his head wasn’t under it any more; it had shifted or swerved somehow, without her actually seeing it do so. She was stroking barren space.

Again her lips diffidently approached his. He drew in his breath, sharply. “What is that?”

“What?”

He drew in breath a second time.

“Oh, that. ‘One Hour Alone’.”

“So strong,” he said, as if repeating something from memory, “it even gets on you secondhand.” She saw his eyes go up towards the ceiling, as if trying to determine whether he had recited it right.

“I may have used too much,” she admitted. “Just now I was so excited, seeing you sitting there in front of me, by way of the mirror.”

“Just now?” was all he said.

She withdrew herself slowly from him, reluctantly straightened to her feet. “You’re tired,” she said mournfully.

“We’ll have to get used to each other all over again. But we will. I’m going to make you some coffee, that’ll help. I have it right here.”

“I don’t want anything,” he said, with a dull, sightless shake of his head, staring before him towards where she had been until now.

She stopped again, baffled. “What is it, Mitch, what is it?” she pleaded in a low, coaxing voice. “What have they done to you?”

“I ask that,” he said absently.

They remained without speaking for a moment after that. She, standing in arrested departure, sideways and rearward of him, looking back at him. He, seated, vacant-eyed, looking forward at nothing.

Then suddenly, as if revivified, he stood, went over to the bed. He picked up the paper-backed book, reversed it, glanced into the two exposed pages.

“I saw your light go on, about ten or fifteen minutes ago,” he said, without raising his eyes towards her, continuing to scan the page.

“I’d been lying awake in the dark,” she said. “Worrying about you, as I always do. I couldn’t sleep. So I got sick of it finally, and put on the light and tried to read.”

“This?” He raised the book slightly with both hands, lowered it again. But without taking his eyes off it, seeming to peruse it absorbedly.

“Yes, that.”

“What was the last line you read, just as my knock came? What was the last thing of all?”

“Oh, Mitch—” she laughed reproachfully.

He kept staring at the book. “I’d like to find the place. To put my finger on it, and say: ‘Up to here, she was alone. And then I came in.’ ”

Her hand sought her hair, strayed into it baffledly. “I can’t,” she said. “Your knock drove it out of my mind, and now it won’t come back. I wasn’t interested in it, anyway.”

“But you *were* reading,” he said placidly, as if in reminder of something she herself had forgotten, and was supposed not to.

“Yes, I was reading it.”

“Can’t you give me just the sense of it? Just a word?”

“Oh, but Mitch, this is childish.” She smiled, but again her hand went to her hair. “I can’t think for the life of me . . . No, wait, I have it! He was asking her if she remembered a woman in the theatre-audience wearing the same kind of hat she herself had on.” She chuckled with a mischievous sort of satisfaction. “It just came back to me now.”

“That’s not here,” he said stonily. “Not on here anywhere.” He began to turn the pages. Endlessly, he seemed to go on turning them in reverse, from back to front. Suddenly he stopped again, retraced his course by a single page. “It is in here,” he said. “I see it. It’s the chapter before. You must have been reading it some other night. Not tonight.”

“No, I read it tonight. I’m sure of it now. When I threw the book down, the pages must have slipped over and carried my place too far forward.”

He turned it in his hands so that it was now face down; he parted his hands and let it fall that way, so that it fell from a greater height than if one had merely discarded it in haste at reading level.

Then he took it up and looked.

“It’s still at the same place,” he said, with all the objectivity of a physicist.

Then he closed it for good, and thus arbitrarily ended the story it held.

Her face had sobered. “I’ll fix that coffee,” she said.

“There won’t be time.” He put his hand out towards her, dissuadingly, but in a lazy, enervated sort of way. And yet the half-hearted gesture was enough to stop her, hold her there, half in, half out of the little recess or wall alcove she had evidently intended using for the purpose.

There was a moment's pause, while he seemed to be thinking what to say, his head held contemplatively downward. "I've been standing out there ever since half past nine. You didn't go by. I didn't see you come in."

"But I was here already. I've been here since nine, a little after. Why didn't you come to the door and—"

Like a drowning man grasping at straws he suddenly blurted out, "You've been visiting somebody upstairs. Somebody in the house that you know, you ran up there first, like girls do, when you first came home . . ." and beat out a sort of agonized time to it by striking his own knee with his clenched fist, once to almost every word, as if by repetition, by rhythm, he could rid himself of pain. "Some girl-friend, some chum, that lives in the building . . . *Then* you came down here, after that." And made a bitter mouth, through which, all incongruously, emerged a throb of happy, almost vacant, laugher.

"I don't know anyone upstairs."

"You've been visiting on the third or fourth, then. *Way* up. Think."

"I don't know anybody in the house. Not a soul in the entire house."

"*Say* you've been visiting somebody upstairs," he pleaded. "*Say* it."

"Why should I, when I haven't?"

He got up from the chair suddenly, started towards the door, as if in desperate urgency to get out, to leave her. Then the impulse wavered, and he stopped and turned towards her, parenthetically. As if still intent on carrying out the idea of departure, but only waiting to be reassured on some point first before doing so.

"Say you haven't waited. Say you haven't been true to me, Constance, and I'll go. I'll go right now. Without a word, without a whimper. Only don't fool me. Respect me, even if I am—what I am now. Say it."

Her eyes were brimming, but she gave no other sign of stress. She shook her head, but with such leniency of motion that the gesture was scarcely discernible at all. As though the phantom of a contradiction was even too substantial to give to such a non-existent idea. “I haven’t looked at another man since you’ve been gone.”

A retch of risibility seemed to course from his stomach, and he even placed his hand towards it for a moment as if to quell the pain implicit in it. “I *forgive* you, Constance. I overlook it. I—I understand. The war was long and—and hopeless. What am I now—and what was I before? It’s happened to others, why not to me? Only just say it with your own mouth. Is that asking too much? Hurry up, Constance, while I can still take it.”

She came towards him slowly. Her voice was choked with compassion. “You’re so sick. Oh, what is it, what’ve they done—?”

Her arms went towards him, and she slowly twined them about his neck, and looked into his face. Then she tried to bring her own closer, to find his lips with hers, and kiss them in consolation.

He breathed heavily. “So strong it even gets on you secondhand,” he whispered stonily. He swerved his head violently aside, without otherwise moving, and she was left there pendant, unable to reach him with her lips.

The embrace unravelled, and her arms slipped over his shoulders and fell down like loose ropes.

“I’d better make that coffee,” she said almost inaudibly. “There doesn’t seem to be—anything else I can do for you.”

She turned away and went into the alcove, passing from sight for a moment. A tin container clashed briefly, as it was shifted from a higher to a lower level. There was the scratch of a matchstick against sandpaper, the feathery puff of ignited gas.

His hands went towards his waist, and with a sort of introspective leisureliness he began to separate the

fastening of his belt.

She had come back to the alcove opening, was staring at him.

“Mitch, what are you doing? I don’t like that. Don’t do that here. I don’t like that here. Mitch, what are doing that for?”

He had withdrawn it now from the loops that held it. His wrists moved with the sort of absent dexterity one gives to the act of disrobing. Mechanical, oft-repeated, with the thoughts elsewhere. “I’m making it small. I’m making a loop of it. So it’ll go around you.” He had made a slipknot of it. The horror was in the way he looked at it, not at her. As though his whole preoccupation were with it, to see if it were satisfactory or not, and she were just an onlooker, an admiring feminine observer to his typical masculine skill at such problems as this.

“Will you say you haven’t been faithful?”

She didn’t answer. She moved suddenly, and to move was death. She darted forward to get to the outer door, swerving outward to get past the place he stood.

He, on the contrary, didn’t move from it. Simply pivoted on his heels to face the other way, while she made the longer outward progress. Like a ringmaster halting some small animal prancing about him on a given radius that cannot be altered.

It dropped over her head just as she reached the door. Her outstretched hand, one moment inches from the knob, was drawn slowly backward, as the pressure of the throng arched her back away from it. The second hand, futilely reaching out to take the other’s place, was again too late. It likewise fell short, strained tremblingly against inexorable backward draw, stretched out on empty air, then at last receded to a distance that could no longer hope to be bridged.

Then, no longer their own masters, they both flew up to ease the stricture, like mechanical things that, once bent

back that way, could no longer open out again.

She dropped to her knees, close up against his legs. He kept doing something with his wrists, with deft economy of movement. Her face turned towards him, but whether puppeted by his hands or in last despairing plea of her own volition, it was no longer possible to determine. They were too inextricably entwined. They were what he had wanted them to be: one.

Death came sectionally, not totally.

Her arms died first. Then her legs died, dancing against air. Then her heaving breast. Her eyes died last, after everything else was gone. The lights went out, but they stayed open. He bent his head slowly. He found her agonizedly parted lips with his and kissed them. Lingeringly, devoutly. The kiss of homecoming, the kiss of parting. Then he let go of the belt, that he was gripping behind her head, holding her up as by a halter, and she seemed to fall away from him. She dropped suddenly on to the bed. The bed shook and she seemed to shake with it, but it was only the bed shaking, not she.

“Now I’m alone,” he whispered, baffled. “Now she’s not here any more. Now I’m without her anyway.” A puzzled expression creased his forehead. “What good did that do?” Then the answer he was groping for seemed to come to him, belatedly, and it partially eased him. “Now she has to be true to me, whether she wants to or not.” The lover that had her now, he never gave them back again.

He wanted the belt back. There was some sort of dim precaution involved in this; but it wasn’t at all coherent to him. Don’t leave your belt on her, was all it seemed to say; don’t leave your belt on her. He wasn’t sure why, but it nudged at him insistently in the twilight of his reflexes.

It was hard to get it off. He’d stop each time, afraid that he was hurting her; then he’d remember that she couldn’t feel it now, and go ahead a little more.

It was hard to straighten, too, even after it was off.

He paid it off in a straight line along the floor, and then he smoothed it by treading on it with his foot, and drawing his foot slowly along it, as if he were pressing it with an iron. Then he picked it up.

He turned his back on her, with some dim instinct of delicacy, and inserted it through the loops of his waistband. And then buckled it.

Now he was very tired, now he could sit down and rest.

He sat down on the chair, and supported his head for a while with one hand. It was quiet in the room, soothing. His eyelids started to droop closed once or twice, but he would blink them open again, go on resting again, contemplative, motionless.

She stared at the ceiling, he at the floor. It was as though they had had a quarrel and were sulking, pretending indifference to each other.

After a while something bothered him. There was something still wrong, something left undone. He couldn't think what it was at first. He looked over at her. "My belt is not around her throat."

Then suddenly he knew what it was. "I am still in here with her. I am still in the same room with her. I should be outside somewhere, away from here."

Questions, that was all he was afraid of. Too many questions. He was too tired.

He struck the arms of the chair with his hands, as the preliminary stage of rising. Then enervated, tired, did nothing else.

(More than that, that's not enough. You just moved your hands. You've got to pull your whole body up.)

He thrust one foot backward, under the chair seat, to gain leverage for rising. Then followed it with the second. Then again did nothing further.

(Still not enough. Now this is the hard part. This comes next. *Want to,* like they told you at the hospital. *Want to bad.)*

He pulled himself erect. He stood there just forward of the chair. He swayed. He sought backward-flailing support of the chair-arms and found himself sitting again.

He grimaced and his eyes got wet.

(All right then, do it over. You'll have to start in from the beginning and do it over again. Ready? Rested? Now.)

He was standing again. He fixed his eyes on the door.

(Now go over *there.)*

Midway to it he stopped. Looked back.

(But why do I have to leave her? There *was* some reason, but I've forgotten.) He half turned, about to retrace his steps. (No, keep going, and try to remember it on the outside, if you must. It won't come to you here. The air's clearer out there.)

He got to the doorknob, and punched it into his stomach with both hands, and that held him for a while, as though he'd skewered himself on to it bodily. Then he got the door open and crept around it to the outside.

He closed the door with infinite, tender slowness, holding her face fixed within view to the last. "Little Connie," he whispered, as if reassuring her of his fondness. "We've known each other such a long time, haven't we?"

He touched two fingers to his lips, in what, had it been completed, would have been the gesture of wafting a kiss.

But the kiss faltered, and the fingers dropped, and the door closed.

Outside in the open, it was cool and still and dark. The only sound was the scrape of his foot on the steps of the house. He stood there for a moment on them, as he remembered once having seen some other man do—he couldn't remember who, couldn't remember when—on leaving a house that he had stood watching.

The freshness of the air helped him. He felt a little less tired. He knew the respite was temporary, it would come back again. He knew that when it did, this time it would be

for good. He knew, somehow, that before it did he must get as far away from here as he could.

He would have liked to stay there in the doorway, but he forced himself to leave it. He crossed to the other side of the street, at a rather faltering, shaky gait. There was about the way he lifted and set down his feet (almost seeming to free them with a lingering shake each time) a faint suggestion of a struggling fly, already trapped but still able to move, trailing over flypaper.

He stopped and looked back from there. The light was still on in her window. He knew that she was dead in there. He knew that he should go away from it as far as he could. Those two things were clear and distinct. They were all that were.

Then he looked up higher, to see if anyone was looking out. No one was. The last thing he saw was the geraniums, on the window-sill over hers. They were black, but he could still see their outline.

They should be down below, he thought vaguely. Flowers are for death.

The first block wasn't so difficult. He was conscious of going steadily forward. Though he didn't know in what direction forward lay, still he did not stand still, and he kept going away from where he had been. That much was a gain.

Fatigue began creeping back. Not fatigue of the limbs, that can be overcome by resting; fatigue of the senses, that leads into nonawareness, into nothingness. His mind was like an exposed photographic plate, still clear in the centre but beginning to blur all around the edges. In the clear patch in the centre there remained but one sharply defined image or message: Keep going, keep going far away.

The second block he was stopping more frequently now, coming to an erratic standstill every so often, then going on

again. As though an enormous hand had been cupped upon him suddenly, holding him where he was; then lifted again, as inexplicably, letting him continue. He was like a mannikin, or something wound with a key, that follows a mechanical trajectory. He would even continue stiffly facing in the one set direction, while the halt lasted; even though it might be on the bias to the guiding-lines of pavement edge and building base. Then continue on it when he resumed going.

It was fairly horrible; night charitably covered most of it.

Once he passed a sentry, and the man studied him suspiciously, but there was no challenge, so he gave no recognition. No halting shot followed, either, though his neck was bent defensively for some time after. He went on until he was past that area.

The swirling blur had all but closed over the clear space in the centre now. One twinkling point of light remained, like a glimmering star. Keep on, farther away.

He stumbled over some hidden kerbstone hazard, went down. A screaming shell went by just then, trailing blinding light. He could feel the air flurry of its passage, so the fall must have saved him. There was no concussion; it never exploded. It simply whined itself out into far distance. It seemed to skim the surface of the earth without ever descending to it to detonate, without its arc ever coming to an end. He'd never experienced a shell like that before.

He dropped the protective arm with which he'd shielded his eyes, and picked himself up, and went on.

Another one came at him, this time from the opposite direction. He must be in the centre of a cross-fire. Again on a blinding trail of light that *preceded* it. He stood still, paralysed. It swerved violently to one side of him, snaking its comet-like glare with it, skimmed past, then straightened back upon its former trajectory. A smouldering red spark marked its recession. Again there was no thud. His nerves cried out for it, and it never came.

These were the worst kind; there was no sundering of tension after them. They never hit anywhere.

He began to run now, at a sort of tottering trot, to get away from them. No more came for a minute. He stopped, panting and clutching at his stomach with both hands to keep it from rejecting.

Suddenly a voice said: “Anything wrong? Anything I can do for you, buddy?”

His lieutenant, giving him an order.

“Yes sir,” he said crisply, and saluted mechanically, and went forward, walking rapidly in a straight, unerring line.

He went face first into a wall, and felt it blindly with the flats of his hands for an opening, then, finding none, and not knowing how to overcome it, lieutenant or no lieutenant, allowed it to deflect him and followed it instead. They often sent you places like that, where there was no way through. You had to go, though, just the same.

The wall turned, and he did with it. Then it left him, and he was on his own again.

They were starting to come around him thick again. Some of them screeched, and some of them hummed, and some of them gave ear-slitting honks, like flying metal geese. He’d better hurry and get a hole dug.

He dropped to his hands and knees, keeping his head low, as he had learned to do, and raked with his bare nails, in long strokes in two parallel rows.

The surface was hard, he couldn’t seem to break it, to get through to the fill. He tried harder, faster. His arms flailed in and out.

They kept dropping around him. The flash would come, but then it wouldn’t go out again. It would sort of slide to a stop, to one side of him, and then just stay there with a sort of purring throb, that even shook the ground he was grovelling on.

Voices came from them, and doors cracked, and feet thrust suddenly down into view from on high, then took

root.

"What is it? What's he doing?"

"I don't know. I been following him for several blocks. Something wrong."

"Oh, my God, Charlie! Don't just stand there *watching* him. Help him. Look at his hands."

There were narrow, dark, glistening tracks appearing now in the wake of his fingers, freshly renewed each minute.

Arms went round his middle. The arms of medicos, they must have been. He was lifted up, held propped. Hands fumbled with the buttons of his shirt, and he could feel his dog-tag being twisted, drawn out through the opening.

"From—Convalescent Hospital," a muffled voice said. "Better get him back there, right away."

His hand groped upward, trying to find his forehead in a salute.

"I couldn't make it," he sighed inaudibly.

"Easy, easy," a sympathetic, sob-thick voice murmured. "The war's over, soldier."

The war's over, soldier. He took that with him down into the long sleep that follows battles. Constance was his girl, safe, waiting, three thousand miles away. Someone to go back to . . .

It was warm in the sun, on the park bench. It went through your clothes, and found your skin, and felt good; you didn't hurt any more. There were green leaves, and under them a film of pale-blue shade, off that way in the distance, but it was even better here, out in the open, out in full sun.

You just sat, and the blue shade slowly circled round on the ground under the trees, from one side all the way over to the other. Let the shade move. You didn't. You just sat. There was nowhere to go but here. He knew now all the

places to go—he wasn't lost or uncertain any more, his mind was clear—and he knew there was no other place but this to go.

There was no going back now, either. He knew that too. He was all right now. You couldn't always go back. He could light a cigarette now. Watch. See? He could walk as long as he wanted to without stopping. And that was all-right. That was all it would ever be from now on. If there had been other things, there weren't any now.

There was no place to go, nothing to do. Sit in the sun, watch the shade go round. You grew old, like the shade. You had to wait for it, what else could you do? It was an order, from a lieutenant. A different one, you never saw. But He'd given it just the same; you had to obey.

The man over at the other end of the bench got up, left his newspaper lying there behind him.

After a while he reached over and picked it up. He rearranged it and started to pore over it patiently. It took a long time, it said so many things. It helped the shade go quicker; it helped in carrying out the lieutenant's order.

It said so many things. Some of them were large, some of them small. He got to even the smallest eventually, after the large ones were done.

It said: 'Forecast for Thursday: Clear and warm, with variable winds, lowered humidity. Maximum temperature—'

It said: 'Extraordinary Values! Mail and phone orders filled while quantities last. Come early to be sure of a full selection—'

It said: 'Cards Strike Out in Second—'

It said: 'Killer Pays Penalty. Orville Johns, 32, went to his death last night in the execution chamber of the State Penitentiary at—for the murder of Constance Sterling, in June of last year. Johns was the janitor of the building in which the slain girl lived; a number of her belongings were found in his basement apartment shortly after the discovery of the crime. He disappeared at the time, and was not

apprehended for some months afterwards . . . Protesting his innocence to the last, the condemned man entered the chamber at 11.10 and was pronounced dead at 11.15.

“For acid indigestion, use Bell-ans. Twenty-five cents at all drugstores.”

I did that, he said to himself, squinting thoughtfully up at the sun. That was me.

He’d known he’d done it, for some time now.

THE BOY CRIED MURDER

Everyone was annoyed by Buddy's daydreaming. But only the killers thought it a crime for such a brave little boy to stay alive!

The kid was twelve, and his name was Buddy. His real name wasn't that, it was Charlie, but they called him Buddy.

He was small for his age. The world he lived in was small too. Or rather, one of them was. He lived in two worlds at once. One of them was a small, drab, confined world; just two squalid rooms, in the rear of a six-story tenement, 20 Holt Street; stifling in summer, freezing in winter. Just two grownups in it, Mom and Pop. And a handful of other kids like himself, that he knew from school and from playing on the streets.

The other world had no boundaries, no limits. You could do anything in it. You could go anywhere. All you had to do was just sit still and think hard. Make it up as you went along. The world of imagination. He did a lot of that.

But he was learning to keep it to himself. They told him he was getting too big now for that stuff. They swatted him, and called it lies. The last time he'd tried telling them about it, Pop had threatened.

"I'm going to wallop you good next time you make up any more of them fancy lies of yours!" Pop had said.

“It comes from them Sa’day afternoon movies he’s been seeing,” Mom said. “I told him he can’t go any more.”

And then this night came along.

It felt as if it were made of boiling tar, poured all over you. July was hot everywhere, but on Holt Street it was hell. He kept trying and he kept trying, and it wouldn’t work. The bedding on his cot got all soggy and streaked with damp. Pop wasn’t home; he worked nights.

The two rooms were like the chambers of an oven, with all the gas burners left on full tilt. Buddy took his pillow with him finally and climbed out the window onto the fire-escape landing just outside, and tried it out there. It wasn’t the first time; he’d done it lots before. You couldn’t fall off, the landing was railed around. Well, you could if you were unlucky, but it hadn’t happened yet. He sort of locked his arm through the rail uprights, and that kept him from rolling in his sleep.

It wouldn’t work, it was just as bad out there. It was still like an oven, only now with the burners out maybe. He decided maybe it would be better if he tried it a little higher up. Sometimes there was a faint stirring of breeze skimming along at roof level. It couldn’t bend and get down in here behind the tenements. He picked up the pillow and went up the iron slats one flight, to the sixth-floor landing, and tried it there.

It wasn’t very much better. But it had to do, you couldn’t go up any higher than that. He’d learned by experience you couldn’t sleep on the roof itself, because it was covered with gravel, and that got into you and hurt. And underneath it was tar-surfaced, and in the hot weather that got soft and stuck to you all over.

He wriggled around a little on the hard-bitten iron slats, with empty spaces in-between, that were like sleeping on a grill, and then finally he dozed off. The way you can even on a fire escape, when you’re only twelve.

Morning came awfully fast. It seemed to get light only about a minute later. The shine tickled his eyelids and he opened them. Then he saw that it wasn't coming down from above, from the sky, the way light should. It was still dark, it was still night up there. It was coming in a thin bar, down low, even with his eyes, running along the bottom of the window he was lying outside of, on a level with the fire-escape landing he was lying on.

If he'd been standing up instead of stretched out flat, it would have been over his feet instead of across his eyes. It was only about an inch high. A dark shade unrolled nearly to the bottom, but that had slipped back maybe a half turn on its roller, cut the rest of it off. But with his eyes up close against it like they were, it was nearly as good as the whole window being lit up. He could see the whole inside of the room.

There were two people in it, a man and a woman. He would have closed his eyes again and gone right back to sleep—what did he care about watching grownups?—except for the funny, sneaky way they were both acting. That made him keep on watching, wondering what they were up to.

The man was asleep on a chair, by a table. He'd been drinking or something. There was a bottle and two glasses on the table in front of him. His head was down on the table, and his hand was in front of his eyes, to protect them from the light.

The woman was moving around on tiptoes, trying not to make any noise. She was carrying the man's coat in her hands, like she'd just taken it off the back of the chair, where he'd hung it before he fell asleep. She had on a lot of red and white stuff all over her face; but Buddy didn't think she looked very pretty.

When she got around the other side of the table from him, she stopped, and started to dip her hand in and out of all the pockets of the coat She kept her back to him while

she was doing it. But Buddy could see her good from the side, he was looking right in at her.

That was the first sneaky thing he saw that made him keep on watching them. And the second was, he saw the fingers of the man's hand, the one that was lying in front of his eyes, split open, and the man stole a look through them at what she was doing.

Then when she turned her head, to make sure he was asleep, he quickly closed his fingers together again, just in time.

She turned her head the other way again and went ahead doing what she was doing.

She came up with a big fat roll of money from the coat all rolled up tight, and she threw the coat aside, and bent her head close, and started to count it over. Her eyes got all bright, and Buddy could see her licking her lips while she was doing it.

All of a sudden Buddy held his breath. The man's arm was starting to crawl along the top of the table toward her, to reach for her and grab her. It moved very slow and quiet, like a big thick snake inching along after somebody, and she never noticed it. Then when it was out straight and nearly touching her, the man started to come up off his chair after it and crouch over toward her, and she never heard that either. He was smiling, but it wasn't a very good kind of a smile—not at all.

Buddy's heart was pounding. He thought, "You better look around, lady, you better look around!" But she didn't. She was too busy counting the money.

All of a sudden the man jumped and grabbed her. His chair went over flat, and the table nearly did too, but it recovered and stayed up. His big hand, the one that had been reaching out all along, caught her around the back of the neck, and held on tight, and he started to shake her from head to foot.

His other hand grabbed the wrist that was holding the money. She tried to jam it down the front of her dress, but she wasn't quick enough. He twisted her wrist slowly around, to make her let go of it.

She gave a funny little squeak like a mouse, but not very loud. At least it didn't come out the window very loud, where Buddy was.

"No you don't!" Buddy heard the man growl. "I figured something like this was coming! You gotta get up pretty early in the morning to put anything like that over on me!"

"Take your hands off me!" she panted. "Let go of me!"

He started to swing her around from side to side. "You won't ever try anything like this again, by the time I get through with you!" Buddy heard the man grunt.

All of a sudden she screamed, "Joe! Hurry up in here! I can't handle him any longer by myself!" But she didn't scream it out real loud, just in a sort of a smothered way, as if she didn't want it to carry too far.

The door flew open, and a second man showed up. He must have been standing right outside it waiting the whole time, to come in that fast. He ran up behind the man who was being robbed. She held on tight and kept him from turning around to meet him.

The second man waited until his head was in the right position, and then he locked both his own hands together in a double fist, and smashed them down with all his might on the back of the other man's neck.

The other man dropped to the floor like a stone and lay there quiet for a minute.

The woman scrambled down and started to pick up all the money that was lying around on the floor.

"Here!" she said, handing it to the man.

"Hurry up, let's get out of here!" he snarled. "What'd you have to bungle it up like that for? Why didn't you fix his drink right?"

"I did, but it didn't work on him. He musta seen me do it."

“Come on!” he said, and started for the door. “When he comes to, he’ll bring the cops down on us.”

All of a sudden the man lying on the floor wrapped his arm tight around both legs of the second man, pinning them together. The second man tripped and fell down flat, full length. The other man scrambled on top of him before he could get up, held him that way, and it started in all over again.

The man they were robbing was the better fighter of the two. He swung punches at the second man’s head, while he had him under him like that. In another minute he would have punched him cold, even Buddy could tell that. His arms spread out limp on the floor, and his fists started to open up lazy.

But the woman went running all around the place hunting for something to help with. All of a sudden she threw open a drawer in a bureau and took out something that flashed in the light. Buddy couldn’t see what it was for a minute, she was so fast with it. She darted in close to them and put it in the outstretched hand of the man who was lying underneath, being knocked silly.

Then when it swept up high over both their heads a second later, Buddy could see what it was by that time all right! It was a short, sharp knife. Buddy’s eyes nearly came out of his head.

The man swung it and buried it in the other’s back. Right up to the hilt; yon couldn’t see the blade any more.

The fight stopped cold on the instant, but not the stabbing. He wrenched it out with a sawing motion from side to side, and swung it again, and buried it again, in a different place this time. The other man wasn’t moving any more, just sort of recoiling with the stab itself.

He wasn’t satisfied even yet. He freed it a third time, with a lot of trouble, and it came up and went back in again. Then they both lay there still, one of them getting his breath, the other not breathing any more.

Finally he rolled the crumpled weight off him, and picked himself up, and felt his jaw. Then they both stood looking down at what lay there, he and the woman.

“Is he dead?” Buddy heard her ask in a scared voice.

“Wait a minute, I’ll see.” He got down by him, and put his hand underneath him, where his heart was. Then he pulled it out. Then he pulled the knife out of his back. Then he stood up.

He looked at her and shook his head a little.

“Holy Smoke!” she gasped. “We’ve killed him! Joe what’ll we do?” She didn’t say it very loud, but it was so quiet in the room now, Buddy could hear everything they said just as if he were in there too.

The man grabbed her arm and squeezed it tight. “Take it easy. There’s plenty of people killed, that they never find out who done it. Just don’t lose your head, that’s all. We’ll get by with it.”

He held her until he was sure she was steady, then he let go of her again. He looked all around the room. “Gimme some newspapers. I want to keep this stuff from getting on the floor.”

He got down and stuffed them underneath the body on all sides. Then he said, “Case the door, see if there’s anyone out there that heard us. Open it slow and careful, now.”

She went over to it on tiptoe, and moved it open just on a crack, and looked out with one eye. Then she made it a little wider, and stuck her whole head out, and turned it both ways. Then she pulled it in again, and closed up, and came back to him.

“Not a soul around,” she whispered.

“All right. Now case the window. See if it’s all right out in the back there. Don’t pull up the shade, just take a squint out the side of it.”

II

She started to come over to where Buddy's eyes were staring in, and she got bigger and bigger every minute, the closer she got. Her head went way up high out of sight, and her waist blotted out the whole room. He couldn't move, he was like paralyzed. The little gap under the shade must have been awfully skinny for her not to see it, but he knew in another minute she was going to look right out on top of him, from higher up—and see him. Buddy rolled over flat on his back, it was only a half-roll because he'd been lying on his side until now, and that was about all the moving there was time for him to do. There was an old blanket over the fire-escape rail, hung out to air. He clawed at it and pulled it down on top of him. He only hoped it covered all of him, but there wasn't time to tuck it around evenly. About all he could do was hunch himself up and make himself as small as possible, and pray none of him stuck out.

A minute later, even with his head covered, he could tell, by a splash of light that fell across the blanket, like a sort of stripe, that she'd tipped the shade back and was staring out the side of it.

"There's something white down here," Buddy heard her say, and he froze all over. He even stopped breathing, for fear his breath would show up against the blanket, make it ripple.

"Oh, I know!" she explained, is relief. "It's that blanket I left out there yesterday. It must haw I fallen down. Gee, for a minute I thought it was somebody lyin' there!"

"Don't stand there all night," the man growled.

The stripe of light went out, and Buddy knew she'd let the shade go back in place.

He was still afraid to move for a minute, even after that. Then he worked his head clear of the blanket, and looked again.

Even the gap was gone now. She must have pulled the shade down even, before she turned away. He couldn't see them any more, but he could still hear them.

But he didn't want to. All he wanted to do was get down off there!

He knew, though, that if he could hear them, they could hear him just as easy. He had to do it slow. The fire escape was old and rickety, it might creak. He started to stretch out his legs, backward, toward the ladder steps going down. Then when he had them oat straight, he started to palm himself along backward on the flats of his hands, keeping his head and shoulders down. It was a little bit like swimming the breast stroke on dry land. Or rather on iron slats, which was worse still.

But he could still keep on hearing them the whole time he was doing it.

"Here's his identification papers," the man said. "Cliff Bristol. Mate on a merchant ship. That's good. Them guys disappear awfully easy. Not too many questions asked. We want to make sure of getting everything out of his pockets, so they won't be able to race who he was."

The woman said, like she was almost crying, "Oh, what do we care what his name is. We've done it, that's all that matters.

Come on, Joe, for God's sake let's get *out* of here!"

"*We* don't have to get out now," the man said. "Why should we? All we have to do is get him out. Nobody seen him come up here with you. Nobody knows it happened. If we lam out now and leave him here, they'll be after us in five seconds. If we just stay here like we are, nobody'll be any the wiser."

"But how you going to do it, Joe? How you going to get him out?"

"I'll show you. Bring out them two valises of yours, and empty the stuff out of them."

Buddy was worming his way down the fire-escape steps backward now, but his face and chin were still balanced above the landing.

"But he won't go into one of them, a great big guy like him," the woman protested.

"He will the way I'll do it," the man answered. And then he said, "Go in the bathroom and get me my razor."

Buddy's chin went down flat on the landing for a minute, and he felt like he wanted to throw up. The fire escape creaked a little, but the woman had groaned just then, and that covered it up.

"You don't have to watch," the man said. "You go outside the door and wait, if you feel that way about it. Come in again if you hear anyone coming."

Buddy began to move again, spilling salt water from his mouth.

"Hand me all the rest of the newspapers we got in here, before you go," he heard the man say. "And bring in that blanket you said was outside the window, that'll come in handy too. I'm going to need it for a lining."

Buddy wriggled the rest of the way down, like a snake in reverse. He felt his feet touch bottom of his own landing, outside his own windows, and he was safe! But there was something soft clinging to them. He looked, and it was the blanket. It had gotten tangled around his foot while he was still up above there, and he'd trailed it down with him without noticing in his excitement.

He kicked it clear of himself, but there was no time to do anything else with it. He squirmed across the sill and toppled back into his own flat, and left it lying there. An instant later a shot of light doused the fire escape and he heard the window above go up, as she reached out for it.

Then he heard her whisper in a frightened, bated voice: "It blew down! I see it, there it is down below. It was right out here a minute ago, and now it's down below!"

The man must have told her to go after it and bring it up. The light went out. He must have put the light out in the room, so she'd have a chance to climb down and get it without being Buddy could hear the wooden window frame ease the rest of the way up in the dark then a stealthy scrape on the iron ladder stairs.

He pressed himself up flat against the wall, under his own sill. He was small enough to fit in there. He saw the white of the blanket flick upward and disappear from sight.

Then he heard her whisper, just as she went in her own window again, "That's funny; and there's not a breath of air stirring either. How did it come to get blown down there?"

Then the window rustled closed and it was over.

Buddy didn't get up and walk to his own bed. He couldn't lift himself that high. He crawled to it on his hands and knees.

He pulled the covers all over him, even past the top of his head, and as hot as the night that seemed only a little while ago, he shook as if it were the middle of December and goose-pimple came out all over him.

He was still shaking for a long time after. He could hear some one moving around right over hit once in a while, even with the covers over his head. And just picturing what was going on up there, that would start him in t shaking all over again.

It took a long time. Then everything got quiet. No more creaks on the ceiling, like some body was rocking back and forth sawing away at something. He was all covered with sweat now, and the sheets were damp.

Then he heard a door open, and someone moved softly down the stairs outside. Past his own door and down to the bottom. Once something scraped a little against the wall, like a valise. He started in shaking again, worse than ever.

He didn't sleep all the rest of the night. Hours later, after it was already light, he heard someone coming quietly up the stairs. This time nothing scraped against the walls. Then

the door closed above, and after that there was no more sound of anything.

Then in a little while his mother got up in the next room and got breakfast started and called in to him.

He got dressed and dragged himself in to her, and when she turned around and saw him she said, “You don’t look well, Buddy. You feel sick?”

He didn’t want to tell her, he wanted to tell his father.

His father came home from work a few minutes after that, and they sat down to the table together like they did every morning, Buddy to his breakfast and his father to his before-bedtime supper.

He waited till his mother was out of the room, then he whispered: “Pop, I want to tell you something.”

“Okay, shoot,” his father grinned.

“Pop, there’s a man and woman livin’ over us.”

“Sure, I know that,” his father said, helping himself to some bacon. “That’s no news to me. I’ve seen them, coming and going. I think the name’s Scanlon or Hanlon, something like that.”

Buddy shifted his chair closer and leaned nearer his father’s ear, “But Pop,” he breathed, “last night they killed a man up there, and they cut up his body into small pieces, and stuck it into two valises.”

His father stopped chewing. Then he put down his knife and fork. Then he turned around slowly in his chair and looked at him hard. For a minute Buddy thought he felt sick and scared about it, like he had himself. But then he saw that he was only sore. Sore at Buddy himself.

“Mary, come in here,” he called out grimly.

Buddy’s mother came to the door and looked in at them.

“He’s at it again,” his father said. “I thought I told you not to let him go to any more of them Sat’day movies.”

She gnawed her lip worriedly. “Making things up again?”

“I didn’t make—” Buddy started to protest.

“I wouldn’t even repeat to you the filthy trash he’s just been telling me. It would turn your blood cold.” His father whacked him across the mouth with the back of his hand. “Shut up,” he said. “If there’s one thing I can’t stand it’s a liar. One of them congenial liars.”

“What’d he say?” his mother asked troubledly.

“It’s not fit for you to hear,” his father said indignantly. But then he went ahead and told her anyway. “He said they done someone in up there, over us, and then chopped him up into small pieces and carried him off in two valises.”

His mother touched her apron to her mouth nauseatedly. “The Kellermans?” she gasped in horrified disbelief. “Oh Buddy, when are you going to stop that? Why, they’re the last people in the world. She seems like a very nice woman. Why she was right down here at the door only the other day, to borrow a cup of sugar from me. She always has a smile and a nice word, whenever you pass her on the stairs. Why, they’re the *last* ones—!”

“Well, he’ll grow up fine,” his father said darkly. “There’s something wrong with a boy like that. This had to happen to me! I don’t know where he gets it from. I wasn’t that way, in my whole life. My brother Ed, rest his soul, wasn’t that way. You were never that way, nor anyone on your side of the family. But I’m going to take it out of him if it’s the last thing I do.”

He started to roll up his shirt sleeve. He pushed his chair back. “You come in here with me.”

Then at the door he gave him one more chance. “Are you going to say it’s not true?”

“But I *saw* them. I watched through the window and *saw* them,” Buddy wailed helplessly.

His father’s jaw set tight. “All right, come in here.” He closed the door after the two of them.

It didn’t hurt very much. Well, it did, but just for a minute; it didn’t last. His father wasn’t a man with a vicious

temper. He was just a man with a strong sense of what was right and what was wrong. His father just used halfstrength on him; just enough to make him holler out satisfactorily, not enough to really bruise him badly.

Then when he got through, he rolled down his shirt sleeves and said to the sniffling Buddy: “Now are you going to make up any more of them fancy lies of yours?”

There was an out there, and Buddy was smart enough to grab it. “No, sir,” he said submissively. “I’m not going to make up any lies.” And he started for the door.

But his father added quickly too quickly, “Then you’re read to admit now that wasn’t true what you told me in there at the table?”

Buddy swallowed hard ant stood still, with freedom just with in reach. He didn’t answer.

“Answer me,” his father said severely. “Was it or wasn’t it?”

There was a dilemma here, and Buddy couldn’t handle it. He’d been walloped for telling what they thought was a lie. Now they wanted him to do the very thing they’d punished him for doing in the first place. If he told the truth it would be called a lie, and if he told a lie he’d be repeating what he knew they were walloping him for.

He tried to side-step it by asking a question of his own. “When you—when you *see* a thing yourself, with your own eves, is it true *then?”* he faltered.

“Sure,” his father said impatiently. “You’re old enough to know that! You’re not two years old.”

“Then I saw it, and it has to be true.”

This time his father got real sore. He hauled him back from the door by the scuff of his neck, and for a minute he acted as, if he were going to give him another walloping, all over again. But he didn’t.

Instead he took the key out of the door, opened it, and put the key in the front. “You’re going to stay in here until you’re ready to admit that whole thing was a dirty, rotten

lie!” he said wrathfully, “You’ll stay in here all day, if you have to! It’s what you deserve, all right.”

He went out, slammed the door after him, and locked Buddy in from the outside. Then he took the key out of the lock, so Buddy’s mother wouldn’t weaken while he was asleep.

III

Buddy went over and slumped down gloomily onto a chair, and hung his head, and tried to puzzle it out. He was being punished for doing the very thing they were trying to lace into him: sticking to the truth.

He heard his father moving around out there getting ready for bed; heard his shoes drop heavily one after the other, then the bedsprings creak. Then after that nothing. He’d sleep all day now, until dark. But maybe his mother would let him out, before she went to work for the day.

He went over *to* the door and started to jiggle the knob back and forth, to try and attract her attention wife as little noise as he could.

“Mom,” he whispered close to the keyhole, “Hey, mom.”

After a while be heard her tiptoe up on the other side, “Mom, are you there? Let me out”

“It’s for your own good, Buddy,” she whispered back. “I can’t do it unless you take back that sinful lie you told. He told me not to.” She waited patiently. “Do you take it back, Buddy? Do you?”

“No,” he sighed. He went back to the chair and disheartenedly sat down once more.

What was a fellow to do, when even his own people wouldn’t believe him? Who was he to turn to? You had to tell *somebody* about a thing like that. If you didn’t, it was

just as bad as—just as bad as if you were one of the ones that did it. He wasn't scared any more as he'd been last night, because it was daylight now, but he still felt a little sick at his stomach whenever he thought of it. You *had* to tell somebody.

Suddenly he turned his head and looked at the window. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Not about getting out through the window; he'd known he could all along, it was latched on the inside. But he hadn't tried to get out that way until now, because he wanted to stay here and get them to believe him here, where he was. As long as they wouldn't believe him here, there was another place where maybe they *would* believe him.

That's what grownups did the first thing, whenever they were in his predicament. Why shouldn't a kid do it? *The police.* They were the ones had to be told. They were the ones you were supposed to tell, anyway. Even his father, if he'd only believed him, was supposed to tell them. Well, if his father wouldn't, then he'd tell them himself.

He got up and softshoed over to the window and eased it up. He slung himself over onto the fire escape. It was easy, of course; nothing to it. At his age it was just as easy as going out a door. Then he eased it down again. But not all the way, he left just a little crack open underneath, so he could get his fingers in and get it up again when he came back.

He'd tell the police, and then he'd come back and sneak in again through the window, and be there when his father woke up and unlocked the door. That would get it off his mind; then he wouldn't have to worry any more.

He went down the fire escape, dropped off where the last section of ladder was hoisted clear of the ground, went in through the basement, and came out the front, up the janitor's steps without meeting anybody. He beat it away from in front of the house fast, so he wouldn't be seen by anyone who knew him, any of the neighbors for instance,

who might later accidentally tell on him. Then as soon as he was safely around the corner he slowed up and tried to figure out how you went about it.

Telling the police!

It was better to go to a station house, for anything as important as this, instead of just telling a stray neighborhood cop you met on the sidewalk. He was a little bit in awe of station houses, but as long as you hadn't done anything yourself it was probably safe enough to go into one.

He didn't know where one was exactly, but he knew there must be one somewhere close around, there had to be. He saw a storekeeper sweeping the sidewalk, and he got up his courage and went up to him.

"Where's the station house, mister?" he asked.

"How should I know?" said the man gruffly. "What am I, a telephone book? Look out with your feet, can't you see I'm busy?"

Buddy backed away. That gave him an idea. He turned and went looking for a drugstore, and when he found one, he went in and looked in the telephone books they had in the back, chained to the wall-

He picked the nearest one to where he was, and he headed for it. When he got there, all his instinctive fear of that kind of place, left over from when he was a kid of six or eight and cops were the natural enemies of small boys, came back again for a minute. He hung around outside for a short while, and then finally he saw the station house cat go in, and that gave him courage, and he went in himself.

The man at the desk didn't pay any attention to him for a long time. He was looking over some papers or something. Buddy just stood there and waited, afraid to speak first.

Finally he said, kindly, "What is it, son? Lost your dog or something?"

“No, sir,” Buddy said spasmodically. “I—I got something I want to tell someone.”

The desk sergeant grinned absently, continuing to look at what he was looking at. “And what would that be, now?”

Buddy glanced apprehensively behind him, at the street outside, as though fearful of being overheard from there. “Well, it’s pretty serious,” he gulped. “It’s about a man that was killed.”

The sergeant gave him his full attention for the first time. “You know something about a man that was killed?”

“Yessir,” said Buddy breathlessly. “Last night. And I thought I better tell you.” He wondered if that was enough, and he could go now. No, they had to have the name and address; they couldn’t just guess.

The sergeant clawed his chin. “You’re not trying to be a smart aleck, now, or anything like that?” he asked warningly. One look at Buddy’s face, however, seemed to reassure him on that point.

“No sir,” Buddy said strenuously.

“Well, I’ll tell you. That’s not my department, exactly. You see that hall there, over next to the clock? You go down that to the second door you come to. There’s a man in there, you tell him about it. Don’t go in the first door, now, or he’ll have your life; he eats kids your age for breakfast.” Buddy went over to the mouth of the corridor, looked back from there for reassurance.

“Second door,” the sergeant reassured him.

He went on. He made a wide loop around the dread first door, pressing himself flat against the opposite wall to get safely by it. Then he knocked on the one after that, and felt as scared as if it were the principal’s office at school. Even more scared, in fact.

“ ’M’in,” a voice said.

He couldn’t move for a minute.

“Well?” the voice repeated with a touch of annoyance.

To stay out, now, was worse than to go in. Buddy took a deep breath, held it, caving in his middle, and went in. Then he remembered to close the door after him. When you didn't close the door after you in the principal's office, you had to go outside and come in all over again.

There was another man, at another desk. His eyes had been fixed in readiness at a point about six feet up the door. When it opened and closed, and they still met nothing, they dropped down to Buddy's four-foot level.

"What is this?" he growled. "How'd you get in here?" The first part of the question didn't seem to be addressed to Buddy himself, but to the ceiling light or something like that.

Buddy had to go through the thing a second time, and repetition didn't make it come any easier than the first.

The man just looked at him. In his imagination, Buddy had pictured a general rising-up and an excited, pell-mell rushing out on the part of everyone in the station house, when he delivered his news; patrol cars wailing into high gear and orders being barked around. That was what always happened in pictures. Everyone always jumped up and rushed out, whenever somebody came in and told them something like this. But now, in real life: the man just looked at him.

He said, "What's your name, son?" He said, "What's your address?"

Buddy told him.

He said, "D'y'ever have a nightmare, son? You know, a pretty bad dream that scares the life out of you?"

"Oh, sure," Buddy said incautiously. "I've had 'em, lots of times."

The man said, into a boxlike thing on his desk, "Ross, come in here."

Another man came in. He didn't have on a uniform either; neither of them did. Which made them a little declassé in Buddy's esteem. They conferred in Ion voices; he couldn't hear a word they said. He knew it was about himself, though. He could tell by the way they'd look over at him every now and then.

They didn't look in the right way. They should have looked sort of—well, sort of concerned worried about what he'd told them, or something. Instead, they looked sort of amused; like men who are trying to keep straight faces.

Then the first one spoke up again. "So you saw them cut him up and—"

This was a distortion, and Buddy scotched it quick. He wasn't here to make things up, although only a few short weeks ago, he would have grabbed at the chance this gave him, it was a wonderful opening.

"No, sir," he said, "I didn't see *that* part of it. I just heard them say they were going to do it. But—"

But then before he could reaffirm that he had seen the man fall and the knife go home three times, as he was about to, the detective cut in with another question, without waiting. So he was left with the appearance of having made a whole retraction, instead of just a partial one.

"Did you tell your parents about this?"

This was a bad one, and nobody knew it better than Buddy.

"Yes," he mumbled unwillingly.

"Then why didn't they come and tell us about it, why'd they send you instead?"

He tried to duck that by not answering.

"Speak up, son."

You had to tell the truth to cops; that was serious, not telling the truth to cops. Even *civilian* cops, like these.

"They didn't believe me," he breathed.

"Why didn't they believe you?"

"They—they think I'm always making up things."

He saw the look they gave one another, and he knew what it meant. He'd already lost the battle. They were already on his father's side.

"Oh, they do, hunh? Well, *do* you make up things?"

You had to tell the truth to cops. "I used to. I used to a lot. But not any more. Not this time. This time I'm not making it up."

He saw one of them tap a finger to his forehead, just once. He wasn't meant to see it, it was done very quickly, but he saw it.

"Well, do you know for sure when you are and when you're not making things up, son?"

"I do, honest!" he protested. "I *know* I'm not this time! I know I'm not!"

But it wasn't a very good answer, he knew that. It was the only one he had, though. They got you in corners where you hardly knew what you were saying any more.

"We'll send somebody around, son, and check up," the first man reassured him. He turned to the other man.

"Ross, go over there and take a look around. Don't put your foot down too hard, it's not official. Sell them a magazine subscription or something. No, an electric razor, that'll tie in with the story. There's one in my locker, you can take that with you for a sample. It's the—" He glanced at Buddy inquiringly.

"The sixth floor, right over us."

"That's all I've got to do," Ross said disgruntledly. But he went out.

"You wait out in the hall, son," the first man said to Buddy. "Sit down on the bench out there."

IV

Buddy went out and sat.

About half an hour went by, not much more. Then he saw Ross come back and go in again. He waited hopefully for the rushing out and shouting of orders to come. Nothing happened. Nobody stirred. All he could hear was Ross swearing and complaining in a low voice, through the frosted glass inset of the door, and the other man laughing, like you do when there's a joke at somebody's expense. Then they sent for him to come in again.

Ross gave Buddy a dirty look. The other man tried to straighten his face. He passed his hand slowly in front of his mouth, and it came out serious at the other side of it.

"Son," he said, "you can hear things quite easily through that ceiling of yours, can't you? The one between you and them. Pretty thin?"

"Y'yes," Buddy faltered, wondering what was coming next.

"Well, what you heard was a program on their radio."

"There wasn't any. They didn't have a radio in the apartment. Ross gave him quite an unfriendly look. "Yes, they do," he said sourly. "I was just over there, and I saw it myself. You could hear it all the way down the stairs to the third floor, when I came away. I been on the force fourteen years, and this kid's going to tell me what is in a room I case and what isn't!"

"All right, Ross," the other man tried to soothe him.

"But I saw it through the *window!"* Buddy wailed.

"It could have still been the radio, son," he explained pacifyingly. "Remember, you can't *see* something that's said, you can only hear it. You could have been looking square at them, and still hearing what the radio was saying."

"What time was it you were out there?" Ross growled at Buddy.

"I don't know. Just—just nighttime. We only got an alarm clock and you can't see it in the dark."

Ross shrugged angrily at the other man, as if to say: *See what I mean?* “It was the Crime-Smashers Program,” he said bitterly. “It’s on from eleven to twelve. And last night was Wednesday. Or don’t you know that either?” he flared in an aside to Buddy.

“She told me herself it was a partic’ly gruesome one this time. Said her husband wouldn’t talk to her for an hour afterward, because he can’t stand hearing that kind a stuff and she dotes on it. She admits she had it on too loud, just to spite him. Fair enough?”

The other man just looked at Buddy, quizzically. Buddy just looked at the floor.

Ross finished rubbing it in, with vengeful relish. *“And* her husband uses a safety razor. She brought it out and showed it to me herself when I tried to peddle the prop to her. Did you ever try cutting up anybody with one of them? *And* there are two valises still right there in the room with them. I saw them when I pretended to fumble my pencil and stooped down to pick it up from the floor. With their lids left ajar and nothing worse in them than a mess of shirts and women’s undies.

“And not brand-new replacements, either; plenty grubby and battered from years of knocking around with them. Even papered all over with faded hotel labels. I don’t think cheapskates like them would be apt to own four valises, two apiece. And if they did, I don’t think they’d pack the stiff in the two best ones and keep the two worst ones for themselves. It would most likely be the other way around.

“And, finally, they’ve got newspapers still kicking around from two weeks back. I spotted the date-lines on a few of them myself. What were they supposed to have used to clean up the mess, kleenex?”

And he backed his arm toward

Buddy, as if to let one fly at him across the ear. The other man, laughing, had to reach over quickly and hold him back. “A little practice work won’t hurt you.”

“On level ground maybe; not up six flights of stairs.” Ross stalked out and gave the door a clout behind him.

The other man sent for a cop; this time one of the kind in uniform. For a minute Buddy thought he was going to be arrested then and there, and his stomach went down to about his feet, nearly.

“Where do you live, son? You better take him back with you, Lyons.”

“Not the *front* way,” Buddy pleaded, aghast. “I can get in like I got out.”

“Just to make sure you get safely back, son. You’ve done enough damage for one day.” And the man at the desk waved him, and the whole matter he’d tried to tell them about, out the door.

He knew better than to fight a policeman. That was about the worst thing you could do, fight back at a policeman. He went along with him tractably, his head hanging down in shame.

They went inside and up the stairs. The Carmody kid on the second floor peeked out the door and shrieked to her sister, “Ooh, they’ve arrested Buddy!”

“They have not.” he denied indignantly. “They’re just bringing me home special!”

They stopped in front of his own door.

“Here, son?”

Buddy quailed. Now he was going to get it!

The policeman tapped, and his mother, not his father opened the door. She must have been late leaving for work today, to still be there. Her face got white for a minute.

The policeman winked at her to reassure her. “Nothing to get frightened about, lady. He just came over and gave us a little story, and we thought we better bring him back here where he belongs.”

“Buddy!” she said, horrified. “You went and told them?”

“Does he do it very often?” the policeman asked.

“All the time. All the time. But never anything as bad as this.”

“Getting worse, hunh? Well, you ought to talk to the principal of his school, or maybe a doctor.”

There was a. stealthy creak on the stairs, and the Kellerman woman had paused on her way down, was standing looking at them. Curiously, but with cold composure.

The cop didn’t even turn his head. “Well, I gotta be getting back,” he said, and touched the visor of his cap to Buddy’s mother and left.

Buddy got panicky. “Come in, quick!” he whispered frantically. “Come in quick, before she sees us” And tried to drag his mother in out of the doorway.

She resisted, held him there in full view. “There she is now. You apologize. You say you’re sorry, hear me?”

The woman came the rest of the way down. She smiled affably, in neighborly greeting. Buddy’s mother smiled in answering affability.

“Nothing wrong, is there?”

“No, nothing wrong,” Buddy’s mother murmured deprecatingly.

“I thought I saw a policeman at the door here, as I was coming down.”

“Buddy did something he shouldn’t.” Without taking her eyes off the woman, she shook Buddy in an aside. Meantime, pantoinimically, “Apologize.”

He hung back, tried to efface himself behind her.

“He *looks* like a good little boy,” the woman said patronizingly. “What’d he do?”

“He’s not a good boy,” Buddy’s mother said firmly. “He makes things up. He tells things on people. Horrible things. Things that aren’t so. It can cause a lot of trouble, especially when the people are living in the same house with us—” She didn’t finish it.

The woman's eyes rested speculatively on Buddy for a long cool moment. Speculation ended and conviction entered them. They never wavered. She might have been thinking of a blanket that suddenly fell down the fire escape from one floor to the next when there was no wind. She might have been thinking of a razor salesman that asked too many questions.

Something about that look, it went right through you. It crinkled you all up. It was like death itself looking at you. Buddy'd never met a look like that before. It was so still, so deep, so cold, so dangerous.

Then she smiled. The look in her eyes didn't go out, but her mouth smiled. "Boys will be boys," she said sweetly. She reached out to try and playfully pull his hair or something like that, but he swerved his head violently aside, with something akin to horror, and she failed to reach him.

She turned away and left them. But she went *up,* not down. She had been coming from above just now, now she went back that way again. "I'm always forgetting something," she murmured as if to herself. "That letter I wanted to mail."

Buddy knew, with an awful certainty. She wanted to tell *him.* That man. She wanted to tell him right away, without losing a minute.

The politeness forced on her by the spectator at an end, Buddy's mother resumed her flurried handling of him where she had left off. She wrestled him violently into their flat and closed the door. But he wasn't aware of anything that she said to him. He could only think of one thing.

"Now you told her!" he sobbed in mortal anguish. "Now they *know!* Now they know *who!"*

His mother misunderstood, beautifully and completely. "Oh, now you're ashamed of yourself, is that it? I should think you would be!" She retrieved the key from his sleeping father's pillow, unlocked the door, thrust him in,

and relocked it. “I *was* going to let you out, but now you’ll stay in there the rest of the day!”

He didn’t hear her, didn’t know what she was saying at all.

“Now you told her!” he said over and over. “Now they’ll get me for it!”

He heard her leave for work. He was left alone there, in the stifling flat, with just his father’s heavy breathing in the outside room to keep him company.

Fear didn’t come right away. He knew he was safe while his father was out there. They couldn’t get at him. That’s why he didn’t mind being in there, he didn’t even try to get out through the window a second time. He was all right as long as he stayed where he was. It was tonight he was worried about, when his father was away at work and just his mother was asleep in the flat with him.

V

The long hot day burned itself out. The sun started to go down, and premonitory fear came with the creeping, deepening blue shadows. He’d never felt this way before. The night was going to be bad, the night was going to be his enemy, and he didn’t have anyone he could tell it to, so they’d help him. Not his father, not his mother, not even the police.

And if you didn’t have the police on your side, you might as well give up, there was no hope for you. They were on the side of everyone in the whole world, who wasn’t a crook or murderer. *Everyone.*

But not him. He was left out.

His mother came back from work. He heard her start to get supper ready, then call to his father, to wake him. He

heard his father moving around getting dressed. Then the key was inserted, the door unlocked. He jumped up from the chair he'd been huddled on. His father motioned him to come out.

"Now you going to behave yourself?" he asked gruffly. "You going to cut that stuff out?"

"Yes sir," Buddy said docilely. "Yes sir."

'Nit down and have your supper."

They sat down to eat.

His mother didn't mean to give way on him, he could tell that. It came out accidentally, toward the end of the meal. She incautiously said something about her employer having called her down.

"Why?" Buddy's father asked. "Oh, because I was five to ten minutes late."

"How'd you happen to be late? You *seemed* to be ready on time."

"I was *ready,* but by the time I got through talking to that policeman that came to the do—" she stopped short, but the damage was already done.

"What policeman came to the door?"

She didn't want to, but he finally made her tell him. "Buddy sneaked out. One of them brought him back here with him. Now, Charlie, don't, you just finished eating."

Buddy's father hauled him off his chair by the shoulder. "I belted you once today. How many times am I going to have to—" There was a knock at the door, and that saved Buddy for a minute. His father let go of him, went over and opened it. He stood out there a minute with someone, then he closed it, came back, and said in surprise: "It's a telegram. And for *you,* Mary."

"Who on earth—?" She tore it open tremulously. Then she gave him a stricken look. "It's from Emma. She must be in some kind of trouble. She says to come out there at once, she needs me. 'Please come without delay as soon as you get this.' "

Emma was Buddy's aunt, his mother's sister. She lived all the way out on Staten Island.

"It must be the children," his mother said. "They must be both taken sick at once or something."

"Maybe it's her herself," his father said. "That would be even worse."

"If I could only reach her! That's what comes of not having telephones."

She started to get her things together. Buddy pleaded, terrified, "Don't go. Mom! It's a trick. It's from *them.* They want you out of the way. They want to get me."

"Still at it," his father said, giving him a push. "Get inside there. Go ahead, Mary. You'll be half the night getting there as it is. I'll take care of him. Gimme a hammer and a couple of long nails," he added grimly. "He'll stay put, I'll see to that."

He drove them through the two sash joints of the window in there, riveting it inextricably closed. "That oughta keep you. Now you can tell your stories to the four walls, to your heart's content!"

His mother patted his head tearfully, "Please be a good boy, listen to your father," and was gone.

He only had one protector left now. And a protector who had turned against him. He tried to reason with him, win him over.

"Pop, don't leave me here alone. They're going to come down and get me. Pop, take me with you to the plant. I won't get in your way. Honest, I won't."

His father eyed him balefully.

"Keep it up. Just keep it up. You're going to a doctor tomorrow. I'm going to take you to one myself and find out what's the matter with you."

"Pop, don't lock the door. Don't. *Don't.* At least give me a chance so I can get out." He tried to hang on to the knob with both hands, but his father's greater strength dragged it slowly around in a closing arc.

“So you can run around to the police again and disgrace us? Well, if you’re so afraid of *them,* whoever they are, then you ought to be glad I’m locking the door, that’ll keep you safe from them. You confounded little liar!” *Cluck!* went the key in the lock.

He pressed his face close to the door seam and pleaded agonizedly.

“Pop, don’t leave the key in. If you gotta lock me up, at least take the key with you.”

“The key stays in. I ain’t taking a chance on dropping it somewhere and losing it.”

He began to pound with his fists, frantic now and beyond all control. “Pop, come back! Take me with you! Don’t leave me here alone! Pop, I take it back. It wasn’t so.”

His father was thoroughly exasperated by now, nothing could have made him relent. “I’ll see you when I come back from work, young fellow!” he rasped. “You’ve got something coming to you!” The outer door slammed, and he was gone away beyond recall.

He was alone now. Alone with crafty enemies, alone with imminent death.

He stopped his outcries at once. Now they were risky. Now they could no longer help him, now they might even bring on the danger all the quicker.

He put out the light. It made it more scary without it, but he knew it was safer to be in the dark than in the light. Maybe he could fool them into thinking nobody was there, if he stayed in the dark like this. Maybe, but he didn’t have much hope. They must have watched down the stairs, seen his father go alone.

Silence, then. Not a sound. Not a sound of menace, at least; from overhead, or from the outside room. Plenty of sounds outside in the back; the blurred harmless sounds of a summer night. Radios, and dishes being washed, and a baby crying somewhere, then going off to sleep.

Too early yet, he had a little time yet. That almost made it worse, to have to sit and *wait* for it to come.

A church bell began to toll. St. Agnes', the little neighborhood church a couple of blocks over. You could always hear it from here. He counted the strokes. Nine. No, there was another one. Ten already. Gee, time had gone fast. In the dark you couldn't keep track of it very easy.

It would take Mom a full hour and a half to get over to Aunt Emma's even if she made good connections. She'd have to cross over to lower Manhattan first, and then go by ferry down the bay, and then take the bus out to where the place was. And another hour and a half to get back, even if she left right away.

But she wouldn't leave right away. She'd stay on there for a while, even after she found out the message was a fake. She wouldn't think there was any danger, she trusted everyone so. She always saw the good in everyone. She'd think it was just a harmless joke.

He'd be alone here until at least one, and maybe even after. They knew that. That's why they were taking their time. That's why they were waiting. They wanted things to quiet down, they wanted other people to be asleep.

He got up every once in a while and went over to the door and listened. Nothing. The ticking of the clock in the other room was all he could hear.

Maybe if he could push the key out, and it fell close to the door, he could pull it through to his side underneath the door. It was an old, warped door, and the crack seemed pretty wide along the floor.

It was easy to push it out. Pie did that with a pencil stub he had in his pocket. He heard it fall. Then he got a rusty old wire coat hanger that was in the room, and pushed that through the crack on its flat side and started to fish round with it, hoping the flat hook at the top of it would snag the key and scoop it through to him.

He could hear himself hitting it, but each time he'd ease the hanger through, the hook would come back empty. Finally he couldn't hit it any more at all, and he knew what had happened. He'd pushed it farther away, it was out of reach now entirely. He'd lost it.

The church bell sounded again. Again he counted. Eleven. Had a whole hour passed, just doing that?

Most of the lights in the back windows were out now. The last radio had stopped.

If he could last through the next hour, maybe he'd be all right. From twelve on time would be working in his favor. Mom would be on her way back, and—

He stiffened. There was a single creak, from directly overhead. From *them.* The first sound they'd made. Trying not to be heard. You could tell the person was going on tiptoe by the slow way it sounded. *Cree-eak.* It took about a whole half-minute to finish itself.

Then nothing more for a long time. He was afraid to move, he was afraid to breathe. Then another kind of a sound, from a different place. Not wood, but shaky iron. Not overhead, but outside. Not a creak, but a kind of a soft clank.

His eyes flew to the window.

The shade. He should have thought about that sooner. But if there was no light on, nobody could see into the room anyway, even with it up.

He could see out a little. Not much, but just a sort of sooty dark gray color, a little bit lighter than the room itself, that was all. And now this was getting darker, right while he watched it. It was sort of blotting out, as if something was coming down from above, out there in front of the window.

He crouched back against the wall, hunched his head low between his shoulders, like a turtle trying to draw its head into its shell.

The looming shape was up close now, it covered the whole pane, like a black feather bolster. He could see something pale in the middle of it, though, like a face.

Suddenly the middle of it lit up bright silver, in a disk about the size of an egg, and a long spoke of light shot through the glass and into the room.

It started to swing around slowly, following the walls from one side all the way around to the other. It traced a white paper hoop as it went. Maybe if he got down low he could duck under it, it would miss him. He bunched himself up into a ball, head below knees now.

It arrived right over him, on the wall, and there was nothing he could push in front of him, nothing he could get behind. Suddenly it dropped. It flashed square into his squinting face, blinding him.

Then it went out, as suddenly as it had gone on. It wasn't needed any more. It had told them what they wanted to know. They knew he was in there now. They knew he was *alone* in there.

He could hear fingers fumbling about the woodwork, trying the window. It wouldn't move, the nails held it tight.

The looming black blur slowly rose upward, out of sight. The fire escape cleared. There was another creak overhead, on the ceiling. Not so slow or stealthy any more; the need for concealment was past now.

What would they do next? Would they try to get in the other way, down the front stairs? Would they give up? He knew they wouldn't. They'd gone to too much trouble, sending that phony telegram. It was now or never, they'd never have such an opportunity again.

St. Agnes' chimed the half-hour. His heart was going so fast, it was just as though he'd run a mile race top speed.

VI

Silence for minutes. Like before thunder, like before something happens. Silence for the last time. Buddy was breathing with his mouth open, that was the only way he could get enough air in. Even that way he couldn't, he felt as if he were going to choke.

Then a lock jigged a little. Out there, in the room past this. You could hardly hear it, but it gave off little soft turning sounds. The outside door started to open gradually. He could hear one of the hinges whine a little as it turned. Then it closed again.

A skeleton key. They'd used a skeleton key.

The floor softly complained, here, there, the next place, coming straight over toward the door he was behind, the final door. Somebody was in there. Maybe just one. Maybe the both of them together.

They didn't put on the lights. They were afraid, maybe they'd be seen from outside. They were up to it now, the door to where he was. He almost thought he could hear their breathing, but he wasn't sure; his own made enough noise for two.

The knob started to turn. Then it went back again to where it had been. They were trying the door. If only they didn't see the key lying there—But then he realized they didn't need that one anyway. The same skeleton key that had opened the outside door would work on this.

Maybe he could jam the lock; the pencil stub that he'd used the first time, to force the original key out. He dredged it up from his pocket. Too fast, too hurriedly. He dropped it, and he had to go feeling all over the floor for it, with slapping hands.

He found it again, floundered toward the door. The door seam had gleamed a little, for a moment, as if a light were licking along it, to place the keyhole. Just as he got there, the keyhole sounded off, the key rammed into it.

Too late; the key was in, he was gone.

He looked around for something to shove up against the door, to buy a minute more. Nothing heavy enough. Only that chair he'd been sitting on, and that was no good.

The key was squirming around, catching onto the lock.

He hoisted the chair and he swung it. But the other way, away from the door. He swatted the window pane with all his might. It went out with a torrential crash just as the door broke away from its frame and bucked inward.

He got out through the jagged opening; so fast that his very speed was a factor in saving him. He felt his clothing catch in a couple of places, but the glass didn't touch his skin.

Heavy running steps hammered across the wooden floor in there behind him. An arm reached through and just missed him. The splintered glass kept the man back, he was too big to chance it as Buddy had.

Buddy scuttled down the fire escape for all his life. And around the turn, and down, and around another turn, and down, like a corkscrew. Then he jumped down to the ground, and ran into the basement.

It was plenty dark down there, and he knew every inch of it by heart from being in there a lot at other times. But he was afraid if he stayed in there they'd come right down after him and trap him, cut off his escape. Then eventually ferret him out, and do it down there instead, in the dark. He wanted the open, he wanted the safety of the streets, where they wouldn't dare try anything. Where there would be people around who could interfere, come to his rescue.

So he plunged straight through without stopping, and up the janitor's steps at the front to sidewalk level. Just as he gained the street, panting, the oncoming rush of his pursuer sounded warningly from the cavernous building entrance alongside him, and a moment later the man came

careening out after him. He'd come down the front stairs in an attempt to try to cut him off.

Buddy turned and sped away toward the corner, racing as only the very small and the very light in weight can race. But the man had longer legs and greater wind-power, and it was only a matter of minutes before the unequal pursuit would end.

Buddy made the comer and scuffed around it on the sides of his shoes. No one in sight, no one around that offered any chance of protection. The man was closing in on him remorselessly now, every long step swallowing three of Buddy's. Buddy would have had to be running three times as fast even to break even with him, and he wasn't even matching his speed. The woman had joined in the chase too, but she was far behind, unimportant to the immediate crisis.

He spotted a row of ashcans just ahead, lined up along the curb. All filled and set out waiting to be emptied. About six, making a bulwark of them about ten yards or so in length. He knew he couldn't get past them, the man was within about two outstretched arm's length of him now, and already had one arm out to bridge half the span.

So he ran to the end of them, caught the rim of the last one to swing himself around on—its fill held it down fast—and suddenly doubled back along the other side of them. A feat the man couldn't hope to match as quickly, as deftly, because of his greater bulk. He went flying out too far on a wasteful ellipse, had to come in again from out there.

Buddy was able to keep their strung-out length between the two of them from now on. The man couldn't reach across them the short way, all he had to do was swerve back a little out of his reach. The man couldn't overthrow them either, they were too hefty with coke and ash.

But Buddy knew he couldn't stay there long, the woman was coming up rapidly and they'd sew him up between the two of them. He stopped short and crouched warily over

one of the bins. He gouged both hands into the powdery gritty ash, left them that way for an instant, buried up to the wrists. The man dove for him.

Buddy's hands shot up. A landmine of the stuff exploded full into the man's face. He got more of it that way than by throwing it. The whole top layer erupted.

Buddy shot diagonally into the open for the other side, left the readymade barricade behind. The man couldn't follow him for a minute, he was too busy staggering coughing, pawing, trying to get his eyesight back.

Buddy made the most of it He gained another corner, tors down a new street. But it was just a postponement, not a clear getaway. The man came pounding into sight again behind him after a brief time-lag, murderous now with added intensity. Again those longer legs, the deeper chest, started to get in their work.

Buddy saw a moving figure ahead, the first person he'd seen on the streets since the chase had begun. He raced up abreast a him, started to tug at his arm, too breathless to be able to do anything but pant for a minute. Pant, and point behind him, and keep jerking at his arm.

"Geddada here," the man said thickly, half-alarmed himself by the frenzied incoherent symptoms. "Warrya doing?"

"Mister, that man's trying to get me! Mister, don't let him!"

The man swayed unpredictably to one of Buddy's tugs, and the two of them nearly went down together in a heap.

A look of idiotic fatuousness overspread his face. "Warrsh matter kid? Somebody trying to getcha?"

A drunk. No good to him. Hardly able to understand what he was saying to him at all.

Buddy suddenly pushed him in the path of the oncoming nemesis. He went down, and the other one sprawled over his legs. Another minute or two gained.

At the upper end of the street Buddy turned off again, into an avenue. This one had tracks, and a lighted trolley was bearing down on him just as he came around the corner. That miracle after dark, a trolley just when it was needed. Its half-hourly passing just coinciding with his arrival at the corner.

He was an old hand at cadging free rides on the backs of them; that was the way he did all his traveling back and forth. He knew just where to put his feet, he knew just where to take hold with his hands.

He turned to face the direction it was going, let it rumble by full length, took a short spurt after it, jumped, and latched on.

The man came around into view too late, saw him being borne triumphantly away. The distance began to widen, slowly but surely; legs couldn't keep up with a motor, windpower with electricity. But he wouldn't give up, he kept on running just the same, shrinking in stature now each time Buddy looked back.

"Stop that car!" he shouted faintly from the rear.

The conductor must have thought he merely wanted to board it himself as a fare. Buddy, peering over the rim of the rear window, saw him fling a derisive arm out in answer.

Suddenly the car started to slacken, taper off for an approaching stop. There was a huddle of figures ahead at trackside, waiting to board it. Buddy agonizedly tried to gauge the distance between pursuer, trolley, and intended passengers.

The man was still about twice as far away from it, in the one direction, as they were in the other. If they'd get on quick, if he started right off again, Buddy could still make it, he'd still get away from him, even if only by the skin of his teeth.

The car ground to a stop. A friendly green light was shining offside, at the crossing. The figures, there were three, went into a hubbub. Two helped the third aboard.

Then they handed several baskets and parcels after her. Then she leaned down from the top of the step and kissed them severally.

"Goodbye. Get home all right, Aunt Tilly."

"Thank you for a lovely time."

"Give my love to Sam."

"Wait a minute! Aunt Tilly! Your umbrella! Here's your umbrella!"

The motorman went *ding!* impatiently, with his foot.

The green light was gone now. There was nothing there in its place, just an eclipse, blackness.

The car gave a nervous little start, about to go forward.

Suddenly red glowered balefully up there. Like blood, like fiery death. The death of a little boy.

The car fell obediently motionless again, static. In the silence you could hear *wap-whup, wap-whup, wap-whup,* coming up fast from behind.

Buddy dropped down to the ground, too late. The man's forked hand caught him at the back of the neck like a vise, pinned him flat and squirming against the rear end of the car.

The chase was over. The prey was caught.

"Now I've got you," his captor hissed grimly in his ear.

The treacherous trolley, now Shat it had undone him, withdrew, taking the shine of its lights with it, leaving the two of them alone in the middle of the darkened trackway.

Buddy was too exhausted to struggle much, the man was too winded to do much more than just hold him fast. That was all he needed to do. They stood there together, strangely passive, almost limp, for a few moments. As if taking time out, waiting for a signal to begin their struggle anew.

VII

The woman came up presently. There was a cold business-like quality to her undertone worse than any imprecations could have been. She spoke as though she were referring to a basket of produce.

"All right, get him out of the middle of the street, Joe. Don't leave him out here."

Buddy went into a flurry of useless struggling, like a snagged pin-wheel, that ended almost as soon as it began. The man twisted his arm around behind his back and held it that way, using it as a lever to force submission. The pain was too excruciating to disobey.

They remounted the sidewalk and walked along with him between them. Sandwiched between them, very close between them, so that from the front you couldn't tell he was being strongarmed. The pressure of their two bodies forced him along as well as the compulsion of his disjointed arm.

Wouldn't they meet anybody, anybody at all? Was the whole town off the streets, just tonight? Suddenly they did.

There were two men this time. Not swaying, walking straight and steady, cold sober. Men you could reason with. They'd help him, they'd have to. They were coming toward him and his captors. Otherwise the latter would have tried to avoid them. They couldn't; the men had turned the corner just before them too abruptly, catching them in full view.

A retreat would have aroused suspicion.

The man Joe took a merciless extra half-turn in his already fiery arm just as a precaution. "One word out of you," he gritted, "and I'll yank it off by the roots!"

Buddy waited until the two parties were abreast of one another, mustering up strength against the pain; both present pain and the pain to come.

Then he sideswept one foot, bit its heel savagely into his captor's unprotected shin bone. The man heaved from the pavement, released Buddy's arm by reflex.

Buddy flung himself almost in a football tackle against the nearest of the two passers-by, wrapped both arms about his leg, and held on like a barnacle.

"Mister, help me! Mister, don't let 'em!"

The man, hobbled, was unable to move another step. His companion halted likewise. "What the—!"

"Y'gotta listen! Y'gotta believe—!" Buddy sputtered, to get his lick in first. "They killed a man last night. Now they're gonna do the same thing to me!"

Joe didn't do what he'd expected. He didn't grab for him, he didn't show violence, even anger. There was a sudden change of attitude that threw Buddy off key, put him at a disadvantage. The thing had become psychological instead of physical. And he wasn't so good psychologically.

The line-up had turned into one of age groups before he knew how it had happened; a kid against four grownups. Grownups that gave each other the benefit of the doubt sooner than they would give it to a kid.

"His own mother and father," Joe murmured with mournful resignation. The woman turned her back and her shoulders shook.

"He doesn't mean to lie," Joe said with parental indulgence. "He makes these things up, and he believes it himself. His imagination is over-active."

"They're not my parents, they're not!" Buddy groaned abysmally.

"Well, tell them where you live, then," Joe said suavely.

"Yeah, kid, give us your address," one of the two strangers put in.

"Twenty Holt Street!" Buddy rushed in incautiously.

Joe had suddenly whipped out a billfold, held it open for the men to see some sort of corroboratory identification. "Tor once he admits he lives with us," he said ruefully. "Usually—"

"He stole five dollars out of my pocketbook," the woman chimed in tearfully, "My gas bill money for this month. Then

he went to the movies. He's been gone since three this afternoon, we only found him just now. This has been going on all the way home."

"They killed a man," Buddy screeched. "They cut him up with a razor."

"That was in the picture he just saw," Joe said with a disheartened shake of his head.

The woman was crouched supplicatingly before Buddy now, dabbing her handkerchief at his face in maternal solicitude, trying to clean it "Won't you behave now? Won't you come home like a good boy?"

The two strangers had turned definitely against him. The woman's tears, the man's sorrowful forbearance, were having an effect One man looked at the other. "Gee, I'm sure glad I never married, Mike, if this is what you get."

The other one bent over and detached Buddy none too gently, "C'mon, leggo of me," he said gruffly. "Listen to your parents, do like they tell you."

He dusted off his trouser leg where Buddy had manhandled it, in eloquent indication of having nothing more to do with the matter. They went on about their business, down the street

The tableau remained unaltered behind them for as long as they were still within call. The woman crouched before Buddy, but her unseen hand had a vicious death grip on the front of his shirt.

Joe was bending over him from behind, as if gently reasoning with him. But he had his arm out of kilter again, holding it coiled up behind his back like a mainspring.

"You—little devil!" he exhaled through tightly clenched teeth.

"Get him in a taxi, Joe. We can't keep parading him on the open street like this."

They said something between them that he didn't quite catch. "—that boarded-up place. Kids play around there a lot" Then they both nodded in malignant understanding.

A cold ripple went up his back. He didn't know what they meant, but it was something bad. They even had to whisper it to each other, it was so bad. *That boarded-up place.* A place for dark, secret deeds that would never come to light again; not for years, anyway.

A cab glided up at the man's up-chopping arm, and they went into character again, "It's the last time I ever take you out with me!" the woman scolded, with one eye on the driver. "Now you get in there!"

They wrestled him into it between them, feet clear of the ground; the woman holding his flailing legs, the man his head and shoulders; his body sagging in the middle like a sack of potatoes. They dumped him on the seat, and then held him down fast between them.

"Corner of Amherst and Twenty-second," the man said. Then as the machine glided off, he murmured out of the corner of his mouth to the woman, "Lean over a little, get in front of us." Her body blocked Buddy from the oblivious driver's sight for a moment.

The man pulled a short, wicked punch with a foreshortened arm, straight up from below, and Buddy saw stars and his ears rang. He didn't lose his senses, but he was dazed to a passive acquiescence for a few minutes. Little gritty pieces of tooth enamel tickled his tongue, and his eyes ran water without actually crying.

The cab stopped for a light, while he was slowly getting over the effects of the blow. Metal clashed, and a figure on the opposite side of the street closed a call box and leisurely sauntered on.

A policeman, at last! What he'd been hoping for, what he'd been praying for.

The woman's hand, handkerchief-lined, guessed his intent too late, tried to find his mouth and clamp itself tight

over it. He swerved his head, sank his teeth into her fingers. She recoiled with a stifled exclamation, whipped her hand away.

Buddy tore loose with the loudest scream he could summon; it almost pulled the lining of his throat inside out "Mr. Officer! Mr. Pleeeceman! Help me, will ya? Help me!"

The policeman turned on his course, came toward them slowly. A kid's cry for help, that wasn't the same as a grownup's cry for help, that wasn't as immediate, as crucial.

He looked in the cab window at the three of them. He even rested his forearm negligently along the rim as he did so. He wasn't on the alert; it couldn't be anything much, a kid squawking in a taxicab.

"What's up?" he said friendlily. "What's the hollering for?"

"He knows what he's going to get when we get home with him, that's what's up!" the woman said primly. "And you can holler at all the policemen you want to, young man, that won't save you!"

" 'Fraid of a licking, hunh?" the cop grinned understandingly. "A good licking never hurt any kid. My old man useta gimme enough of 'em when I was—" He chuckled appreciatively. "But that's a new one, calling the cops on your old man and lady to keep from getting a licking! I tell you, these kids nowadays are bad—

"He turned in a false alarm one time," the "father" complained virtuously, "to try to keep me from shellacking him!"

The cop whistled.

The cab driver turned his head and butt in, unasked. "I got two of my own, home. And if they gave me half as much trouble as this young pup's been giving these folks here since they first hailed me, I'd knock their blocks off, I'm telling you."

“They m-m-murdered a man last night, with a knife, and then they cut him up in pieces and—” Buddy sobbed incoherently.

“What a dirty mind he’s got,” the cop commented disapprovingly. He took a closer look at Buddy’s contorted face. “Wait a minute, don’t I know you, kid?”

There was a breathless silence. Buddy’s heart soared like a balloon. At last, at last—

“Sure, I remember you now. You come over with that same story and made a lot of trouble for us at the station house this morning. Wasting everybody’s time. Brundage even sent somebody over to investigate, like a fool. And was his face red afterwards! A lot of hot air. You’re the very one. I seen you there myself. Then one of the guys had to take you home afterwards to get rid of you. Are you the parents?”

“Do you think we’d be going through this if we weren’t?” Joe demanded bitterly.

“Weil, you’ve sure got my sympathy.” He waved them on disgustedly. “Take him away. You can *have* him!”

The cab glided into lethal motion again. Buddy’s heart went over supinely, in ultimate despair. Wasn’t there anyone in the whole grownup world believed you? Did you have to be a grownup yourself before anyone would believe you, stop you from being murdered?

He didn’t try to holler out the window any more at the occasional chance passers-by he glimpsed flitting by. What was the use? They wouldn’t help him. He was licked. Salty water coursed from his eyes, but he didn’t make a sound.

“Any p’tickler number?” the driver asked.

“The corner’ll do,” Joe said plausibly. “We live just a couple doors up the street.” He paid off before they got out,

in order to have both hands free for Buddy once they alighted.

The cab slowed, and they emerged with him, started walking hurriedly away. Buddy's feet slithered along the ground more than they actually lifted themselves. The cab wheeled and went back the way it had come.

"Think he'll remember our faces later?" the woman breathed worriedly.

"It's not our faces that count, it's the kid's face," Joe answered her. "And nobody'll ever see that again."

As soon as the cab was safely gone, they reversed directions and went up another street entirely.

"There it is, over there," Joe said guardedly.

VIII

It was a derelict tenement, boarded up, condemned, but not demolished. It cast a pall of shadow, so that even while they were still outside in front of it, they could scarcely be seen. It sent forth an odor of decay. It was, Buddy knew, the place where death was.

They stopped short. "Anyone around?" Joe said watchfully.

Then suddenly he embraced the boy; a grim sort of embrace if there ever was one, without love in it. He wrapped his arms around his head and clutched him to him tight, so that his hand sealed Buddy's mouth. Buddy had no chance to bite him as he had the woman. The pressure against his jaws was too great, he couldn't even open them.

He carried him that way, riding on his own hip so to speak, over to the seemingly secure boarded-up doorway. He spaded his free hand under this, tilted it out, wormed his way through, and whisked Buddy after him. The woman followed and replaced it. A pall of complete darkness

descended on the three of them. The stench was terrific in here. It wasn't just the death of a building; it was—some other kind of death as well. Death in two suitcases, perhaps.

"How'd you know that was open?" the woman whispered in surprise.

"How do you suppose?" he answered with grisly meaning.

"*This* where?" was all she said.

The man had taken his torch out. It snapped whitely at a skeleton stair, went right out again; instantaneously as the lens of a camera.

"Wait here where you are; don't smoke," he warned her. "I'm going up aways."

Buddy could guess that he didn't knock him completely out because that would have made him too heavy to handle. He wanted him to get up there on his own two feet, if possible. They started to climb, draggingly. The soundtrack went: *crunch, crunch, skfff.* That was Buddy's feet trailing passively over the lips of the steps.

He was too numbed with terror now to struggle much any more. It was no use anyway. No one anywhere around outside to hear him through the thick mouldering walls. If they hadn't helped him outside on the street, they were never going to help him in here.

Joe used his torch sparingly, only a wink at a time. Only when one flight had ended and they were beginning another. He wasn't taking any chances using it too freely. It was like a white Morse Code on black paper. *Dot, dot, dot.* Spelling out one word: *death.*

They halted at last. They must have reached the top now. There was a busted skylight somewhere just over them. It was just as black as ever, but a couple of low-wattage stars could be made out.

Joe pressed Buddy back flat against the wall, held him that way with one hand at his throat. Then he clipped his light on, left it that way this time. He wanted to see what he

was doing. He set it down on the floor, left it that way, alight, trained on Buddy.

Then his other hand closed in to finish the job.

A minute, maybe a minute and a half, would be all he needed. Life goes out awfully quick; even manually, which is one of the slowest ways.

“Say goodbye, kid,” he murmured ironically.

You fight when you die, because—that’s what everything alive does, that’s what being alive *is*.

Buddy couldn’t fight off the man’s arms. But his legs were free. The man had left them free, so he could die standing up. Buddy knew a man’s stomach is soft, the softest part of him. He couldn’t kick it free-swinging, because the man was in too close. He kicked upward with his knee, rammed it home. He could feel it pillow itself into something rubbery. A flame of hot body breath was expelled against him, like those pressure things you dry yourself with.

The death collar opened and the man’s hand went to his middle. Buddy knew that one such punch wasn’t enough. This was death and you gave no quarter. The man had given him the space he needed. He shot his whole foot out this time, sole flat. There was almost a sucking noise, as if it had gone into a waterlogged sponge.

The man went all the way back. He must have trodden on the cylindrical light. It spun crazily around. Off Buddy, onto the man for an instant. Then off the man, onto somewhere else. You couldn’t follow it with your eyes, it jittered too quick.

There was a splintering of wood. There was a strange sagging feeling, that made everything shake. Then a roaring sound, like a lot of heavy stuff going down a chute. The light flashed across the space once, and showed nothing: no Joe, no rail, no anything.

Then it pitched down into nothingness itself.

There was a curious sort of playback, that came seconds late, from somewhere far below. Like an echo, only it wasn't. Of something heavy and firm, something with bones in it, bones and a skull, smacking like a gunshot report. A woman's voice screamed "Joe!" hollowly.

Then a lot of loose planks went *clat-clat, clat, clattity, bang!* The woman's voice just groaned after that, didn't scream any more. Then the groans stopped too. A lot of plaster dust came up and tickled Buddy's nose and smarted his eyes.

It was very still, and he was alone in the dark. Something told him not to move. He just stood there, pressed himself flat and stood there. Something kept telling him not to move, not to move a finger. He didn't know what it was, maybe the way his hair stood up on the back of his neck. As if his hair could see in the dark better than he could, knew something that he didn't.

It didn't last long. There were suddenly a lot of voices down there, as if people had come running in from the street. And lights winking around. Then a stronger one than the rest, a sort of thick searchlight beam, shot all the way up, and jockeyed around, and finally found him.

The whole stair structure was gone. A single plank, or maybe two, had held fast against the wall, and he was standing on them. Like on a shelf. A shelf that ended at his toes. Five floors up.

A voice came up to him through a megaphone, trying to be very calm, very friendly; shaking a little around the edges, though.

"Close your eyes, kid. We'll get you down. Just don't look, keep your eyes closed. Think hard of something else. Do you know your multiplication tables?"

Buddy nodded cautiously, afraid to move his head too much.

“Start saying them. Two times two, two times three. Keep your eyes closed. You’re in school and the teacher’s right in front of you. But don’t change your position. He was in Six-A, didn’t they know that? You got multiplication in the first grade. But he did it anyway. He finished the two, he finished the threes. He stopped.

“Mister,” he called down in a thin but clear voice. “How much longer do I have to hold out? I’m getting pins and needles in my legs, and I’m stuck at four times twenty-three.”

“Do you want it fast and just a little risky, kid, or do you want it slow and safe?”

“Fast and a little risky,” he answered. “I’m getting kind of dizzy.”

“All right, son,” the voice boomed back. “We’ve got a net spread out down here. We can’t show it to you, you’ll have to take our word for it.”

“There may be loose planks sticking out on the way down, another voice objected, in an undertone that somehow reached him.

“It’ll take hours the other way, and he’s been through enough already.” The voice directed itself upward to him again. “Keep your arms close to your sides, keep your feet close together, open your eyes, and when I count three, jump.

“—three!”

He was never going to get there. Then he did, and he bounced, and it was over, he was safe.

He cried for a minute or two, and he didn’t know why himself; it must have been left over from before, when Joe was trying to kill him. Then he got over it.

He hoped they hadn’t seen him. “I wasn’t crying,” he said. “All that stuff got in my eyes, and stung them.”

“Same here,” Detective Ross, his one-time enemy, said gravely. And the funny part of it was, his eyes *were* kind of shiny too.

Joe was lying there dead, his head sticking out between two planks. They’d carried the woman out on a stretcher.

Somebody came up and joined them with a sick look on his face. “We’ve pulled two valises out from under what’s left of those stairs back there.”

“Better not look in them just yet,” Ross warned.

“I already did,” he gulped, and he bolted out into the street, holding his hand clapped to his mouth.

They rode Buddy back in state, in a departmental car. In the middle of all of them, like a—like a mascot.

“Gee, thanks for saving me,” he said gratefully.

“We didn’t save you, son. You saved yourself. We’re a great bunch. We were just a couple minutes too late. We would have caught *them,* all right, but we wouldn’t have saved you.”

“How’d you know where to come, though?”

“Picking up the trail was easy, once we got started. A cop back there remembered you, a cab driver showed where he let you out. It was just that we started so late.”

“But what made you believe it now all of a sudden, when you wouldn’t believe it this morning?”

“A couple little things came up,” Ross said. “Little, but they counted. The Kellerman woman mentioned the exact program you were supposed to have overheard last night, by name. It sounded better that way, more plausible. It’s the exact time, the exact type: it fitted in too good to waste. But by doing that she saved your life tonight. Because I happened to tune in myself tonight. Not out of suspicion, just for my own entertainment. If it was that good, I wanted to hear it myself.

“And it *was* that good, and even better. It’s a serial, it’s continued every night. Only at the end, the announcer apologized to the listeners for *not being on the air at all last*

night. Tuesday's election, and the program gave up its time to one of the candidates. And what you'd said you heard was sure no campaign speech!

"That was one thing. Then I went straight over to their flat. Pretty late, and almost as bad as never. They must have already been on the way with you. Everything in order, just like I'd seen it the first time. Only, a towel fell down from in back of the bathroom door, as I brushed past. And under it, where nobody could be blamed for overlooking it, not even the two of *them* themselves, there was a well-worn razor strop. The kind you use for an open blade, never a safety. With a fleck of fairly fresh soap still on it. Just a couple of things like that, they came awfully late, but that counted!

"Come on, Buddy, here's your home. I'll go with you."

It was already getting light out, and when they knocked, Buddy said in a scared whisper, "Gee, now I'm going to get it for sure! I been out the whole night long!"

"Detectives have to be sometimes, didn't you know that?" And Ross took his own badge off and pinned it on him.

The door opened, and his father was standing there. Without a word, he swung his arm back.

Ross reached up and held it where it was.

"Now, now, just be careful who you raise the back of your hand to around here. It's a serious matter to swat a member of the Detective Bureau, you know. Even if he happens to be an auxiliary, junior grade."

DEATH ESCAPES THE EYE

The other night at a party I met my last love again. By last, I don't mean my latest, I mean my final one. He was as taking and as debonair as ever, but not to me any more; a little older maybe; and we said the things you say, with two glasses in our hands to keep us from feeling lonely.

"Hello, Lizzie"; "Hello, Dwight"; "Haven't seen you"; "Nor you either."

Then when there wasn't anything more to say, we moved on. In opposite directions.

It isn't often that I see him any more. But whenever I do, I still think of her. I wonder what really did become of her.

And just the other night, suddenly, for no reason at all, out of nowhere, the strangest thought entered my head for a moment.

But then I promptly dismissed it again, as being too fantastic too absurd.

I first met him on paper.

Jean was the one called my attention to the manuscript. Jean was my assistant on the magazine. Strange, I suppose, for that type publication to have an all-female staff. I've never run across another such instance before or since. It didn't deal with confessions or with the screen or with home-making; it dealt with murder mysteries purely and

simply. And they were pure and they were simple, I assure you. Nothing else got in. Well, the backing was masculine, if capital can be said to have a gender; and they'd picked us to run it, so they must have liked the way we did it. We turned out a competent, craftsmanlike, he-man shocker and we signed it with first-initials, so the readers never knew the difference. "Editor, E. Aintree; Associate Editor, J. Medill." All my mail came addressed "Mr. Aintree."

We had a hole left in the magazine. You work pretty close to deadline on a monthly, and that will happen now and then. One of our regulars had defaulted; gotten drunk, or gotten the grippe, or come through with a stinker that couldn't be used. I don't remember now any more. We didn't have enough of a backlog to help us out; we were too young yet. (That's an accumulation of stories already purchased and held in reserve for just such an emergency.)

"What about the slush-pile?" I asked. That's the stuff that goes back. It varies all the way from abominable up to just plain not-so-good. That was poor Jean's department, first readings. She used to have to drink lots of black coffee with her lunch, to make her head feel better.

"There are a couple of shorts," she said, "but they're pretty bad. We'd have to use two."

"If we've got to use a bad one," I said, "I'd rather use just one long bad one than two short bad ones. See if you can't dig up something at ten thousand words."

She came into my office again in about an hour. "I've found something," she announced triumphantly. She made a face expressive of cynical appreciation. "Park Avenue," she said.

"What do you mean?" I glanced at the return address on the cover. "Dwight Billings, 657 Park Avenue, New York City." This was before the postal zones had come in.

Her eyebrows continued satirically arched. "We're getting contributions from the Four Hundred now."

“It runs all the way up to 125th Street and beyond.“I reminded her. “He may have rented a room in someone’s apartment. Most likely receives his mail care of the doorman.”

“Do they rent rooms on Park Avenue?” she wanted to know. Not sincerely; she seldom asked her questions sincerely. She already had the greater part of the answers, as a rule. She asked to see whether you had, that was the impression.

I read it. It was encased in dream-format, if you know what I mean. And that was taboo in our shop.

I’d read worse. But very infrequently.

“It’s a first try,” I let her know.

“Think we can take a chance on it?” she asked.

“We’ll have to. We go to the printer tomorrow. If we lop off the dream-casing and run it straight, it might get by. A good retreading job ought to fix it up. Have Ann see if she can get him on the phone for me.”

She returned breathlessly in a moment. “He’s listed,” she announced. She acted surprised, as though she’d expected at least the address—if not name and address both—to be feigned. “But we can’t reach him. And it’s quarter to five now.”

I slapped the manuscript rather short-temperedly into my briefcase. “I’ll have to take it home with me myself tonight, and try to hop it up.”

“That,” she said sweetly, “is what you get for being an editor.”

It was on its way to the printer’s by nine next morning; the hole had been filled up.

At nine-thirty the switchboard rang in.

“There’s a Mr. Billings here about a story—”

“Ask him to wait a minute,” I said tersely. I was still a little resentful of the time I’d given up the night before; my own time.

The minute became twenty. Not intentionally, but there was office routine, and he'd come in so damned early.

Finally I picked up the phone. "Ask Mr. Billings to come in." I lit a cigarette and leaned back in the chair.

He knocked subduedly. "Come in." I tilted my head and waited.

He was tall and he was thirty; brown eyes and lightish hair.

He looked at me, and then he looked around the room inquiringly. "Wrong office, I guess," he grinned. "I'm looking for Mr. Ai n tree."

I was used to that. I got it all the time.

"Sit down," I said. "It's Miss Aintree, and I'm she."

He sat down. He looked well sitting; not too far forward, not too far back. Not too straight, not too sunken.

I thought of my hair. I'd never thought of it before, here in the office. I wished I'd had it dressed once a fortnight or so, like Jean; not just run a comb through loosely and be done for the day.

"Is this your first story, Mr. Billings?"

He smiled deprecatingly. "I haven't fooled you, have I?"

I explained about the dream-format. "—so we took it out."

"But," he said incredulously, "that sounds as if you intended to—"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? We tried to reach you yesterday afternoon. You see, we're using it."

I watched closely. Just the right reaction; not too cocksure, not lackadaisical either. Modestly appreciative. Couldn't he do anything wrong? He should do something wrong. This wasn't good for me.

I rang for Jean. "I'd like you to meet the other half of the staff, now that you're under way with us."

He'd have to meet her sooner or later, so it was better right now. She only had on a pique shirtwaist and black skirt today, and she'd come in with an overnight cold.

“This is Mrs. Medill, my associate.” I deliberately emphasized the married title. “Mr. Billings is our newest contributor, Jean.”

“Welcome to our family.”

The cold wasn’t noticeable enough and the pique blouse looked too pert and chipper, I thought.

“I’ve been thinking about your story all night,” she said.

“You’ve been thinking about it, but I’ve been working on it,” I said caustically.

The three of us laughed.

Jean had a cigarette with us. We mulled over titles, finally decided on one. He’d been in with me for forty-five minutes, the longest interview I’d ever given since I’d been in the business.

He got up to go finally. He shook our hands.

“You’ll come back at us again with another now, won’t you?” I said. “We’re wide open, you know.”

“Yes,” Jean concurred demurely, her eyes resting on me innocently for a moment, “we’re wide open and our sales-resistance is practically nil.”

“Thanks,” he beamed. “You’ve both been perfectly swell.” He closed the door after him. A moment later he reopened it and looked in again. “I have an idea. Why don’t you both come up and have dinner with me at my place? I’m batching it, but I have some one up there who’ll look after us.”

“I have a miserable thing called a husband,” Jean said. “He doesn’t make any noise, he’s very well-trained, but the poor creature depends on me to be fed.”

“Bring him along!” he said. “Only too glad. Shall we say Tuesday, then?”

“Tuesday’s fine.”

“Tuesday at seven. Just the four of us. Goodbye, Miss Aintree.”

“Oh, make it Lizzie,” I said with a touch of bravado. That was another thing that had to be out and over with, too, so

the sooner the better. All the “Beths” and “Elspeths” when I was seventeen and eighteen hadn’t been able to improve on it. “Goodbye, Dwight.”

He closed the door, and I could hear his step going away down the corridor outside. He had a fine, firm tread; clean-cut, without any slurring.

She stood there looking at me with her brows raised.

“Why are your brows up?” I asked, finally.

“Are they up?”

“Well, they don’t grow that way.”

“I’ve never seen you so patient with a writer before,” she mused, gathering up her papers to take back with her.

Yes, he was here as a writer, wasn’t he?

Jean and her husband, the Cipher, stopped by for me Tuesday in a cab, and the three of us went on together. The Cipher was singularly uncommunicative, on any and all subjects, after five o’clock in the afternoon. He was resting from business, she and I supposed. “He has a voice,” she had once assured me. “I called for him one day, and I heard it through the office door.”

On the present occasion he said, “Lo, Lizzie,” in a taciturn growl as I joined them, and that, I knew, was all we were likely to get out of him for the next hour to come, soit had to do. But Jean had settled for it, and Jean was smarter when it came to men than I could ever hope to be.

657 was one of the tall monoliths that run along Park Avenue like a picket fence from Forty-fifth to Ninety-sixth; but a picket fence that doesn’t do its job. It doesn’t seem to keep anyone out; everyone gets in.

We stepped out of the elevator into a foyer, and there was only a single door facing us. Meaning there was but one apartment to a floor, in this building. The little waiting-place was made as attractive as if it were part of the apartment itself. The carpeting was Oriental, there was a heavily-framed mirror on the wall, a carved table below that, and a Louis XVI armchair with grape satin back-and-seat

upholstery. A small rock-crystal chandelier was suspended overhead.

"Is this one of your writers, Lizzie?" Jean inquired quizzically.

"Not on our rates," I said drily. And unnecessarily.

"Why does he bother fiddling around with writing?" the Cipher shrugged.

We both gave him a cold look. Meant to be taken as haughty reproof.

A colored man opened the door. None of the faithful old family-retainer type. A streamlined version. His accent was pure university. "If you'll allow me, sir." He took the Cipher's hat. "If you ladies would care—" He indicated a feminine guest-room to one side of the entrance gallery.

Jean and I went in and left our wraps in there.

She unlidded a cut-crystal powder receptacle, being Jean, and sniffed at it. "Coty's, unless I'm slipping. Vibrant for brunettes, and—" She unlidded a second one on the opposite side, "—Rachel for blondes. Evidently there are no redheads on his list."

I didn't answer.

We rejoined the Cipher and the butler in the central gallery. It ran on for a length of about three rooms, cutting a wide swath through the apartment, and then ended in a short flight of about four ascending steps. Beyond these was the living room. But it was lateral to the gallery, not frontal to it.

There was again a matter of steps, two this time, to be descended. You stopped, and turned to your left, and came down two steps onto the floor of the room. It was artfully constructed for dramatic entrances, that room.

Desultory notes of "None but the Lonely Heart" played with one hand alone stopped short. He raised his head at the bustle of our coming down the two steps, and I saw his eyes for a moment, fitted evenly into the crevice between the top of the instrument and its upraised lid. There was

something sinister about the vignette. It was as if he were wearing a flesh-colored mask between eyebrows and cheekbones, and the rest of his face were ebony-black.

Then he stood up and came forward, one hand each for myself and Jean.

I got the left. “Nearest to the heart,” I had to say to myself, to fool myself that I’d got the best of the bargain.

His man brought in a frost-rimmed shaker and poured bacardis and offered them to us.

“This is Luthe,” he said.

Luthe dipped his head slightly, with the same dignified reticence he’d shown at the door.

I wondered what Billing did. I wondered how to find out, without asking him. And Jean rushed in. It was a great convenience having her along, I couldn’t help reflecting.

“Well, what do you do?” she queried. “I mean, outside of writing for Lizzie, now that you are writing for Lizzie?”

“Nothing,” he said bluntly. “Simply—nothing.”

“Now, there’s a man after my own heart!” she blurted out. “Let me shake hands with you.” And proceeded vigorously to do so.

The Cipher made his hourly utterance at this point. “I admire you,” he stated emphatically. “You carry out what you feel like doing.”

“Do you always carry out the things you feel like doing?” Jean suggested mischievously. “I’d hate to be the lady in front of you at the theatre wearing that tall, obliterating hat.”

After dinner, with a great show of importance, he took me to see the room he did his work in. We went by ourselves. I don’t know why; leaving Jean and Cipher behind. I didn’t mind that.

He keyed open the door, as though revealing a site of very great intrinsic worth. “I don’t even let Luthe in here when I’m at it,” he said. “I’m sort of self-conscious about it, I guess.”

“You’ll get over that,” I assured him. “Some of them can work in the middle of the street at high noon.”

He showed me the typewriter. It had been left open with an insert at mid-page.

“I sit there and look at it and nothing happens. I hit the side of the machine, I hit the side of my head—”

I’m afraid I wasn’t as interested in him professionally as I should have been. I bent down close as if to look, but my eyes went past the roller toward the girl’s photograph standing farther back on the desk.

It said: “To my Dwight,” down in a lower corner, “from his loving wife, Bernette.” But he’d said he was batching it.

Divorced then.

I hummed a little, under my breath. Humming is a sign of contentment.

And then he called, in about a week, and invited us to dine with him a second time, starting the whole thing over.

We went. We were sitting there in his living room, just the four of us, about ten o’clock. And suddenly drama had come fuming in around us, like a flash-flood.

Luthe appeared, went over to him, bent down and said something not meant for our ears.

I saw Dwight look up at him, in complete disbelief.

“No,” he mouthed in astonishment. I caught the word. Then he pointed to the floor. “Here?”

Luthe nodded. “Right outside.”

“With him?” I caught those two words too.

“All right,” he said finally, and gave his hand an abrupt little twist of permission. “All right. She knows I’d never—”

I got it then.

She has somebody else. But not only that:

She's come right here with the somebody else!

Luthe showed up at the gallery-opening, announced formally: "Mr. and Mrs. Stone."

That told me the rest of it. She'd remarried, and the somebody else who'd come with her was her second husband.

I felt his wrist shaking a little, but it was safely out of sight behind the turn of my shoulder. For support purely, you understand; to sustain him against the settee-back. Nothing personal. I didn't have to be told.

I turned my head. She'd come out onto the entrance-apron, two steps above the rest of us. She, and a husband tailing her. But what it amounted to was: she'd come out onto the entrance apron. He might just as well not have been there.

She was familiar with the stage-management of this particular entry-way, knew just how to get the most out of it. Knew just how long to stand motionless, and then resume progress down into the room. Knew how to kill him. Or, since she'd already done that pretty successfully, perhaps I'd better say, know how to give him the shot of adrenalin that would bring him back to life again, so that she could kill him all over again. To be in love with her as he was, I couldn't help thinking, must be a continuous succession of death-throes. Without any final release, I could feel that hidden wrist behind me bounce a little, from a quickened pulse.

She stood there like a mannequin at a fashion-display, modeling a mink coat. Even the price-tag was there in full view, if you had keen enough eyes, and mine were. Inscribed "To the highest bidder, anytime, anywhere."

She had a lot of advantages over the picture I'd seen on his desk. She was in color; skin like the underpetals of newly-opened June rosebuds, blue eyes, golden-blond hair.

And the picture, for its part, had one advantage over her, in my estimate: it couldn't breathe.

She had on that mink she was modelling, literally. Three-quarters length, flaring, swagger. She was holding it open at just the right place, with one hand. Under it she had on an evening gown of white brocaded satin. The V-incision at the bodice went too low. But evidently not for her; after all she had to make the most of everything she had. She had a double string of pearls close around her neck, and a diamond clip at the tip of each ear.

They have the worst taste in women, all of them. Who is to explain their taste in women?

She came forward, down the steps and into the room. Perfume came with her, and the fact that she had hip-sockets. The bodice incision deepened, too, if anything.

I kept protesting inwardly, but there must be something more than just what I can see. There must be something more. To make him down a glass of brandy straight to keep from moaning with pain. To make his pulse rivet the way it is against the back of this settee. As though he had a woodpecker hidden in it.

I kept waiting for it to come out, and it didn't. It wasn't there. It was all there at first glance, and beyond that there was nothing more. And most of it, at that, was the mink, the pearls, the diamonds, and the incision.

She was advancing upon us. Her two hands went out toward him, not just one. A diamond bracelet around one wrist shifted back a little toward the elbow, as they did so.

He rose from the settee-arm, and his mask was that of the host who has been so engrossed in present company that he is taken completely by surprise by a new arrival. But his mask wasn't on very tight; you could see the livid white strain it was resting upon.

"Billy!" she crowed. And her two hands caught hold of his two, and spread his arms out wide, then drew them close

together, then spread them wide again. In a sort of horizontal handshake.

So she called him Billy. That would be about right for her too. Probably “Billy-Boy” when there were less than three total strangers present at any one time.

“Well, Bernette!” he said in a deep, slow voice that came through the mask.

One pair of hands separated, then the other pair. His were the ones dropped away first, so the impulse must have come from him.

The nonentity who had come in with her was only now reaching us; he’d crossed the room more slowly.

He was a good deal younger than either one of them; particularly than Dwight. Twenty-three perhaps, or five. He had a mane of black hair, a little too oleaginous for my taste, carefully brushed upward and back. It smelled a little of cheap tonic when he got too near you.

Her hand slipped possessively back, and landed on his shoulder, and drew him forward the added final pace or two that he hadn’t had the social courage to navigate unaided.

“I want you to meet my very new husband. Just breaking in.” Then she said. “You two should know each other.” And she motioned imperiously. “Go on, shake hands. Don’t be bashful. Dwight Billings, Harry Stone. My Dwight. My Harry.”

They looked at each other.

Dwight’s crisp intelligent eyes bored into him like awls; you could almost see the look spiraling around and around and around as it penetrated into the sawdust. You could almost see the sawdust come spilling out.

It’s not the substitution itself, I thought; it’s the insult of such a substitution.

The wait was just long enough to have a special meaning; you could make of it what you willed. Finally Dwight shook his hand vigorously. “You’re a very lucky—young fellow, young fellow.”

I wondered what word he would have liked to use in place of “young fellow.”

“I feel like I know you already,” the new husband said sheepishly. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“That’s very kind of Bernette,” Dwight said crisply.

I wondered where she’d got him. He had the dark, slicked-back good looks that would hit her type between the eyes. I cut him off below the neck, to try and visualize what would go with the face. And all I kept getting was a starched soda-jerk’s jacket. The little white cap would show up, cocked over one eye. I couldn’t keep it off. A devil with the three o’clock high-school shift.

Then again, why differentiate? They went well together. They belonged together.

The line of distinction didn’t run between him and her, it ran between her and Dwight. And part of her, at that, belonged on one side of the line, and part belonged on the other. The mink coat and the pearls and the diamond clips belonged on Dwight’s side of the line; and she herself belonged on the other side of it. She wasn’t even an integrated personality. The husband, with all his cheapness and callowness, was at least that.

Dwight introduced the rest of us. Introduced us, after I already knew her better than he ever had or ever would, with a pitiless clarity that he would never have.

Jean might have aroused her antagonistic interest. I could see that, but the married title deflected it as quickly as the introduction was made. Then when it came to myself, one quick comprehensive look from head to foot, and she couldn’t explain to herself what possible interest he could have in me, what anyone who looked like I did was doing there at all.

“Oh, a business friend,” she said.

“No, a friend,” he corrected firmly. And my heart applauded. That’s my boy. If you don’t love me, at least don’t cut me off altogether.

“Drinks for Mr. and Mrs.—” he said over our heads to Luthe. He couldn’t get the name yet. Or didn’t want to.

“Stone,” the husband supplied embarrassedly, instead of letting the embarrassment fall on Dwight, where it rightfully belonged.

She at least was perfectly self-possessed, knew her way around in this house. “My usual, Luthe. That hasn’t changed. And how are you, anyway?”

Luthe bowed and said coldly that he was all right, but she hadn’t waited to hear, the back of her head was to him once more.

Their drinks were brought, and there was a slow maneuvering for position. Not physical position, mental. She lounged back upon the settee as though she owned it, and the whole place with it; as she must have sat there so very many times before. Tasted her drink. Nodded patronizingly to Luthe: “As good as ever.”

Dwight, for his part, singled out the new husband, stalked him, so to speak, until he had him backed against a wall. You could see the process step by step. And then finally, “By the way, what line are you in, Stone?”

The husband floundered badly. “Well, right now—I’m not —”

She stepped into the breach quickly, leaving Jean hanging on mid-word. “Harry’s just looking around right now. I want him to take his time.” Then she added quickly, just a shade too quickly, “Oh, by the way, remind me; there’s something I want to speak to you about before I leave, Billy.” And then went back to Jean again.

That told me why she’d dragged him up here with her like this. Not to flaunt him; she had no thought of profitless cruelty. The goose that had laid its golden yolks for one might lay them for two as well. Why discard it entirely?

Dwight was in torment, and when anyone’s in pain too much to be borne, they strike back blindly.

“Where’d you go for your honeymoon, Bernette?”

She took a second, as though this required courage. She was right, it did. “We took a run up to Lake Arrow.”

He turned to the husband. “That’s where we went. How’d you like it?” Then back to her again. “How is the old lodge? Is Emil still there?”

She took a second. “Emil’s still there,” she said reticently.

“Did you remember me to him?”

She took two seconds, this time. “No,” she said reluctantly, mostly into the empty upper part of her glass, as though he were in there. “He didn’t ask about you.”

He shook his head and clicked with mock ruefulness. “Forgetful, isn’t he? Has he done anything about changing that Godawful wallpaper in the corner bedroom yet?” He explained to me, with magnificent impartiality: “He was always going to. It was yellow, and looked as though somebody had thrown up at two second intervals all over it.” He turned and flicked the punchline at her. “Remember, Bernette?”

It was magnificent punishment.

I watched them at the end, when they were about to go. Watched Dwight and her, I mean, not her husband and self. When the good-byes had been said and the expressions of pleasure at meeting had been spoken all around—and not meant anywhere. They reversed the order of their entry into the room. The husband left first, and passed from sight down the gallery, like a well-rehearsed actor who clears the stage for a key-speech he knows is to be made at this point. While she lingered behind a moment in studied dilatoriness, picking up her twinkling little pouch from where she had left it, pausing an instant to see if her face was right in a mirror on the way.

Then all at once, as if at random afterthought: “Could I see you for a minute, Billy?”

They went over to the side of the room together, and their voices faded from sound, it became pantomime. You had to read between the attitudes.

I didn’t miss a gesture, an expression of their faces, a flicker of their eyes. I got everything but the words. I didn’t need the words.

She glanced, as she spoke, toward the vacant gallery-opening, just once and briefly.

Talking about the husband.

She took a button of Dwight’s jacket with her fingers, twined it a little.

Ingratiation. Asking him something, some favor.

She stopped speaking. The burden of the dialogue shifted to him.

He shook his head almost imperceptibly. But definitely. Refusal. His hand had strayed toward his back pocket. Then it left it again. The billfold pocket.

Money for the husband.

The dialogue was now dead. Both had stopped speaking. There was nothing more to be said.

She stood there at a complete loss. It was something that had never happened to her with him, before. She didn’t know how to go ahead. She didn’t know how to get herself out of it.

He moved finally, and touched her guidingly at the same time, and that broke the transfixion.

“Well—goodnight, Billy,” she said lamely. She was still out of breath—mentally—from the rebuff.

He came and leaned over me.

“I’ve been neglecting you,” he said solicitously.

I had him all to myself for a moment, at least the outside of him.

Not for long, just between the acts. It wasn’t over yet. Suddenly she’d reappeared at the lower end of the room, was standing there.

He turned his head.

“Billy, talk to Luthe, will you? What’s the matter with him, has he had a drink or something? I can’t get him to give me

my coat.” And her whole form shook slightly with appreciative risibility.

He called Luthe. Luthe appeared almost instantly, holding the mink lining-forward in both arms. Like someone who has been waiting in the wings the whole time and takes just a single step forward to appear and play his part.

“Luthe,” Dwight said amiably. “Is that Mrs. Stone’s coat you’re holding?” And before she could interject, “Of course it is!”, which it was obvious she was about to do, he added: “Read the label in the pocket-lining and see what it says.”

Luthe dutifully peered down into the folds of satin and read “Mrs. Bernette Billings.”

There was a pause, while we all got it, including herself. Then suddenly Luthe had stepped from sight again, coat and all. While she still stood there, blankly and still coatless, not knowing what to do. Dwight stepped over to a desk, lowered the slab, and hastily inked something on a card. “Bernette,” he said, “I want to give you something.” And then he went to her with it and handed it to her. “Take this with you.”

It was an ordinary visiting- or name-card. She held it bracketed by two corners and scanned it diagonally, puzzled.

“What’s this for?”

“I’ll call him and make an appointment for you,” he said quietly. “Do me a favor, go in and talk to him. The whole thing’ll be over in no time.”

She still didn’t get it.

“Why should I go in and see your lawyer?” she blurted out. “What have I got to see him about?”

I got it myself, then. An annulment.

Anger began to smolder in her eyes.

Her fingers made two or three quick motions and pieces of cardboard sputtered from them.

“Think it over,” he urged, a second too late.

“I just did,” she blazed. “Is Luthe going to give me my coat?”

“It’ll be here waiting for you—any time you say—”

Her voice was hoarse now, splintered. “You think you’re going to show me up, is that it? No, I’ll show you up!”

Her hands wrestled furiously at the back of her neck. The pearls sidled down the bodice-incision. She trapped them there with a raging slap, balled them up, flung them. They fell short of his face, they were probably too light, but they struck the bosom of his shirt with a click and rustle.

“Bernette, I have people here. They’re not interested in our private discussions.”

“You should have thought of that sooner.” Her hands were at her ear-lobe now. “You want them to know you gave me things, don’t you? You don’t have to tell them! I’ll tell them!” The earclips fell on the carpet at his feet, one considerably in advance of the other.

Hers was the hot rage, incapacitating itself. His was the cold kind, the more deadly of the two, in perfect command of itself, able to continue its barbed, indirect insults.

“You can’t carry that out down to its ultimate—”

Only his face was chalky; otherwise he was motionless, voice low.

“I can’t, hunh? You think these people being here is going to stop me, hunh? The hell with them! The hell with you, yourself! I’ll show you! I’ll show you what I think of you!”

She was beside herself with rage. There was a rending of satin, and suddenly the dress peeled off spirally, like a tattered paper wrapper coming off her. Then she kicked with one long silkencased leg, and it fluttered further away.

She had a beautiful figure. That registered on my petrified mind, I recall. We sat there frozen.

“Keep your eyes down, ducky,” I heard Jean warn the Cipher in a sardonic undertone. “I’ll tell you when you can look up.”

For a moment she posed there, quivering, a monotoned apparition all in flesh-tints, the undraped skin and the pale-pink silk of vestigial garments blending almost indistinguishably. Then she gave a choked cry of inexpressible aversion, and darted from sight.

He called out: “Luthe, that raincoat in the hall. Put it over her. Don’t let her go out of here like that. It’s chilly tonight.”

A door slammed viciously somewhere far down the gallery.

Jean was the first one to speak, after the long somewhat numbed silence that had followed. And, probably unintentionally, her matter-of-fact minor-keyed remark struck me as the most hilariously malapropos thing I had ever heard. I wanted to burst out laughing at it.

She stirred and said with mincing politeness: “I really think we should be going now.”

A six-week interval, then.

Nothing happened. No word. No sight. No sign.

Was he with her once more? Was he with somebody else entirely different? Or was he alone, with nobody at all?

I had it bad. Real bad.

I was reading proof when the desk-phone rang one afternoon.

“Mr. Dwight Billings calling,” Ann said.

He said: “I don’t dare ask you and the Medills to come up here after what happened that last time.”

“Dare,” I said faintly. “Go on, dare.”

“All right, would you?” he said. “Let’s all have dinner together and—”

Jean came into the room about fifteen minutes later, to see if the proofs were ready.

“Dwight Billings just called,” I said, trying to right an inverted comma with the wooden cone of the pencil.

She said the strangest thing. I should have resented it, but she said it so softly, so understandingly, that it never occurred to me until later that I should have resented it.

"I know," she said. "I can tell."

She uncoupled my phone and turned it the other way around, so that it wouldn't come up to my ear reversed the next time I lifted it. She stooped and picked up two or three stray proofsheets that were lying on the floor under my desk. She dredged a sodden blue cigarette out of my inkwell, and removed my pen from the ashtray.

"Either that, or there's a high wind out there on Fifty-third Street today."

So back we went, the three of us, for another glimpse at this real-life peep-show that went on and on, with never an intermission, even though there was not always someone there to watch it.

He was alone. But my heart and my hopes clouded at the very first sight of him as we came in; they knew. He was too happy. His face was too bright and smooth; there was love hovering somewhere close by, even though it wasn't in sight at the moment. Its reflection was all over him. He was animated, he was engaging, he made himself pleasant to be with.

But as for the source of this felicity, the wellspring, you couldn't tell anything. If I hadn't known him as he'd been in the beginning, I might have thought that this was his nature. He was alone, just with Luther. We were only four at the table, one to each side of it, with candles and a hand-carved ship-model in the center of it.

Then when we left the table, I remember, we paired off unconventionally. I don't think it was a deliberate maneuver on anyone's part, it just happened that way. Certainly, I didn't scheme it; it was not the sort of partners I would have preferred. Nor did he. And the Cipher least of all. He never schemed anything. That left only Jean: I hadn't been watching her—

At any rate, the two men obliviously preceded us, deep in some weighty conversation; she and I followed after.

She stopped short midway down the gallery, well before we had emerged into view of the drawing-room, which the two men had already entered.

“I have premonitions of a run,” she said. “I don’t trust these sheers.” But what she did was jog her elbow into my side, in a sort of wordless message or signal, as she turned aside and went in through the nearest doorway.

So I turned and followed her: that was what her nudge had summoned me to do.

The lights went on.

“But this is his bedroom,” I protested, with an instinctive recoil at the threshhold.

“Oh, is it?” she said with utter composure. She had already crossed to the other side of it, to a dressing-table. I saw her squeeze the bulb of an atomizer so that its trajectory passed beneath her nose. “Chanel Twenty-two,” she deciphered. “Are THEY using that now?”

I couldn’t have given her the answer; she wanted none, it hadn’t been a question.

She went toward the full-length mirror in a closet-door. She went through the motions of validating her excuse for stepping in here; raised her skirt, cocked her leg askew toward the mirror, dropped her skirt again. Then she reached out and purposefully took hold of the faceted glass knob of the closet-door.

“Jean,” I said with misgivings, “Don’t do that.”

I saw she was going to anyway.

“Just coats and trousers,” I prayed unavailingly. “Just tweeds and—and things like that.” I couldn’t think of an alternate fabric, there wasn’t time.

She swept it wide, the door, with malignant efficiency, and stood back with it so that I could see, and looked at me, not it, as she did so.

Satins and silks, glistening metallic tissues, flowered prints; and in the middle of all of them, like a queen amidst her ladies-inwaiting, that regal mink.

Then there was a blinding silvery flash as the electric light flooded across the mirror, and the door swept closed.

“Back,” was all she said, brittly.

She put out the light as she shepherded me across the threshhold; I remember the room was dark as we left it behind.

She held her arm around me tight as we walked slowly down the remainder of the gallery. And twice, before we got to the end of the way, she pressed it convulsively, tighter still.

I needed it.

“Tune in the stadium concert, Luthe,” he suggested at one point. “It must be time for it.”

I wondered what he wanted that for.

Some very feverish dance-band drumming filtered out.

“If that’s the stadium concert,” Jean said, “they’ve certainly picked up bad habits.”

“Luthe,” he said good-naturedly, “what’re you doing over there? I said the open-air concert, at the stadium.”

“I can’t seem to get it. What station is it on?”

“ABC, I think.”

“I’m on ABC now. Doesn’t seem to be it.”

“Does it?” agreed Jean, pounding her ear and giving her head a shake to clear it, as a particularly virulent trombone-snarl assailed us.

“Call up the broadcasting station and find out,” he suggested.

Luthe came back.

“No wonder. It’s been called off on account of rain. Giving it tomorrow night instead.”

“It’s not raining down here,” Jean said. She turned from the window. “It’s bone-dry out. Do you even have special weather arrangements, for Park Avenue?” she queried.

“Look who we are,” he answered her. A little distractedly, I thought as though he were thinking of something else. “What time is it now, Luthe?” he asked.

She arrived about an hour and a half later. Perhaps even two hours. I don’t know; since I hadn’t been expecting her, I wasn’t clocking her exactly. If he was, he’d kept it to himself, you couldn’t notice it. No more parenthetic requests for the time, after that first one.

There were several things to notice about her arrival. One of them was, she was not announced. She simply entered, as one does where one belongs. Suddenly, from nowhere, she had taken her stance there on the auction-block (as I called it after that first time). Then, after flamboyant pause and pose there, she was coming down the steps to join us.

He’d made a few improvements in her. Surface ones only; that was the only part of her he could reach, I suppose. Or maybe he needed more time.

She’d even acquired an accent. I mean an accent of good, cultivated English; and since it was false, on her it was an accent.

When she walked, she even managed to use the soles of her feet, and not her hips so much any more: I wondered if he’d used telephone directories on her head for that.

“You remember Lizzie, and Jean, and Paul,” he said.

“Oh, yes, of coh-ess, how are you?” she leered affably. She was very much the lady of the manor, making us at home in her own domain. “Sorry I’m so late. I stayed on to the very end.”

“Did you?” he said.

And I thought: Where? Then, No! It can’t be! It would be too good to be true—

But she rushed on, as though speaking the very lines I would have given her myself. She wanted to make a good impression, avoid the cardinal social sin of falling mute, not having anything to say; all those unsure of themselves are mortally afraid of it. So the fact of saying something was more important than the content of what it was she said.

“Couldn’t tear myself away. You should have come with me, Billy. It was heavenly. Simply heavenly.” Business of rolling the eyes upward and taking a deep, soulful breath.

“What’d they play first?” he said tightly.

“Shostakovich,” she said with an air of vainglory, as when one has newly mastered a difficult word and delights in showing one’s prowess with it.

I saw the Cipher’s lips tremble preliminary to speech. I saw the tip of Jean’s foot find his and squeeze it out unmercifully. Speech never came.

You couldn’t tell she’d said anything. His face was a little whiter than before, but it was a slow process, it took long moments to complete itself. Until finally he was pale, but the cause had long been left behind by that time, would not have been easy to trace any more.

She caught something, however. She was not dense.

“Didn’t I pronounce it right?” she asked, darting him a look.

“Oh, perfectly,” he said.

“But here,” she protested. “Here it is right here, on the program.” She’d brought the program with her. She insisted on showing it to him. She thrust it on him.

I thought, What a great man Shakespeare is. He has a line to cover every situation, even from four hundred years back, ‘Methinks the lady doth protest too much.’

He crumpled it without looking at it. But not violently, with a sort of slow indifference.

I wondered how many days ahead they printed them. I wondered how you went about getting hold of one in advance. Well, it wasn't totally impracticable; there were ways, probably.

I thought once more, *What a great man Shakespeare is: 'Love will find a way.'*

She was uneasy now.

She didn't like us. She was hampered by our being there; couldn't defend herself properly against whatever the threat was, although she didn't know what it was herself, as yet. She couldn't even make the attempt to find out, because of our continuing presence.

She sat for a moment with the drink he'd given her, made a knot with her neck-pearls about one finger, let it unravel again. Then she stood up, put her drink down over where they had originally came from.

"I have a headache," she said and touched two fingers to the side of her head. To show us, I suppose, that that was where it was—in her head.

"Shostakovich always gives me a headache too," Jean said sweetly to her husband.

She shot Jean a quick look of hostility, but there was nothing she could do about it. There was nothing to get your teeth into. It had been addressed privately to the Cipher, not anyone else. And it had been said almost inaudibly. Almost, but not quite. If she'd picked it up, that would have been claiming it for her own.

"If you'll excuse me now," she said.

She was asking him, though not the rest of us. She was a little bit afraid. She wanted to get out of this false situation. She didn't know what it was, but she wanted to extricate herself.

"Oh, sure, 'right ahead," he said casually. "You don't have to stand on ceremony with us, Bernette." He didn't even turn to look at her, went ahead dabbling in drinks.

I thought of the old Spanish saying, *Aquitiene Usted su casa*. My house is yours. And it probably was as little valid in the present circumstance as in the original flowery exaggeration.

"But you just came," the Cipher said. He was only trying to be cordial, the poor benighted soul. He hadn't stepped aside into that room with us.

Jean and I simply looked at one another. I could almost lip-read what she was about to say before it came out. "She hasn't far to go." I nearly died for a minute as I saw her lips give a preliminary flicker. Then she curbed herself. That would have been going too far. I breathed again.

She made her goodnights lamely, and yet with a sort of surly defiance. As if to say, I may have lost this skirmish, but I haven't even begun to fight yet. This was on ground of your choosing; wait'll he's without his allies, and must come looking for me on ground of my own choosing. We'll see whose flag runs down then.

She climbed the steps, she turned galleryward, she passed from view. In her clinging black dress, her head held high, her chin out. A little cigarette-smoke that had emanated from her on the way, lingered behind for a moment or two. Then that dissolved, too.

And that's all the trace you leave behind in this world, sometimes. A little cigarette-smoke, quickly blown away.

Presently another figure passed the gallery opening, coming from further back in the apartment, but going the same way she had.

Dwight turned his head.

"Going now, Luthe?"

"Yes, sir. Goodnight."

This time you could hear the outer door. Close not loudly, but quite definitely.

"Luthe goes home to Harlem one night a week, and this is his night for it. The rest of the time he stays down here with me."

We left soon afterward ourselves.

As we moved down the gallery in leisurely deliberation, I looked ahead. That room that Jean and I had been in before was lighted now, not dark as we had left it. The door was partly ajar, and the light coming from it lay on the floor in a pale crosswise bar or stripe.

Then as we neared it, some unseen agency pushed it unobtrusively closed, from the inside. I could see the yellow outshine narrow and snuff out, well before we had reached it.

There was no sound accompanying it, and it was easy to pretend we had not noticed it happen. Those of us that had.

We were kept waiting for the elevator for some time. Finally when it appeared, it was being run, strangely, by a gnarled elderly individual in fireman's overalls. There was no night-doorman on duty below when we got down there, either.

"What happened?" Jean asked curiously. "Where's all the brass?"

"Walked off," he said. "Wildcat strike. The management fired one of the fellows for impudence, and they all quit. Les'n'n hour ago. They ain't nobody at all to run the back elevator. I'm practic'ly running this whole building single-handed, right now. You'll have to get your own taxi, folks. Can't leave this car."

She and I were left alone in the doorway for several minutes, while the Cipher went semaphoring up and down Park Avenue in quest of one. We made good use of the minutes.

"She stayed," I breathed desolately.

"But not for long," Jean assured me. "I don't give her twenty minutes. Five'll get you ten that if you came back an hour from now, you'd find him alone."

I wished afterward she hadn't said that; it may have been what first put the idea in my head, for all I know.

The same elderly pinch-hitter was still servicing the building single-handed. “They ain’t nobody at all looking after the back elevator,” he complained unasked.

I felt like saying, “You said that before,” but I didn’t.

He took me up without announcing me.

I got out and I knocked at Dwight’s door. The car went down and left me alone there.

I looked at myself in the wall-mirror. I knocked again, more urgently, less tentatively. I tripped the Louis XVI gilt knocker, finally. That carried somewhat better, since it had a metal sounding-board, not a wood one.

His voice said, “Who is it?”, too quickly for this last summons to have been the one that brought him; it must have been the first one after all, and he had been waiting there for it to repeat itself.

“Lizzie,” I whispered sibilantly, as though there were someone else around to overhear.

The door opened, but very grudgingly. Little more than a crack at first. Then at sight of me, it widened to more normal width. But not full width of passage, for he stood there in the way; simply full width enough to allow unhampered conversation.

He was in a lounging robe. His shirt was collarless above it, and the collar-band was unfastened. It had a peculiar effect on me: not the robe nor the lack of collar, simply the undone collar-band; it made me feel like a wife.

He smiled hospitably. The smile was a little taut. “Well, good Lord! You’re the last one I expected to—”

“Don’t look so stunned. Am I that frightening?” I couldn’t resist saying.

“Did I get you out of bed?” I said.

He kept smiling with unwavering docility. It was a sort of vacant smile. The smile with which you wait for someone to go away. The smile that you give at a door, when you are waiting to close it. Waiting to be allowed to close it, and held powerless by breeding. It had no real candlepower

behind it, that smile. “No,” he said. “I was just getting ready, by easy stages.”

He felt for the satin-faced lapel of his robe, as if to remind himself he had it on. He felt for the loose knot of the braided cord that encircled it, as if to remind himself that it was fastened.

His face looked very pale, I thought; unnaturally so. I hadn’t noticed it the first moment or two, but I gradually became aware of it now. I thought it must be the wretched foyer-light, and I hoped I didn’t look as pale to him as he did to me. I take pallor easily from unsatisfactory lights. The thing to do was to get inside away from it.

“It’s my compact,” I said. “I left it up here. Only take me a minute. I’d feel naked without it.”

“Where are the others?” he said. His eyes shifted wearily from my face to the elevator-panel rearward of me, then back to my face again.

“I dropped them off first,” I said. “Only missed it after they’d left me. Then I came straight back here.”

“It couldn’t have been up here,” he said. “I would have—I would have found it myself right after you left.” He gestured helplessly with one hand, in a sort of rotary way. “It must have been in the taxi. Did you look in the taxi?”

The light was the most uncomplimentary thing I’d ever seen. It made him look quite ghastly.

“It wasn’t in the taxi,” I insisted. “I didn’t use it in the taxi. Up here was the last place I used it.” I waited for him to shift, but he didn’t. “Won’t you let me come in and look, a moment?”

He was equally insistent. We were both extremely cordial about it, but extremely insistent. “But it isn’t up here, I tell you. It couldn’t be, Lizzie, don’t you see? If it was, I would have come across it by now myself.”

I smiled winningly. “But did you look for it? Did you know it was lost, until I told you so myself just now, here at the

door? Then if you didn't look for it, how do you know it isn't there?"

"Well, I—I went over the place, I—" He decided not to say that, whatever it was to have been.

"But if you didn't know what it was that was lost, you couldn't have had your eyes out for it specifically," I kept on, sugaring my stubborness with a smile. "If you'd only let me step in for a moment and see for myself—"

I waited.

He waited, for my waiting to end.

I tried another tack. "Oh," I murmured deprecatingly, turning my head aside, as if to myself, as if in afterthought, "you're not alone. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

It worked. I saw a livid flash, like the glancing reflection from a sun-blotted mirror, sweep across his face. Just for an instant. If it was fear, and it must have been of a kind, it was a new fear at this point; fear of being misunderstood, and no longer fear of my entering. He stepped back like magic, drawing the door with him.

"You're mistaken," he said tersely. "Come in."

And then as I did, and as he closed the door after me, and pressed it sealed with his palm in one or two places, he added, and still quite brittly. "Whatever gave you that idea?" And turned to look the question at me, as well as ask it.

"After all," I drawled reassuringly, "I'm not anyone's grandmother."

He was no longer smiling. This point was evidently of importance to him, for some peevish reason that escaped me. Sheer contradictoriness, perhaps. Certainly I'd never detected any trait of primness in him before. "I never was so alone in my life," he said somewhat crossly. "Even Luthe went uptown."

"I know," I reminded him. "He left while we were still here."

But I had been thinking mainly of somebody else, not Luthe.

We moved slowly down the gallery, I preceding him.

She'd gone, just as Jean had said she would. The door that I had seen slyly closing before, shutting off its own beam of light, was standing starkly open now, and the room was dark. It looked gloomy in there, unutterably depressing, at that hour of the night.

"I didn't leave it in there," I said. I wasn't supposed to have been in there.

"No, you didn't," he agreed, with considerable alacrity.

We turned and faced across the gallery to the other door, the closed one, to that "writing-room" of his.

"In here, maybe," I suggested.

I heard him draw some sort of a crucial breath.

"No," he said quite flatly. "You didn't."

"I may have, just the same." I reached out to take the knob.

"No," he said. Tautly, almost shrilly, as though I were getting on his nerves.

I glanced at him in mild surprise, at the use of such a sharp tone of voice for such a trifling matter. The look I caught on his face was even more surprising. For a moment, all his good looks were gone.

He was ugly in mood and ugly of face.

Then, with an effort, he banished the puckered grimace, let his expression smooth out again. Even tried on a thin smile for size, but it didn't fit very well and soon dropped off again.

I tried the door and it was locked.

"It's locked," I said, desisting.

"I always keep it that way," he said. "I write in there, and leave my copy lying around, and—well, I'm sensitive about it; I don't like Luthe nosing into it. I caught him once snickering—"

"But you said he'd gone home."

“Well, the habit persists.”

“Well, won’t you let me go in and look at least?” I coaxed. I thought: I still love him, even when his face is all ugly and puckery like that. How strange; I thought it was largely his looks that had me smitten, and now I see that it isn’t.

“But you weren’t in there, so how could it get in there?”

“I was. I was in there once earlier tonight. I don’t know whether you knew it or not, but I strayed in there one time this evening.”

He looked at me, and he looked at the door. “I’ll see if I have the key,” he said quite suddenly, and gave the skirt of his robe a lift and plunged his hand into his pocket. There was a great commotion of jangling. The pupils of his eyes slanted far over into their corners for an instant, toward me, then righted themselves.

I’d caught the little secretive flicker; I read it. That was a look of hidden annoyance with me, I told myself, expressed quicker than he could master it.

Why do I drive him like this, I wondered? To see how far I can go? To make him fully aware of my being here alone with him? I didn’t know myself.

He took out a considerable palmful of them; five or six, I should say. They were all secured together on a little ring-holder. The majority, it could be seen at sight, were not door-keys at all. They were keys of special usage: to a desk-drawer, perhaps; to a safetybox; to the ignition of a car.

And as he paid them over, making considerable noise with them, I saw an additional one fall soundlessly to the carpet, from between his robe and the mouth of his pocket. One that must have been held in there separate, apart from the rest. One that had come up accidentally, perhaps, without his meaning it to, when he had drawn the rest of them up.

It was long-shanked, a typical interior-door key, this one.

I saw that he hadn’t noticed its fall, the noise he was making with the others covered it. For a moment I was going to pick it up and restore it to him. Then, instead, I

shifted my foot, put it over it, and stood there making no other move.

He tried one unsuccessfully, withdrew it again. It was far too small to be taken by that particular lock.

He creased his forehead querulously. “I’ve misplaced it,” he said. “I don’t seem to have it here.” He restored them under his robe, without exploring with his fingers to see if there were any additional ones lingering in there. I could tell; his hand came out too swiftly. As if this were a point he himself needed no reassurance upon, he already knew the answer.

“I may have dropped it into something around the place. I do that sometimes.” He scratched his head, and glanced the other way, as if in aid to his memory.

I stooped swiftly, in that instant he left unguarded, and took up the key, and kept it to myself in my hand.

“Well,” he said, as if in conclusion to the whole interview, “if I come across it, I’ll see that you get it back.”

We stood and looked at one another for a moment, he waiting for me to make the next move.

“He wants me to go,” I said, as though speaking ruefully to a third person. “He can’t wait until I do.”

What could he say then? What could anyone have said, except in overt offense? And that, you see, was why I’d said it. Though it was true, my saying so forced him to deny it, obliged him to act in contradiction to it. Though he didn’t want to, and I knew that he didn’t want to, and he knew that I knew that he didn’t want to.

“No,” he said deprecatingly. “No, not at all.” And then warmed gradually to his own insistence: picked up speed with it as he went along. “Come inside. Away from that door.” (As though my departure from a fixed point was now what he wanted to obtain, and if he could obtain it only by having me all the way in, rather than by having me leave, then he’d have me all the way in.) He motioned me the way with his arm and he turned to accompany me. And kept up

meanwhile the running fire of his invitation at a considerably accelerated tempo, until it ended up by being almost staccato. “Come inside and we’ll have a drink together. Just you and I. Just the two of us alone. As a matter of fact I need company, this minute.”

On the rebound, I thought. On the rebound; I may get him that way. They say you do. Oh, what do I care how, if only I do.

I went down the steps, and he went down close beside me. His swinging arm grazed mine as we did so, and it did something to me. It was like sticking your elbow into an electrical outlet.

That drawing room of his had never looked vaster and more sombre. There was something almost funereal about it, as though there were a corpse embalmed somewhere nearby, and we were about to sit up and keep vigil over it. There was only one lamp lit, and it was the wrong one. It made great bat-wing shadows around the walls, from the upraised piano-lid and other immovables, and now added our own two long, willowly emanations.

He saw me look at it, and said “I’ll fix that.”

I let him turn on one more just to take some of the curse off the gruesomeness, but then when I saw him go for the wall-switch, that would have turned on a blaze overhead, I quickly interposed “Not too many.” You can’t have romance under a thousand-watt current.

I sat down on the sofa Jean had been on that night of the striptease.

He made our drinks for us, and then came over with them and then sat down in the next state.

“No, here,” I said. “My eyesight isn’t that good.”

He grinned, and brought his drink over, and we sat half-turned toward one another like the arms of a parenthesis. A parenthesis that holds nothing in it but blank space.

I saw to it that it soon collapsed of its own emptiness, and one of the arms was tilted rakishly toward the other.

I tongued my drink.

“It was a pretty bad jolt,” I admitted thoughtfully.

“What was?”

“You don’t have to pretend with me.”

“Oh,” he said lamely.

“You’re still pretending,” I chided him. “You’re pretending that you haven’t thought of it; that I’m the one just now brought it back to your mind for the first time. When all along it hasn’t left your mind, not for a single moment since.”

He tried to drown his face in his drink, the way he pushed it down into it. “Please,” he said, and made a grimace. “Not now. Do we have to—Don’t let’s talk about it now.”

“Oh, it hurts that much,” I said softly.

The parenthesis had become a double line, touching from top to bottom.

“Why don’t you put iodine on it?” I suggested.

He made a ghastly shambles of a smile. “Is there any for such things?”

“Here’s the bottle, right beside you,” I offered. “And there’s no death’s head on the label.”

That symbol seemed to frighten him, or at least be highly unwelcome. He screwed up his eyes tight, and I saw him give his head a shake, as though to rid it of that particular thought.

“It stings for a minute, and then you heal,” I purred. “You heal clean. No festering. And then you’re well again; even the mark goes away. And you have a new love.” I dropped my voice to a breath. “Won’t you try—iodine?”

So close his face was to mine, so close; all he had to do—

Then he turned it a little; oh, a very, tactful little. The wrong way; so that the distance had widened a little. And he could breathe without mingling his breath with mine. Which seemed to be what he wanted.

“Don’t you understand me, Dwight? I’m making love to you. And if I’m awkward about it, it’s because women aren’t

very good at it. Can't you help me out a little?"

I saw the look on his face. Sick horror. I wish I hadn't, but I did. I never thought just a look on a face could hurt so.

"Would it be that bad? Would it be that intolerable, to be married to me?"

"Married?" His backbone gave a slight twitch, as though a pin overlooked in his shirt had just pricked him. I caught him do it, slight as it was. That was no compliment, either, any more than the look on his face before had been.

"You've just been proposed to, Dwight. That was a proposal, just then. The first I've ever made."

He tried, first, to carry it off with a sickly grin. The implication: You're just joking, and I'm supposed to know you are, but you make me a little uncomfortable just the same.

I wouldn't let him; I wouldn't accept the premise.

"You don't laugh when a lady proposes to you," I said gently. "You don't laugh at her. You meet her on her own ground; you give her that much at least."

"I'm not—cut out—" he floundered. "It would be about the dirtiest trick I could play—I couldn't do that to you—" And then finally, and more decidedly, like a snap-lock to the subject: "You'd be sorry."

"I want to be. Let me be. I'd rather be sorry—with you—than glad—with anyone else."

He looked down his nose now. He didn't say anything more. A sort of stubborn muteness had set in. That was his best defense; that was his only one. He probably knew it. Their instincts are just as valid as ours.

I had to do the talking. Someone had to. It would have been even worse to sit there in silence.

I took a sip of my drink. I sighed in feigned objectivity. "It's unfair, isn't it? A woman can refuse a man, and she doesn't have to feel any compunction. He's supposed to take it straight, and he does. But if a man refuses a woman, he has to try to spare her feelings at the same time."

He hadn’t as a matter of fact made any such attempt until now; he did now, possibly, because I had recalled his duty to him.

“You’re a swell gal, Lizzie—It’s you I’m thinking of—You don’t know what you’re asking—You don’t want me.”

“You’re getting your pronouns mixed,” I said sadly.

All he could repeat was: “No. I mean it, you’re a swell gal. Lizzie—”

“You’re a swell gal, Lizzie,” I echoed desolately, “but you don’t ring the bell.”

He made the mistake of putting his arm around my shoulder, in what was meant as a fraternal embrace, I suppose. He should have left his hands off me; it was hard enough without that.

I let my head go limp against him. I couldn’t have kept it up straight if I’d tried. And I didn’t try.

He tried to jerk his arm away, as he realized this new danger, but I caught it, from in front, with mine, and held it there, around my shoulders, like a precious sable someone’s trying to take away from you.

He shuddered, and hit himself violently in the center of the forehead. As if there were some thought lodged in there that he couldn’t bear the contemplation of. “Good Lord,” I heard him groan. “Good Lord! Right here, in this apartment —”

“Is there something wrong with this apartment?” I asked innocently.

“Not with the apartment, with me,” he murmured.

“I won’t dispute you there,” I said cattishly.

I let go of his arm, and stood up. I got ready to go. I’d been rejected. To have prolonged it would have veered over into buffoonery. I had no self-respect left, but at least I still had my external dignity left. The law of diminishing returns would only have set in from this point on.

“Is it my age?” I said, with my back toward him for a moment, doing something private to my hair.

“No,” he said. “I never think of age in—in connection with you . . .”

“I’ll be forty in November,” I said, unasked, now that there was nothing further to lose. “So you can see how lucky you were just now.”

“No,” he protested. “You can’t be—Why, I always thought you were about twenty-eight, somewhere along there—”

“Thank you for that much, anyway,” I said. “At least I’ve salvaged something out of the evening’s wreckage.”

I turned and looked at him, still sitting there. “Proposals don’t agree with you,” I let him know. “You look positively harassed.”

I saw him wince a little, as though he agreed with me; not only looked it, but felt it. He stood now, to do the polite thing as host.

“I’ll get over it,” I said, speaking out loud to keep my own courage up. “It doesn’t kill you.”

He blinked at that word, as though it grated a lot.

I was ready to go now. He came closer, to accelerate the process.

“Won’t you kiss me goodnight?” I said.

He did it with his brakes on; used just one arm to support my back. Put his lips to mine, but with a time-valve to them. Took them away as soon as time was up. Mine tried to follow, and lost their way.

We straightened ourselves. “I’ll see you out,” he said.

“Never mind, don’t rub it in.”

He took me at my word, turned back to pour himself another drink. His hand was shaking, and if that’s a sign of needing one, he needed one.

I went down the long gallery alone. My heart was blushing and my cheeks felt white.

I came even with that door, the door to his workroom, and remembered I was holding the key to it, that he’d dropped before when we were out here.

I stopped, and took it out, and put it in the keyhole.

Then I felt his eyes on me, and turned, and saw him standing watching me at the end of the gallery, where I'd just come from myself.

"Lizzie," he said. "Don't. It won't be in there." His voice was toneless, strangely quiet. But his face looked terrible. It wasn't just white, it was livid; it was the shining white of phosphorus gleaming in the dark.

He didn't offer to approach, his feet stayed where they were; but his hands, as if restlessly feeling the need to be occupied with something during the brief pause while we stood and confronted one another like that, strayed to the cord of his robe and, of their own accord, without his seeming to know what they were doing, fumbled there, until suddenly the knot had disheveled, fallen open. Then each one, holding a loose end of the cord, flicked and played with it, all unconsciously. The way the two ends danced and spun and snaked, suggested the tentative twitching of a cat's tail, when it is about to spring.

He was holding it taut across his back, and out at each side, in a sort of elongated bow-shape. It was just a posture, a stance, a vagary of nervous preoccupation, I suppose.

An odd one.

I flexed my wrist slightly, as if to complete the turning of the inserted key.

The cord tightened to almost a straight line, stopped moving.

For a moment, out of sheer perversity, I was going to open the door, simply to prolong my presence. He was not really interested in whether I opened the door or not; it just seemed that way. What he really was interested in was having me leave once and for all, so he'd be let alone. The opening of the door would have delayed that, so that was why he set such store upon my not doing so. My own common sense told me this.

His eyes met mine and mine met his, the length of the gallery.

The impulse to annoy him died.

Indifferently, I desisted. I dropped my hand slowly, and left the key in the lock, and let the door be.

His hands dropped too. The taut pull of the cord slackened, it softened to a dangling loop.

“It wouldn’t have been in there,” he breathed with a sort of exhausted heaviness, as though all his strength had gone into holding the cord as he had been just now.

“I know it wouldn’t,” I said. “It’s been safely in my bag the whole time.” I opened the bag, took it out, and showed it to him. “I knew it was in there even when I started back here to look for it.” I went on to the outside door and opened it. “The trick didn’t pay off, that’s all.”

“Good night, Dwight,” I added.

“Good night, Lizzie,” he echoed sepulchrally. I saw him reach out with one arm and support himself limply against the wall beside him, he was so tired of me by this time.

I closed the outside door.

They tell you wrong when they tell you infatuation dies a sudden death. Infatuation dies a lingering painful death. Even after all hope is gone the afterglow sometimes stubbornly clings on and on, kidding you, lighting the dark in which you are alone. Infatuation dies as slowly as a slower love; it comes on quicker, that is all.

Twice I went by there in a taxi, in the weeks following that night. And each stopped a moment at his door.

But then I didn’t get out after all. Just sat there. Perhaps to see if I could sit there like that without getting out. Perhaps to see if I was strong enough.

I was. I just barely made it, both times, but I made it.

“Drive on,” I said heroically. It was like leaving your right arm behind, jammed in a door; but I left it.

But the third time, ah, the third time. I was practically over it. I was cured. I made the discovery for myself sitting there in the taxi, taking my own blood-pressure, so to speak, holding my own pulse, listening to my own heart. I could drive away now without a wrench, without feeling that I'd left a part of me behind, caught in his door.

I lit a cigarette and thought with a sigh of relief: It's passed. It's finished. Now I've got something more to worry about. I'm immune now, this attack will last me for the rest of my life. That was my last siege of love. Now I can go on and just work and live and be placid.

"Y'getting out, lady, or what?" the driver asked fretfully.

"Yes," I said coolly, "I think I will. I want to say goodbye to someone in there."

And in perfect safety, in perfect calm, I paid him and got out and went inside to visit my recent, my last, love.

But they tell you wrong when they tell you infatuation dies a sudden death. It doesn't. I know.

I seemed to have picked an inappropriate time for my farewell visit. Or at least, a non-exclusive one.

There'd been somebody else with him. The apartment-door was already open, when I stepped off at his foyer, and he was standing there talking to some man in dilatory leave-taking.

The man was heavily-built and none too young. In the milder fifties, I should judge. His hair was silvering, his complexion was florid, and there were little skin-like red blood-vessels threading the whites of his eyes. He had a hard-looking face, but he was being excessively amiable at the moment that I came upon the two of them. Almost overdoing it, almost overly amiable, for it didn't blend well with the rest of his characteristics, gave the impression of being a seldom-used, almost rusty attribute he had to push

down hard on the accelerator to get it working at all. And he was keeping his foot pressed down on it for all he was worth so that it couldn't get away from him.

"I hope I haven't troubled you, Mr. Billings," he was apologizing just as the elevator panel opened.

"Not at all," Dwight protested indulgently. There was even something patronizing in his intonation. "I know how those things are. Don't think twice about it. Glad to—" And then they both turned at the slight rustle the panel made, and saw me, and so didn't finish the mutual gallantries they were engaged upon. Or rather, postponed them for a moment.

Dwight's face lit up at sight of me. I was welcome. There could be no doubt of it. Not like that other night.

He shook my hand cordially. "Well! Nice of you! Where've you been keeping yourself?" And that sort of thing. But made no move to introduce the departing caller to me.

And his manners were too quick-witted for that to have been an oversight. So what could I infer but that there was a differentiation of status between us that would have made a social introduction inappropriate. In other words, that one call was a personal one and the other was not, so the two were not to be linked.

"Go in, Lizzie. Take your things off. I'll be right with you."

I went in. My last impression of the man standing there with him was that he was slightly ill-at-ease under my parting scrutiny; call it embarrassed, call it sheepish, call it what you will. He turned his head aside a moment and took a deep draught of an expensive cigar he was holding between his knuckles. As if: Don't look at me so closely. I certainly wasn't staring, so it must have been his own self-consciousness.

I went down the gallery of lost love. The writing-room door was open now. I went past it without stopping, and down the steps to the drawing-room arena.

I took off my “things” as he’d put it, and primped at my hair, and moved idly around, waiting for him to join me.

I looked at things, as I moved. One does, waiting in a room.

He’d left them just as they were, to take his visitor to the door. Probably I hadn’t been announced yet, at that moment. I must have been announced after they were both already at the door, and he hadn’t come all the way back in here since leaving it the first time.

There were two glasses there. Both drained heartily, nothing but ice-sweat left in their bottoms; the interview must have been a cordial one.

There were two strips of cellophane shorn from a couple of expensive cigars.

There was a single burned matchstick; one smoker had done that courteous service for both.

His checkbook-folder was lying on the corner of the table. He must have taken it out of his pocket at one time, and then forgotten to return it again. Or perhaps thought that could wait until afterward, it was of no moment.

I didn’t go near it, nor touch it, nor examine it in any way. I just saw it lying there.

There was a new blotter lying near it. Almost spotless; it had only been used about once.

That I did pick up, idly; and look at. As if I were a student of Arabic or some other right-to-left scrawl. I looked at it thoughtfully.

He still didn’t come in.

Finally I took it over to the mirror with me and fronted it to that, and looked into that.

Part of his signature came out. “—illings.” It was the thing he’d written last, so the ink was still freshest when the blotter’d been put to it. Above it were a couple of less distinct tracings. “—career.” And two large circles and two smaller ones. Like this: “OOoo.”

I turned swiftly, as though that had shocked me (but it hadn't. why should it?) and pitched it back onto the table from where I stood. Then I fixed my hair a little more, in places where it didn't need it.

He came in, looking sanguine, looking zestful. I don't remember that he rubbed his hands together, but that was the impression his mood conveyed: of rubbing his hands together.

"Who was that man?" I said indifferently.

"You'll laugh," he said. And he set the example by doing so himself. "That's something for you. Something for your magazine." Then he waited, like a good raconteur always does. Then he gave me the punch-line. "He was a detective. A real, honestto-goodness, life-sized detective. Badge and everything."

I stopped being indifferent, but I didn't get startled. Only politely incredulous, as a guest should be toward her host's surprise climaxes. "Here? What'd he want with you?"

"Asking if I could give him any information," he said cheerfully. Then in the same tone: "You've heard about Bernette, haven't you?"

I said I hadn't.

"I think you met her up here once."

I visioned a Fury in pink lingerie. Yes, I said, I seemed to recall.

"Well, she's disappeared. Hasn't been heard of in weeks."

"Why do they come to you about it?" I asked him.

"Oh," he said impatiently, "some tommyrot or other about her never having been seen again after—after the last time she left here. I dunno, something like that. Just routine. This's the third time this same fellow's been up here. I've been darn good-natured about it." Then he said, more optimistically, "He promised me just now, though, this is the last time; he won't come back any more."

He was fixing two drinks for us, in two fresh glasses. The first two had been shunted aside. The checkbook and the

blotter had both vanished, and I'd been facing him in the mirror the whole time; so maybe I'd been mistaken, they hadn't been there in the first place.

"And then there was something about some clothes of hers," he went on off-handedly. "She left some 0f her things here with me—" He broke off to ask me: "Are you shocked, Lizzie?"

"No," I reassured him. "I knew she stopped here now and then."

"I was supposed to send them after her; she said something about letting me know where she could be reached—" He shrugged. "But I never heard from her again myself. They're still waiting in there—"

He finished swirling ice with a neat little tap of the glass mixer against the rim.

"Probably ran off with someone," he said contemptuously.

I nodded dispassionately.

"I know who put him up to it," he went on, with a slight tinge of resentment. I had to take it he meant the detective; he offered no explanation to cover the switch in pronouns. "That dirty little ex-second husband of hers."

"Oh, is he ex?" I said. That was another thing I hadn't known.

"Certainly. They were annulled almost as soon as they came back from their wedding-trip. I even helped her to do it myself, sent her to my lawyer—"

And paid for it, I knew he'd been about to add; but he didn't.

"I told this fellow tonight," he went on, still with that same tinge of vengefulness, "that they'd better look into his motives, while they were about it. He was only out to get money out of her—"

(And she was only out to get money out of you, I thought, but tactfully didn't say so.)

"Do you think something's happened to her?" I asked.

He didn’t answer that directly. “She’ll probably turn up someplace, they always do.” Then he said grimly, “It won’t be here. Now let’s have one, you and I.” And he came toward me with our drinks.

We sat down on the sofa with them. He didn’t need any urging tonight.

We had another pair. Then a third. We let the third pair stand and cool off awhile.

I was the upright arm of the parenthesis tonight, I noticed presently; he was the toppled-over one.

I didn’t move my head aside the way he had his; his lips just didn’t affect me. It was like being kissed by—cardboard.

“I want you to marry me,” he said. “I want—what you wanted that night. I want—someone like you.”

(That’s not good enough, I thought. You should want just me myself, and not someone like me. That leaves it too wide open. This is the rebound. You want the older woman now. Safety, security, tranquility; not so much fire. Something’s shaken you, and you can’t stand alone; so if there was a female statue in the room, you’d propose to that.)

“Too late,” I said. “I’ve passed that point, as you arrive at it. You got to it too late. Or I left it too soon.”

He wilted, and his head went down. He had to go on alone. “I’m sorry,” he breathed.

“I am too.” And I was. But it couldn’t be helped.

Suddenly I laughed. “Isn’t love the damnedest thing?”

He laughed too, after a moment; ruefully. “A devil of a thing,” he agreed.

And laughing together, we took our leave of one another, parted, never to meet in closeness again. Laughing is a good way to part. As good a way as any.

I read an item about it in the papers a few days afterward, quite by chance. The second husband had been picked up and taken in for questioning, in connection with her disappearance. Nothing more than that. There was no other name mentioned.

I read still another item about it in the papers, only a day or two following the first one. The second husband had been released again, for lack of evidence.

I never read anything further about it, not another word, from that day on.

The other night at a party I met my last love again. I don't mean my latest; by last, I mean my final one. And he was as taking and as debonair as ever, but not to me any more—a little older maybe; and we said the things you say, with two glasses in our hands to keep us company.

"Hello Lizzie; how've you been?"

"Hello, Dwight; where've you been keeping yourself lately?"

"I've been around. And you?"

"I've been around too."

And then when there wasn't anything more to say, we moved on. In opposite directions.

It isn't often that I see him any more. But whenever I do, I still think of her. I wonder what really did become of her.

And just the other night, suddenly, for no reason at all, out of nowhere, the strangest thought entered my head for a moment.

But then I promptly dismissed it again, just as quickly as it had occurred to me, as being too fantastic, too utterly improbable. The people you know never do things like that;

the people you read about may, but never the people you know.

Do they?

ONE NIGHT IN BARCELONA

In the Spanish hotel Maxwell Jones was still sleeping as evening drew on. His face was merged in the shadow where the pillows met the wall. His hands were hidden in white kid gloves. He always slept with white kid gloves on his hands; he always had, ever since he'd first fronted a band. "For my sax solos, you know. It keeps them soft and flexible," he'd once explained to the boys in the outfit.

They'd laughed about it a lot behind his back, Stateside, when they were traveling buses and getting five hundred a stand. They'd stopped laughing now that they were the sensation of places like Brussels, Nice—and this one, Barcelona—and getting three thousand a week.

Six was the hour his day began. Six in the evening. As the lights began to twinkle outside in the Plaza de Catalunya, as the summit of the mountain Tibidabo, in the distance, darkened to rose-mauve in the afterglow of a gone sun.

Nunez, his valet, entered the room where Jones was sleeping, bent over him and prodded him on the shoulder.

"Senor," he said. "Senor Maxi."

"Fade it," Jones mumbled blurredly. "Two's my point." He opened his eyes. "I was cleaning up, anyway," he told the valet. "That's as good a time as any to quit a game." He put on a dressing-gown Nunez was holding out for him. It had a little silver saxophone embroidered on its breast.

"Whenever you're ready," Nunez ventured, "your bath is drawn."

Jones flung the dressing-gown on the floor and kicked it out of the way.

“I’ll use bay rum,” he decreed. “It saves time.”

A waiter came in next grimacing, cringing, and clasping a bill of fare between both hands as if it were a breviary.

“The senor permits?” he faltered.

“Well, it’s about time!” Jones snarled, turning his head and pulling out the wing-tie Nunez was in the act of doing up. “Maybe you think I can live on treble notes all night long?”

He took a pencil from the tremulous waiter and gashed a number of items down the line in rapid succession. “This, and this, and this!” he ordered. “And I want it up here inside of five minutes, get me?”

“Yes, senor. How many places does the senor want laid out?”

“Count ‘em out there as you leave,” said Jones gruffly. “They’re all there, the sponges. They wouldn’t miss a free feed.”

“Yes sen—”

“Say senor once more,” Jones shouted, “and I’ll throw something at you!”

The waiter got out fast.

When three short tables had been brought into the outside room, placed end to end to make one long narrow one, and covered over with linen, dishes, glassware, and long thin loaves of Spanish bread Jones entered from the bedroom like a lord, dinner-jacket skintight across his broad shoulders, white handkerchief arrow-heading up out of his breast-pocket, white kid gloves on his hands once more. He ate in them, too.

“Evening, everybody,” he said with an air of feudal hospitality.

They all sat down at the table. That was what they had been waiting for, some of them for two hours.

There were eight of them present tonight, not counting Jones. Bill Nichols (trumpet) and girl, Buzz Davis (drums) and girl, “Hot-shot” Henderson (bass trombone) and Roy Daniels (piano), and two unattached girls, that were nobody’s girls, but just there for the food. They’d been coming around for about two weeks now.

With the fish course, a messenger entered the room carrying a small cardboard box.

“For the Senor Maxi,” he announced, “from an admirer.”

Jones opened it and looked inside. There was a single giantsized white carnation, its stem carefully wrapped in silver paper, a pin for eventual use affixed to it. Also a note on orchid paper.

Jones gave this last to Nunez to read aloud, written Spanish being over his head.

Everyone turned around in their chairs to listen, as though a public speech were being made. Nunez cleared his throat and began to read: ” ‘I will be there again tonight, just as I am every night. You will see me but you will not know me. But if you will wear my flower in your coat, and if you will play Symphonic for me, you will make me supremely happy.

“(Signed) ‘An aficionada who has not the courage to come closer.’ ”

“Every night regular, for three weeks now,” Bill Nichols kidded. “Her old man must be in the florist business.”

“Maybe he runs a funeral parlor,” Davis suggested.

* * * *

Toward the end of the meal, which was signalized by the pouring of boiling-hot coffee into large glasses partly filled with sugar, Nunez, who had been over at the partly open door, conferring with someone unseen on the outside of it, came back to Jones and leaning across his shoulder, whispered:

“There’s a man outside wants to see you, senor.”

“That’s nothing new,“Jones answered patronizingly. “There’s always someone wanting to see me, in this town. Ask him what he wants.”

“I already asked, and he wouldn’t tell me, senor.” Nunez shrugged. “He’s from your own country.”

Jones was suddenly wary. He shook his head.

“Tell him no. Not tonight—”

He stopped and looked. The ineffectively closed door had slowly swung back again and the man was in anyway. The chattering died down, and the others all turned and stared, taken back by this unmistakable piece of lčse-majesté.

He had on a dark-gray suit that could have stood a little pressing. There was a wrinkled topcoat slung over his arm. He carried a well-worn hat, brim slanted down in front. His eyes were blue, his skin-color was on the ruddy side, and his hair was cut down to bristles and sandy-light in shade.

“Close that door and keep—” Jones started to order Nunez, displeased.

But the man did it himself, from the inside now, and then came on slowly. He stopped about four or five feet from Jones’ chair.

“You’re Maxwell Jones,” he said.

“Do I know you?” Jones answered.

“You start tonight.”

“And maybe I finish tonight, too.”

“I wouldn’t count on that. I’d like a little talk with you.”

Jones picked up his coffee-glass, put it to his lips and put it down again, without drinking anything.

Then he touched his napkin to the place the glass had touched.

“I’m eating, can’t you see that?” But he said it a little thinly.

The man didn’t answer; he just stood there waiting.

It was in English so the girls were cut off from the sense of it. But they must have gotten something of its tense,

hushed import. None of them moved or spoke. All watched Jones and the stranger.

The man tired of waiting. He broke the silence. “Do you want it in front of all your friends, or do you want it just between the two of us? You can have it either way.” He shifted his topcoat a little higher on his arm.

Jones rose at last.

“Okay,” he said grudgingly. “Come inside.”

“Let’s do that,” the man agreed ironically, and followed him into the bedroom and closed the door.

* * * *

Jones seated himself on a chair, nervously turning a cigarette around and around in his fingers. The intruder stood there looking down at him. His topcoat had been flung across the top of the dresser, and his hands were sandwiched into the back pockets of his trousers. One of them, on the right, had a peculiar shape through the cloth, like a wedge, ending in a stubby rounded coil of metal. He just kept them there like that, while he talked.

“You’re Maxwell Jones, and you’re thirty-two.”

“And you?” said Jones, with a rapidly evaporating arrogance that was escaping from him like steam and leaving him more wilted by the minute. “Or isn’t this an introduction, maybe?”

“You don’t need my name,” the man said with a half-smile. “One, four, oh, two, one, two. It’s on here.” He took something out of his pocket, the left one, and held it for Jones to see, then put it back.

Jones dropped his cigarette, picked it up, then threw it away for good.

“You’re from a little place outside of Nashville called Liberty.” The man gave that half-smile again. “Most people never heard of it, but you and I have, haven’t we?”

“I’ve never been there in my life,” Jones said haughtily.

“They think you have, and, friend, I just work for them.”

“Who’s *they?*” Jones asked. His eyes darted too wide of their mark, then came back center to the other man again.

“Now who do you suppose?” the man said ironically. “Sheriff Carney, the constabulary, just about the whole community, I reckon.”

Jones moistened his lips. “What—what for?”

“They want to talk to you.”

“What about?”

“This and that. About Amy Dwyer, the sheriff’s daughter. About Mark Claybourne, son of the councilman. I guess you know.” He elevated himself a little on the balls of his feet, sank down again on his heels. “They were both murdered, at the same time and place. I guess you know all that. Pretty grim stuff.

“They left a powerful lot of mourners. Influential mourners. Sheriff Carney. Amy was the apple of his eye. Greg Dwyer, her husband. Mark’s wife who’s the daughter of another member of the town council. Those three families, between them, just about own the community.

“It was more than a double killing, really. It was a triple one. Doc Stevens had promised Carney a grandchild—his first. All those people, not just two, were killed in one way or another. Mark’s wife is as good as lying in the grave with him; she’s just a ghost that goes walking around in a woman’s dress.

“Greg Dwyer has to be picked up and carried home most every night from the tavern; and you can tell which way they took him by the alcohol smelling up the air. All those people paying up, for just a moment’s heat run wild.” He looked at Jones bitterly.

Jones’ face was the color of wet cement. He stood up, shaking all over. He clenched a fist and pounded it against his forehead.

“I didn’t do it,” he said hollowly. He pounded again, and then a third time. “I didn’t do it.”

The other man spread his hand open.

“Tell them,” he said coldly. “That’s all you’ve got to do. I don’t care whether you did or not, I just work for them.”

Jones sat down again, his arms loose now, like ropes dangling toward the floor.

“I wasn’t even there. I’ve never been in the place. I was born in Chicago—”

The man didn’t consult anything. Any memorandum or anything.

“Sure. At Twenty-three-eleven Paige Street, in the back room on the fifth floor. At eleven at night, March eighteenth, Nineteen-Fifteen. Certificate issued by Doctor Sam Rollini—”

“Cut it out,” Jones panted.

“The double murder in Liberty was committed by an Eddie Jones. And the baby born in Chicago was baptized Edward Jones. But there was a middle initial: M. The mother’s name had been Edith Maxwell.” The man grinned bleakly. “What did you do with the ‘Ed’ ? Drop it in the middle of the ocean on your way over?”

“There’s a hundred thousand Joneses,” Jones said desperately.

The other man shook his head smilingly. “Not over here. Then why didn’t you stay where there are a hundred thousand other Joneses? You would have been safer. That was a fool play on your part.” He chuckled grimly. “And up in lights, yet, blazing away into the night. *Maxi Jones, King of the Saxophones*. “He shook his head again, marveling at it. “You were doing all right over here, weren’t you?”

Jones began wringing his hands nervously. A faraway, wistful look came into his eyes, as if he were contemplating something that was already over, beyond recall.

“We packed ‘em in in Paris,” he faltered, as if he were pleading some sort of a case.

“You’ll pack them in back there, too,” the man promised.

“We were the biggest thing that hit the town since Josephine Baker brought over the Charleston.”

“You’ll be the biggest thing to hit Tennessee since the Darrow Case.”

“We were held over six weeks in Cannes.”

“You’ll be held over about three weeks back home. That’s about the usual time it takes them to get ready after sentence has been passed.”

Jones’ head went down; the other man could only see the top of it for a minute.

The man hoisted an elbow and looked at his watch. “Okay. Start packing.”

Jones’ head came up again, with a sort of final defiance.

“This is Spanish soil. You can’t touch me.”

The man tapped his own chest. “I’ve got an extradition warrant in here that says yes. I’ve got these—” He took out a pair of handcuffs, twirled them once, put them away again “—that say sure thing. And I’ve got this—” He showed him a gun for a minute, put that away again too “—that says ‘You bet your sweet life.’ So let’s get started.”

Jones stood up slowly.

“Where will the—the arraignment be held? Nashville?”

The other man shook his head. “Liberty. It’s got to be held in the county in which the crime took place.”

Jones tottered, and acted as though he were going to fall for a minute. He took hold of the back of the chair and held onto that.

“You’re not taking me back to be tried for my life. You’re taking me back to certain death. I’m dead already, standing here in front of you. There won’t even be any trial; there won’t be time for it to get started. I’ll be torn to pieces first.”

The other man eyed him without blinking. “They’re dead, too, both of them,” he said. “Everyone has to die sometime.”

“But not at thirty-two, with flaming gasoline poured over you.”

“They won’t do that,” the other man said. Not very strenuously.

“Are you from there?” was all Jones answered.

“I happen to be from upper New York State, myself. But that doesn’t matter.”

“I thought so,” was all Jones said. He went over to the floor-to-ceiling windows and stood looking out.

The other man watched him.

“Don’t go out on the balcony,” he said. “This is three floors up.” He stayed where he was. “Say good-by to it.” He gave Jones time. Finally he said: “Ready now?”

Jones turned around.

“All right, I’m ready,” he said. “I guess I always knew the number would end like this. Well, I’m over my stage-fright now. I’m all set. You won’t have any trouble with me. Only —” He glanced around once more, longingly, at the powdery, lighted scene down below, outside the windows.

“Only what?” said the other man.

“Only, when a man’s in the death-pen, they give him one last meal.”

“You just got through. What was that, in there?”

“Give me one more night. Just one more night here in Barcelona.”

“That’s what you’re going to have. The ship doesn’t leave until tomorrow after sundown. The planes are booked solid, so I’ve got to take you back the slow way.”

“I don’t mean that,” Jones said. “Let me play one last date at the club. Let me stand up there and say good-by with my fingers on the sax-keys. Let me see the crowds and the lights, and hear ‘em howl for more. It’s going to be awfully dark and quiet where you’re putting me. Just a plain pine box without room to turn over in. Let me have just one more night, a farewell round.”

“Do you think I’m crazy? And what am I supposed to be doing? Sitting here in the hotel room waiting for you with a lamp burning in the window?”

“I didn’t mean alone. I meant in your custody. You’ll be right with me. I won’t be out of your sight. You’ve got the

cuff-links, you've got the gat. What chance are you taking?"

"None," the man said flatly. "Because I won't be doing it."

"Not even if I gave you my word?"

"What is this? I'll give you mine instead. A short 'No.' How's that?"

"That's that, I guess," Jones admitted mournfully.

"What're you so leary about, anyway? You'll get a fair trial."

"Take a good look at me, mister, and then say that."

The man took the look, but he didn't say it.

"Yeah," Jones agreed softly, at the unspoken admission.

The man got a little sore.

"Ah, don't look at me like that!" he said. "That's the way they always look at you, all of them! It reminds me of a—" He didn't finish it.

"What?" Jones prompted.

"None of your business!" The man scowled. But then he went ahead and finished it anyway. "Of a dog I picked up in the street one day, right after it had been run over. I had to use my gun. Just before I did, it rolled its eyes up at me and gave me that same kind of look."

"They like to live, too," Jones agreed. "All of us do. Only, the dogs get off lucky. Other dogs don't set fire to them."

"Why do you keep harping on that?" the man said.

"Because *they* were roasted to death in a cabin, Claybourne and Amy Dwyer. And because Sheriff Carney swore that if he ever got his hands on the man that did it, he'd barbecue him alive."

"Then you *were* there in the town," the man said quickly. "To know that and to hear it. That was just an outburst of grief. Carney didn't really mean it."

"It was an unspoken promise, a pledge, that every man in the town will help him keep when the day comes," Jones said. "I can tell you're not from down around there, or you'd understand."

The man didn’t say anything. He kept staring at the band leader with an odd intensity.

Jones nodded.

“Yes, I was there in the town when it happened,” he said. “And I’m ready to take it; I made up my mind over there by the window a few minutes ago. I’m ready to die. I’m willing to go back with you without lifting a finger. But that isn’t what I asked you for before. I only wanted one last night, just because it *is* so certain. And you won’t give it to me—”

He must have seen something in the other’s face.

“Well, if you won’t give it to me of your own accord, how about letting me try to win it from you? How about giving me a chance, a sporting chance? I’ll give odds. If you win, I’ll go out of here without another word. If I win, just one more night for a finale, six hours more until the club closes down at four?”

He took out a pair of dice. Clicked and cast them. Bent and picked them up without seeing what they’d made.

“What do you think this is?” the detective said. “Rolling them to see who buys the drinks at a bar?”

“Be a sport,” Jones said in a strangely husky, throbbing voice. “I’m your prisoner anyway. This doesn’t alter the main idea. Hold out your hand.”

The detective didn’t move but Jones reached for his hand and put the dice in his palm.

“Are they straight?” the detective asked drily.

“They’re straight,” Jones said. “I make three thousand a week here, American. When you’re in that bracket, it’s the fun you want out of them, not the money. If they were loaded, I couldn’t get any fun out of them.”

“I see what you mean,” the detective said.

“Go ahead,” Jones said. “I’ll take the highest odds you can stack against me. So high they’re impossible to beat. One throw. One throw apiece.”

The detective was still fiddling with them.

“Those odds aren’t so steep,” he said drily. “Suppose I pitch a three or four? You’ve got eight chances against one to better it.”

“You didn’t get me. Not like in the game. One throw, I said. And I have to make your point. Repeat it in my own throw.”

“You can’t do it,” the detective said firmly. He was beginning to vibrate the dice a little in his palm. “It can’t be done. You know that yourself. Why do you want to make it so tough for yourself?”

“Because I’m a fatalist,” Jones answered. “And I want to find out if I’m meant to have this one last night or not. This is my way of pinning fate down and finding out the answer.”

“Now I know they’re spiked,” the detective said skeptically.

“There’s the phone. Call down and order another pair.”

The detective went over to it, put his hand on it, watched Jones.

Then he came away again. “Now I know they’re on the up,” he said.

“Throw,” Jones pleaded. “I can’t stand much more of it.” He wiped off his forehead.

“I haven’t made any agreement,” the detective warned him. “I haven’t made my bargain with you.” But he was starting to beat them up, first slowly, then faster and hotter. “This is between you and fate, strictly.”

“I know,” Jones said. “But I’m beginning to know you.”

The detective suddenly let go of the dice with a jerk, and they landed. They turned up a two.

Jones didn’t move, didn’t even go over to where he could read them.

“What was it?” he asked from where he was.

The detective told him, picked them up. “That’s a bad point,” he said grimly. “I don’t think ‘fate’ and you have much chance. That’s the toughest point of the lot. If it had

been an eight, for instance, you could have made it with maybe two fours, six and two, five and three—”

“I know how the combinations run,” Jones answered quietly. “But maybe it’s just as well. Now I’ll find out for sure whether fate wants me to have this one last night or not. Now there’ll be no mistake about it.”

The detective handed him the dice. But then Jones just stood there holding them, for such a long time that finally the detective suggested: “Now you’ve lost your nerve. Now you want to call it off.”

Jones shook his head slowly. “You don’t call fate off like that. What is to be, is to be. I’m just wondering which answer’s waiting for me, that’s all.”

* * * *

He started to pump his hand. Then he opened it toward the floor, and the cubes flew out, and hit. The detective, watching him, saw him keep his eyes closed as he did so.

He opened his eyes, and without moving, said: “Read them for me.”

The detective went over and got down, knuckling one hand to the floor. He stayed that way a minute, much longer than he needed to just read them. Then he gathered them together and got up. He still didn’t say anything.

“Why is your face so white and strange-looking?” Jones said.

“I’d like to keep these,” the detective said. “Do you mind?” He went ahead and put them in his pocket without waiting for the owner’s permission.

“What was it?” Jones asked.

The detective took a deep breath. “It was a two,” he said, his voice a trifle bated.

Jones sank down suddenly in the chair, as though his legs had collapsed.

“I sure was meant to have that night,” he said, staring sightlessly before him.

The detective took out a handkerchief and patted it across his upper lip. “I never saw anything like that,” he admitted.

Jones looked up at him finally, focusing his gaze from far away.

“How about it?” he said.

The detective kept him waiting. He took out the manacles, and weighed them in the center of his hand, and threw them up, and caught them. Then he put them away again. He took out a .38, and checked it, and let Jones see that it was loaded. He let it lie flat in his hand for a moment, and gave it an emphatic smack with his other palm.

“You don’t get a second break,” he said. “Is that understood? You don’t get any warning to halt and come back. You just get all six of these slugs at once, straight through the back. You’re in my custody, and I have the legal right to do that to you. I wouldn’t even be questioned for it.

“So be careful how you bend to get a drink of water from a cooler. And be careful how you move your hands, even if it’s just to take up the saxophone. And be careful where you stand, when you’re around me. I may not like it, but you’ll be dead before you find it out. If you want it that way, you can have it. You don’t get a second break.”

He put the gun away.

“But you do get a first. You get your one last night in Barcelona.”

Jones exhaled slowly. “You can tell you’re not from—down around there,” was all he said.

After a moment or two he got up from the chair.

“It’s not taking on death that’s tough, it’s leaving off life. I better change my collar. It got all wilted since we came in here.” He opened a cigarette case, looked in it. “I guess there’s enough here to hold me until morning. After that—” He made a gesture of throwing it away.

“What’s your name?” he added, evening the wings of his tie. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” the detective answered. “Freshman. Kendall Freshman.”

Jones nodded his head toward the closed door.

“Do *they* have to know? The other fellows?”

“Not particularly. I’m not a press agent, I’m just a dick.”

Jones poured a jigger of brandy, shot it through his teeth. Then he squared his shoulders, turned to face the door.

“I’m ready. Let’s go. Just one more night of being king.”

Freshman tapped his pocket. “Remember, one false move, and the king is dead.”

* * * *

There was a round of introductory handshaking in the outside room, sponsored by Jones.

“Meet my friend Mr. Freshman. He’s sticking with me from now on.”

No one asked any questions; it seemed as if, in their business, they were used to people drifting in, from nowhere; drifting on again, to nowhere.

Each man’s world was his own. They let him be.

Jones broke it up. “Come on, let’s travel. It’s almost clubtime.”

They got rid of the girls by the simple expedient of dropping them then and there. Henderson gave his street pick-up a farewell pat on the flank in parting, but the rest didn’t even bid theirs that much of a good-by.

There was a concerted scramble for the stray cigarettes left behind, and the half-emptied bottles of wine, and even the unfinished portions of food (to be jealously wrapped and taken home to their families) on the part of the female detachment, almost before the door had closed behind their recent hosts. But the hosts seemed to take it all for granted, paid no attention. The squealing and heated imprecations carried all the way down the hall to where they stood grouped, waiting for the wirework lift to come up for them.

Jones and his escort stood very close together, a little to the rear. The others were in front of them.

"What time do you open?" Freshman asked.

"We don't go on till eleven. A tango band warms it up for us until then. Nothing much doing any earlier. They eat late here in Spain, you know."

They trooped into the shaky lift. Jones and Freshman stood with their feet touching, toe to toe and heel to heel, the left against the right. Freshman had his hand back somewhere, to the rear of him.

They emerged onto the crowded Plaza de Catalunya, with lights spotted all over it, like a huge pinball machine with the glass left off it. They hollered and they cat-called, and Henderson even blew a couple of wild notes on his instrument, and then they finally got a cab. Something that looked as though it had been through the Civil War. The Spanish one. And probably had.

They all piled into it together, stepping on each other's feet, and drove down the Rambla to its lower end.

Where it narrowed, a vivid scarlet neon-sign flashed on and off against the night sky, proclaiming: *Club New York*, and underneath in slightly smaller but no less fiery lettering: *El Hot Jazz, Orquestra Americana, Maxwell Jones, Rey de los Saxofonos*, each on a separate line.

"Billing," commented Freshman, as it suddenly turned the inside of the cab brick-red when they got near. "That's what tipped you off to me," he said to Jones after the others had cleared out ahead of them. "I was just passing through here. I wasn't even stopping over. I already had my plane ticket to Madrid in my pocket when that thing hit me in the eye through the cab window."

"I knew it was risky," Jones admitted, regarding it hypnotically. He gave a deep sigh. "But it was worth it."

Freshman looked at him curiously. "Does it do what they say to you, to see your own name up in lights like that? I'm just a dick, I wouldn't know."

“It does what they say to you. That’s your pay-check. That’s your bread and butter and wine.”

They went in, cased instruments in hand. Single file except at the end, then Jones and Freshman side by side, elbow to elbow. The only difference being their strides; counterpoint, and not in step, otherwise, it would have been almost a lateral lock-step.

A long-drawn, shuddering sigh of ecstasy went up all over the room.

“Oooooh, Maxi.”

“You’re doing all right for yourself,” Freshman remarked. “No wonder you wanted one last night. Funny world.”

“Ain’t it, though? On one side of the water, a bum. On the other side, a king. Same man.”

They went into the dressing-room and sat around smoking. It wasn’t meant for seven, but they all got in somehow. The ones who couldn’t find anything to sit on, sat on what they had already, spreading handkerchiefs or newspaper-sheets between them and the floor.

Freshman stood up against the door, its seam running down his spine. He and Jones had broken contact for the first time since leaving the hotel-bedroom, but there was only one door.

Nobody asked Freshman anything further. They already seemed to take him for granted by this time. Just one more moocher who had attached himself to the outfit’s leader; only this time a transatlantic one. Maybe cashing in on some past favor, back home in the lean days.

A knock hit Freshman in the kidneys, and a voice said through him, with a curiously ventriloquist-like effect: ”*Listo para el senor Maxi*.”

They filed out. Again Jones and Freshman were last, again they were side by side.

“How are you going to fix this?” the detective asked.

“You want to stay in the wings? I’ll be in full view of you there.”

“But the rest of the room won’t.”

“You want to come right up onto the stand with us? Sit in the back line in an empty chair?”

“No, thanks. I don’t play anything,” Freshman said drily. “Push a table right up against it, front and center. I’ll be sitting right under you while you lead. And when you knock off, no wings, you come and sit with me.”

Then he added: “I never take it out of my pocket, you know. I shoot right through it.”

He showed him two small darned patches, where there had been round holes made in the weave. About like moth-holes, but not made by moths.

“I believe you,” Jones said wryly, “without that.”

They passed the tango band going off, and looks without any lost love in them were exchanged by the rival musicians.

They filed up a short flight of slatted steps, and came out onto the stand and in full view of the night club. The pinkish light bothered Freshman’s eyes for a second or two, until he got them gauged to it. Chairs were scraped around and put in place, and stands shifted over to match them. The tango band sat in different format.

Jones was bending down over the rim talking to the headwaiter. Somebody applauded, and he broke off to bow an acknowledgement, then went ahead. The headwaiter nodded, glanced at Freshman, shrugged. He went off.

Two waiters came over carrying a spindly table between them. They shoved it up against the pit of the bandstand. It was isolated; there was nothing but dancing-space all around it. It got the full benefit of the copper-colored spot sighted at the dance floor and stand. Then they dragged over a couple of chairs.

“There you are,” Jones said. “That what you wanted?”

Freshman didn’t answer. He vaulted down over the low edge of the stand, right where he was, instead of going down the ladder at the side and coming around front again.

He sat down on one of the two chairs. That way he was looking straight forward at the band. And its leader. That way the glare was behind him, and in their faces. That way the dancers were behind him, wouldn't distract him by their constant movement.

He could feel people looking at him from all sides for a minute or two, but it soon wore off. They must have thought he was some particularly close friend of Jones, to demand and get such special privileges.

A waiter tried to put a cloth down, but Freshman wouldn't let him.

"Leave it plain," he said gruffly. "Cloths can be jerked off and then thrown over you, tangling you up."

The waiter tried to put down a glass ashtray, and he wouldn't let him do that either. After an ashtray gets full, its contents can be suddenly thrown in your eyes, blinding you.

"Does the senor want anything at all?" the waiter demanded affrontedly.

"Just keep back and give me lots of room," Freshman said. "I want to watch the music." That was the right word, too; he wanted to see, not hear.

They had spread themselves all around now and were in their places. They were making noises like crickets; squeaky, metallic crickets.

Jones tapped his stick twice, spread his arms.

"Number Fifteen on the books," he said.

A rocket-bomb went off and people were dancing all around on three sides of Freshman. He went ahead looking steadily at Jones. There wasn't much to see, from the back like that.

Jones must have had an expensive barber. The back of his neck, where the hair tapered off, was a beautiful job. None of these straight lines running across. His coat rippled a little across his back, with the play of his shoulders, which kept time to the beat. One leg kept jittering up and down, too. That was about all there was to see.

They played three numbers through, without a break.

Then the music stopped as though a switch had been thrown, and the stillness was deafening.

“Take five,” Jones said to his musicians.

He came down the way Freshman had, vaulting over the edge, and sat down at the table with him.

He was panting a little, Freshman noticed, although he’d been standing still in one place; so all that shaking must have been work, too.

He was a band leader to the bitter end.

“How’d it sound?” he asked Freshman.

“Screwy,” the latter said. “It hits the ceiling first, and then comes straight down from there.”

“That’s because you’re under the edge of the stand.”

“And that’s where I’m staying,” Freshman let him know.

Jones’ eyes kept roving questioningly over the three sides of the room behind Freshman, going from table to table, lingering a moment, then going on again.

“What’re you looking for, a raiding party to rescue you?” Freshman asked.

“No, that ain’t it.” Jones smiled bleakly. “I got this.” He took the message that had come with the lapel-flower out of his pocket and showed it to him. “We’re going to be shipmates for the next ten days so you may as well know about it.”

Freshman read it, didn’t say anything.

“She keeps teasing me. I know she’s been here every night. I know she’s in the room right now, somewhere over there, looking straight at me. The hell of it is, which one is she? If she doesn’t tip me off tonight, she’s going to be one night too late.”

His men were starting to straggle out onto the stand again. He stood up unhurriedly.

“Well, happy half-notes,” he said. “Be with you.”

He was lithe and agile. He got up the way he’d come down; with the help of one hand and a catlike swing of the

legs.

The musical thunderstorm broke again. The flattened-out dancing shadows wheeled slowly across the surface of Freshman's table. He sat and watched the rippling of Jones' back muscles under the cloth of his coat.

They seemed to play sets of three each time, and then rest. He came back again. He took a cigarette out of an expensive gold case and thumbed an expensive gold lighter to it. Then as an after-thought, he offered one to Freshman.

He began talking about it, suddenly. The other thing.

"I didn't do it, you know," he blurted out. He looked down at the table, as though he could see the whole thing reflected on there.

"I'd say that, too," Freshman said tonelessly.

"You'd say that, too. Only, they'd give you a chance to prove it. They won't do the same for me."

Freshman didn't dispute that, somehow. "I want you to know about it," Jones insisted.

"I don't have to know," Freshman parried. "I'm not a priest. I'm wearing a tie."

Jones brought his fist down on the table.

"I *have* to tell somebody about it! It's been shut up in me too long. And this is my night for spilling it."

Freshman sighed with a sort of wearied patience.

"Go ahead," he said, "I'm listening."

"I was the driver for the Carneys; the old man, the sheriff, and his son-in-law, Greg Dwyer. I guess you know that. I was the family chauffeur. They had a Packard job, old as Methuselah, but it still ran. Then they had a little Ford coupe. She used to drive that, Miss Amy. Young Mrs. Dwyer. It was her own. A present from her father. I still see it all in my nightmares. Peagreen.

"She'd go out in it in the afternoons, alone. Just for a drive, maybe. It must have been just for a drive. Always out in the country, not toward the village, like for shopping or

anything. She'd come back in a couple of hours. About the time I'd go in and pick up the two menfolk."

His musicians were coming back onto the stand.

He turned his head abruptly, called: "Buzz, lead the next three for me will you? Twenty, Six, and Nine. I'm telling my life-story to this man."

"Wait'll Eight-oh-two hears about this," somebody said and grinned cheerfully.

Jones went ahead telling it to Freshman.

"First she'd just go once a week. Then afterwards, two or three times. Then pretty nearly every day. She'd always take a book with her. I guess she'd stop and read it in the car. Or maybe get out and sit in the shade of a tree. She was a slow reader, though. The jacket on the book was always the same color.

"There was an old backwoods woman did the washing for them. Took it home and brought it back. I met her once at the gate, coming in. She told me she'd spotted the pea-green coupe standing still off the road, in a grove of trees, miles out. She told me there wasn't anybody in it.

"She asked me what I supposed Miss Amy went all the way out there alone like that for. She told me she thought she spotted another car, a tan roadster, also empty, on the opposite side of the road. But this was a considerable distance below, not anywhere near the first car. And she sort of looked at me—you know how these old women do.

"I told her she ought to learn minding her own business. I told her she better keep that big mouth of hers closed.

"Maybe she did. Maybe it was somebody else's mouth. Maybe nobody's mouth at all. Sometimes things are just in the air, and they're catching from one person to another, like headcolds.

"I thought Greg Dwyer acted kind of strange, pretty soon after that. His face was kind of white and set, like there was something troubling him. Something private, between himself and his conscience.

“Then the very next time she’d gone off on one of her lonesome rides, all of a sudden there he was back at the gate, in the middle of the afternoon, without any warning. I wasn’t supposed to pick him and the sheriff up until evening.

“He didn’t ask for her; he didn’t ask any questions. He didn’t even come into the house. I think I was the only one who saw him. The others were all round in back. He just stayed there by the gate. He beckoned, and I dropped the garden hose and went over to him. He said he felt like taking a little drive and told me to get the car out.

“I brought it around and he got in. Next to me, in front.

“ ‘Not that way,’ he said when I started off. ‘Out into the country.’

“I backed and turned, and headed the other way. We went for miles. Way, way out. Farther out, I think, than I’d ever been before. Suddenly he said, ‘Stop here!’ ”

* * * *

Maxi Jones paused and drew a folded handkerchief out of his pocket and carefully mopped his brow.

“I didn’t see anything to stop for,” he went on. “Nothing at all. On one side there was a wooded patch. And on the other a big open meadow, sloping downward from the road.

“He got out and he said, ‘Wait for me,’ and he went off. In among the trees.

“I watched him. That’s when I first saw it. By looking after him, where he was going. A little fleck of pea-green visible through the trees. The car must have turned off the road further back, where there was an opening, and skirted the far side of the trees to where it was now, and then stopped.

“It couldn’t have driven straight through from the place where we were parked. There wasn’t enough space between the trees. You couldn’t have seen it from the road in a thousand years, unless you were looking for it.

“He took about ten minutes. Then he came back, stood beside the car and rested his hand on the door-top and he didn’t say anything. It wasn’t up to me to say anything, so I just waited for him.

“Finally he said, ‘I nearly stepped on a rattlesnake in there just now. Ed, you got that gun with you?’

“They’d given me a gun. It went with the job. A hitch-hiker had robbed and murdered somebody on one of the roads about a year before, and it dated from then. As Sheriff, Carney had turned one of his over to me at that time, to keep with me in the car, and arranged it so that I was licensed to do so. It was mine, and yet it wasn’t. It was on loan to me, you might say, but only so long as I was their driver. It wasn’t my physical property. I was just the custodian.

“ ‘Give it to me,’ he said. ‘I’d like to go back in there and see if I can hit it.’

“ ‘Be easier to club it with a piece of deadwood, wouldn’t it?’ I suggested.

“ ‘Come on, let’s have it,’ he said, in a tone that meant he didn’t want any argument about it.

“I took it out of the side pocket of the car and handed it to him. He put it in his pocket, and then he seemed to forget all about it. He didn’t even go back the way he had come. He strolled straight down the road instead.

“I started to turn my engine over, to pace him slowly along, so he could get back in again whenever he took a notion to.

“He turned his head sharply, and said, ‘Kill that. Stay where you are.’ That was the last thing he ever said to me.

“He turned off the road, but this time on the other side, the meadow side, and went down the slope and across the big yellow-green open patch, diagonally, working his way toward a disused cabin that sat way over in the far corner of it.

“He kept getting smaller and smaller as he went. The cabin was facing the other way, toward a footpath that straggled off the road and went past it, and he came up to it from the rear. He went around two corners of it, to get to the front, and then I couldn’t see him any more.

“The air was quiet and sleepy, like it is out there in the country. Then all of a sudden I heard two cracks, way off in the distance. Widely spaced. One, count ten, and then another. They carried slowly, like they do when the air is hot and hazy. They made a very small, lonely sound, no bigger than the snapping of a twig. It took me a minute to realize it must have been that gun I gave him.

“I said to myself, he must have got two rattlesnakes, not just one. Or else he fired twice at the same one. But why’d he go over that way, when the place he saw the first one was on the opposite side?

“But I knew I was lying to myself, just trying to keep my courage up by talking to myself. Something was starting to scare me stiff, while I sat there, and I knew it wasn’t rattlesnakes; I was afraid to admit to myself what I thought it might be.”

* * * *

Jones took a long breath and shivered. It was a minute or two before he resumed:

“I sat there and I waited, and perspiration came out on my face. I couldn’t take my eyes off that spot, where the cabin was located. It seemed to quiver in the heat-haze sent up by the meadow, the way an image does far off in the distance. Wisps of white steam began to trickle out of its seams here and there.

“I knew I was seeing things. I rubbed my eyes hard and stared for all I was worth. That only made the white tendrils come out more places. They were coming out all over the cabin.

“They darkened to dirty gray, then joined together in one big blur with orange teeth tearing at it. The next thing I knew the cabin was on fire. It had no windows, but the fire oozed out anyway, right through the clapboards, like orange water spilling out.

“Then all of a sudden I thought I heard a man screaming. Not a woman. It was a man’s voice. I’m sure of it.

“I jumped out of the car, then stopped where I was, shaking all over. I didn’t know what to do, whether to run down that way, or stay right where I was.

“Suddenly a tan roadster came bolting out from somewhere around the other side of the cabin, and went heaving along the dirt trail, and clawing at it, to get back up onto the road. I recognized it. It was Mark Claybourne’s roadster.

“The smoke from the cabin was climbing up high now, like a big swirling mass of black ostrich feathers. You couldn’t tell it was a man screaming any more. It was more like an animal. Like a horse I once heard locked in a burning barn.

“Then it stopped. I was glad it stopped; I couldn’t have stood another second of it. The black smoke took a corkscrew twist in itself, and went up higher still. But no more screams came.

“The roadster had turned my way and was bearing down on me. It stopped short with a swipe of its rear wheels, when I almost thought it was getting ready to crash into my car headon, and Greg Dwyer got out. He was alone in it. The gun I’d given him was in his hand.

“He’d stopped the roadster about twenty yards away. He came on the rest of the way on foot. Walking slowly, the way he’d gone into the trees, the way he’d gone down across the meadow. Slowly, but with a sort of springy knee-action, like when you’re slightly crouched.

“All of a sudden I saw his face. I knew then. I don’t know how I knew. I just knew. He was looking straight at me, with a terrible sort of directness. His stare was *aiming* at me.

Concentrated on me. Not on the burning barn back there, not even on the car beside me, as if to make sure of getting away in it fast. His look was nailing down my face, like a target. Trying to hold it fast until he got to where I was. Or like a hunter, trying to creep up on something that he's caught sleeping on its feet.

"I knew then.

"I jumped back in, like a flash. I flattened the starter and shot toward him. There was no time to turn the big job around. I crouched down low in the seat. He jumped aside, just inches from the front fender. Then he fired at me twice. And both times he missed. I think he was too close to hit me. There is such a thing you know. One bullet went out the other side of the car. The other tore through the roof.

"I grazed the tan roadster by the thickness of a coat of paint, but I managed to get safely by it. I kept going. I looked back and I saw him jump into the tan roadster again, and drive off the *other* way. Away from me. He didn't try to come after me. He didn't have to. That would take care of itself. He went the other way, like a man going to raise the alarm.

"I kept going. I'd gotten it. I'd gotten it just in the nick of time.

"I knew what those first two shots in the cabin were for, now. I knew what the shots at me on the road were for, too. His good name was involved. The good name of the two most important families in the town. Caesar's wife must be above suspicion you know. What if this member of the clan or that one guessed the truth later? No outsider ever would; they'd hang together. What was a hired chauffeur's life compared to the honor of Sheriff Carney and Town Councilman Asa Claybourne and Town Councilman Netcher, whose daughter was young Claybourne's wife?

"I knew by heart what the story would be before I ever read a word of it in the papers, and when I first saw it in print days later and miles away, there it was just as I'd

known it would be, word for word. Miss Amy had gone out alone into the country to readjust once too often. I'd followed her in the Packard when nobody was around, forced her into the cabin at gun-point."

For a moment Jones paused, looked intently at the detective, then resumed his story.

"Claybourne had happened to pass by that way in his roadster. He was the hero of the piece. (You see, his family had a good name to uphold too; they pulled plenty of weight in their own right.) He'd glimpsed the pea-green coupe standing there, and the Packard not far off, both empty. He hadn't thought anything of that, thought Miss Amy's husband must have joined her in the second car.

"But when he reached town he ran into Greg Dwyer himself, already uneasy and asking if he'd seen her. Claybourne told him what he had seen. Now thoroughly alarmed, the two of them had turned around and gone back together. They got out and separated. Dwyer went one way, looking for her, Claybourne the other.

"It was Claybourne who reached the cabin, unarmed, and trying to save her as any man would have, paid for it with his own life. The two of them were cremated alive; the murderer's bullets had only crippled them. The coroner's inquest established that fact. Dwyer was luckier. The two shots fired at him, when he tried to intercept the fleeing fiend, both went wild. But he'd gotten a good look at him. He'd seen who it was.

"I kept going. I crossed the State line before I ran out of gas. Then I ditched the Packard near some railroad tracks. They pointed north, that was all I cared about. I followed them on foot a while, and then I hopped a freight when it slowed for a crossing."

Wanted, Dead or Alive, that's how the official wording goes. They had me either way. I knew I didn't have a chance. Dead I couldn't talk. And alive all the talking I could do would be to scream myself to death in some other

blazing shack they'd take me to and lock me in. Persons unknown, in the dead of night. It was just a matter of time; then, or a little later. Well, I settled for a little later, and the world's been very good to me on the time I borrowed.

"And this is the little later now; tonight, in a big Spanish city, miles from there, years from then. But this is it just the same."

He looked at Freshman and smiled wryly: "Long speech, huh? Lots of breath wasted."

Freshman shook his head slowly, as if he couldn't explain it himself.

"You know, it's funny—but I believe you. It wasn't the words you used. I could almost see it reflected all over again in your eyes while you told it; the horror and the fear came back again. It's easy to lie with the mouth, but it's awfully hard to lie with the eyes."

"Thanks, anyway," Jones said indifferently. Then he added, "I kind of like you. Too bad we couldn't have met otherwise."

"I kind of like you, too," Freshman admitted. "It won't get you anything but I do. I like you better than any guy I was ever sent out to bring back to justice."

Jones said, "And there's no liquor on the table either."

* * * *

With a blare of trumpets *Crazy Rhythm* burned out its brakes and squealed to a stop, like something coming around a fast curve. Jones returned to the table again.

"How's your fan mail coming?" Freshman asked drily.

Jones chuckled. "This showed up in the last delivery. She paid off—the one I was telling you about." He took out a sheaf of request-notes, all received during his last three-bagger, extracted one of them from the rest, and deftly palmed it across the table to Freshman, keeping it hidden under his hand. "Don't let her see me showing it to you."

Then he added: “You better reread it to me. I don’t trust the waiter, and there was a drum solo going on while he was trying to tell it to me in my ear.”

It was in Spanish, meaning he would have had to get it second hand in any case. The note read:

If you should like to know me better, as I would like to know you, perhaps you will happen to pass through Valencia Street tonight on your way home. And if you do, perhaps you will happen to stop for a minute outside of Number 126. Just for a minute, to light a cigarette. And if you do, perhaps you will happen to find the key to Apartment 44, if you look around. Perhaps, who knows?

But if you are afraid, or if your heart is elsewhere, then do not pass through Valencia Street tonight on your way home.

One Who Has Watched
You From Afar

Jones nodded. “Yeah, that’s what the waiter said.”

Freshman passed the note back to him without comment.

Jones refolded it, placed it in his pocket.

“I suppose that’s out?” he said, very casually.

“Did you ever hear of three on a blind date?” Freshman replied. “And brother, you’re not going anywhere alone tonight.”

Jones nodded, as though that was the answer he’d expected.

“What’s the legal method in Tennessee, chair or rope?” he asked after a while, as though they’d changed subjects in the meantime. “I don’t mean what am *I* going to get, I mean what have they got down on paper, that you’re supposed to get, if you had lived that long?”

Freshman took a long time. When he finally answered, that wasn’t the question he answered at all.

“Tell her okay,” he said. “I’ll walk over there with you.”

Jones crooked his finger and a waiter sidled over.

“Tell whoever gave you that note—”

The waiter said, “Oh, the lady’s gone long ago. She told me to wait half an hour after she left before giving it to you.

She also made me promise not to tell you what she looked like, in case you asked. She gave me twenty pesetas not to. But if you really want to know, and if I put my mind to it real hard, I think I would be able to—" He kept looking down at Jones' hand, as if expecting another twenty pesetas to show up in it.

Instead, Jones laid it arrestingly on his arm, shut him up.

"Don't try too hard," he said. "I like it better this way." And to Freshman, when the waiter had gone off again, "It's a farewell performance. It's a one-night stand if there ever was one. And that's how one-night stands should be; no names, and not even any faces."

* * * *

A human being dies just once. A night club dies each night. And it's just as brutal to watch.

Freshman watched the place die.

The crowd thinned first; that was its life-blood draining away. Each time the band played there were fewer on the floor. Until there were just three couples left. And then two. And then none. Nobody wanted to be the last couple on the floor; it was supposed to be bad luck.

The pink spot went out. That died and was gone. Then somebody pulled a switch and a whole circuit of marginal lights went out while shadows took over where they'd been. That was blindness setting in.

A new kind of music replaced the old. Pails clanked and brushes rasped, and all of a sudden there were a new set of dancers moving slowly around the floor; old and ragged and down on their hands and knees. Yesterday's dancers, coming back like ghosts, to a place where they'd once worn bright colors and paint and been straight and young; just like today's would come back on some tomorrow.

One of them picked up a bit of ribbon-bow someone had dropped, and looked at it a minute, then tucked it away in her rags.

All the tables were jammed together now, and up-ended back-to-back. The legs of the upper layer stuck stiffly up in the air. That was rigor mortis developing.

Jones said good-by to his men. They didn't know it was goodby; they thought it was just good night. He gave Freshman the wink, to let him understand what he was doing.

Jones had posted himself beside the exit where they'd have to pass him on the way through to the street, and said good-by to them one by one as they came by.

And each one, misunderstanding, just said good night and thought he'd see Jones again tomorrow.

"Take it easy, Bill." And he put his hand on his shoulder a minute, pushed down hard. "Keep blowing 'em hot and fast, now."

" 'Night."

"Buzz, take care of this for me, will you?" He handed him his gold cigarette-case.

"What's the idea?"

"I don't want to carry it around where I'm going. You can give it back to me next time you see me."

One of them called back from the street entrance:

"You coming?"

"Don't wait for me," Jones answered, and the walls made it echo like a death knell.

He turned to Freshman.

"And that's the end of my fellows and me."

Freshman scrutinized him, closely.

"You wanted it that way. You didn't want 'em told."

"I still want it that way." Jones looked around at the night club's remains, cold in death.

"Let's get out of here," he said distastefully, "before they bury us with it."

It was the deadest hour of the night. It would be light in an hour, but in the meantime the darkness seemed to have

redoubled itself, as if realizing it had a deadline to work against.

The towns of Spain never sleep altogether, but Barcelona was as close to a complete lull right now as it ever got, twenty-four hours around the clock.

You could hear a taxi-horn chirp three blocks away. You could hear a straggler trying to whistle up somebody all the way down at the next corner.

The stars were out in full array; cruel, glinting Spanish stars, with something fierce and revengeful in their brightness.

“Do you want to take a cab there?” Freshman asked him.

Jones tilted his face.

“Let’s walk it. The air smells good.”

“And any time you can say that in Spain, you better say it,” his custodian grunted. “It ain’t often.”

It was in the residential sector up past the Rambla —“uptown” you might have called it, at least away from the city’s heart; concrete apartment houses with funny rounded edges, and private homes nestled in their own shrubbery behind high iron railings.

There wasn’t a sound here. Not a car on the streets.

“How we doing?” Freshman asked at last.

They stopped by a light, and Jones took out the note and consulted it for verification.

“One-twenty-six,” he said.

There was a sudden metallic clash, knife-sharp, almost at their very feet. The sound made them both jump slightly. The complete silence had magnified it out of all proportion. They both started, looking around.

“There it is, over there.” Jones went and picked it up, brought it back. A doorkey.

Freshman was looking up. “And this is the house. That window up there just closed. I saw it move.”

It was a six-story flat, bone-white in the starlight, flush with the Street; night-blind, not a light showing.

“Well—” Jones said dubiously. “Here goes!” He half turned to leave, as if he expected Freshman to wait out there on the sidewalk.

“Don’t be in a hurry,” Freshman let him know, turning with him. “I’m going in with you. I’ll do my waiting upstairs, outside the flat door itself. There’s such a thing as a back way out, you know.”

“Help yourself,” was all the bandsman said, noncommittally.

An iron-ribbed glass outer door opened at hand-pressure. An inner, wooden door required the key. It opened easily. They went up a flight of tiled stairs, Freshman letting Jones take the lead. Night lights were burning on each of the successive floors they ascended to. They stopped at the fourth.

“There it is, up that way,” Jones whispered. “Forty, forty-two, forty-four—”

“I’ll take you right up to it,” Freshman said adamantly.

“It’s open,” Jones said. “I can see the black running down the edge of it, from here.”

“All right,” Freshman said when they’d arrived in front of it. “I’ll knock off here. You’re on your own from here on in.”

Jones just stood there. Then he looked down.

“My garter came undone.”

“You’re just stalling,” Freshman said with a skeptical grimace. “Are you afraid to go in there?”

“No, I’m not. Look at it.” He planted one foot against the wall, caught at a dangling strip of elastic, refastened it. “Been dragging half the way over here.”

“Then why didn’t you fix it before?”

“I was afraid to bend down too suddenly with you keeping your hand in your pocket.”

“Maybe you were right,” Freshman admitted. “Let’s get it straight. I know there are things you could do. Take my advice, don’t do them. The balconies in front. I can beat you down to the doorway from here, and I’ll just shoot from

there. Or if she has a gun in there, don't try to borrow it. I'm a professional. You're just an amateur. I'm telling you for your own good, Jones. The only way you'll leave is by this same door you're going in now."

Jones straightened the shoulders of his coat uncomfortably.

"I don't feel like a man going in to his last date. I can't get from one mood into the other. Maybe it's because you're with me."

"Come on back, then. No one's making you."

"I'd better go. This is the last one I'll ever have."

Freshman looked at his watch.

"Four forty-two on the nose," he said. "I'll give you until five. When you hear me rap on the door, come on out. If you don't, I'll come in and get you, handcuffs and all, right in front of her."

Jones straightened his tie. Then he reached for the doorknob, widened the already-open door, and stepped into the engulfing darkness beyond.

The door closed after him, this time fully.

* * * *

There was nothing. Just blackness. It was like being executed already, and in the other world.

Then a soft voice said, "You?"

"Me," Jones answered.

A moment's wait. Then the voice came again.

"You took so long."

"Where is the light? I can't find it."

He felt in his pocket for his lighter, then remembered that he'd given it away.

She must have guessed his intention.

"No, don't. I don't want any."

"But I can't see my way."

"There is no further need to. Your way is ended. You are here. I have always dreamed of it this way, ever since I first

saw you.”

“But I can’t see you.”

“I have seen you. I know you well. I have seen you night after night. My heart doesn’t need any lights.”

“But what about me?”

“You have seen me, too. You have seen me many times and well. Are you afraid I am ugly? I assure you I’m not. Are you afraid I am old?”

“No,” he said politely. “No.”

“Then give me your word. No matches, no lighter, please. You will spoil the mood.”

“All right, I promise,” he said.

“Who is the other one, waiting outside?”

“Oh, you saw him? A friend.”

“You did not trust me? You were afraid to come here alone?”

“I couldn’t get rid of him. He—manages me. He’s afraid to leave me out of his sight, day or night.”

“Oh,” she said. “An artist’s representative. I understand. Come closer. Don’t just stand there.”

“But I’m afraid I’ll stumble over something. I can’t even see where I’m putting my foot.”

“Just move slowly forward from the door. There is nothing between us. And you will finally come to me.”

Bodiless hands found his in the dark. Ghost-hands, soft as silk, light as moths. They linked with his, then drew him gently forward.

And this, he thought, is my last night of freedom in this world.

* * * *

Freshman blew cigarette-smoke in the emptiness of the hall. He turned his head a little, and looked at the inscrutable door just behind his shoulder. Then he turned away again. He was feeling extremely tired of standing still in one place.

Finally he heard the street-door open, floors below. Someone started to come up the stairs. He'd been afraid of this all along.

"Now what do I do?" he wondered, uneasily.

He could pretend he was waiting to be let in; turn around and face the door expectantly.

Or he could pretend he was just leaving and make a false start toward the stairs as the intruder went by, then double back later to his present position.

In the end he did neither one. His profession emboldened him. It was his business to be standing stock-still in a strange hallway, in a strange house, in the middle of the night. He just stood there as he was, alongside the door, and put the burden of explanation on the other party.

It was a man. Middle-aged or better. He was not drunk, but there was wine on his breath, and his eyes were smoky from it.

He reached the landing and moved straight ahead. For a moment Freshman had an uneasy premonition he was making for that very same door. But he went on toward the foot of the next flight, and turned there, to go up.

He looked at Freshman as he went by.

"Evening," he muttered.

"Evening," Freshman answered, and looked him squarely in the eye.

The man glanced at him again, this time from a slightly higher level, as he started up the final flight. Then he nodded, in comradely understanding, as if he had solved it all to his own satisfaction.

"Afraid to go in and face her, eh? I used to be that way, too. Why don't you do like I do now? Why don't you take off your shoes first just outside the door? That way they never hear you. Otherwise, you'll stand out there in the hall all night."

He winked sagely, and he trudged on up out of sight.

I must remember that, thought Freshman. I may need it ten years from now.

He looked at his watch. Four forty-four and a half.

In the room, darkness and two whispering voices.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m looking for a cigarette. I gave my case away. I have none with me.”

“Reach behind you. There is a table. To your left. On it a box of them. Your fingers will find it.”

“They have. I’ve got it.”

Something loosely dangling, like a chain-pull, gave a smothered *plink*.

“Do not touch the lamp. You promised me.”

“I won’t. I didn’t know there was one there.”

“The box will play a tune, as the lid comes up. Do not be alarmed when you first hear it—”

She had spoken too late. A startling bell-like note had already sounded, and his fingers gave an involuntary jump away from it before he could control them. They struck pottery, there was an agitated swirl, and he could feel the lamp going over. He clawed at it, got only a handful of loose chain, and then that was snaked away from him.

There was a dull thud from the floor, without breakage, but followed by a blinding flash—or what seemed like one. It stayed on, however, in all its intensity, rocking a little, that was all. It glared upward through the upside-down shade, full into their faces, like a spotlight trained from the floor at their very feet.

Two livid satanic masks were the result, floating around without shoulders or bodies or background.

He could only see the one opposite him, not the one she saw.

There was dawning stupefaction on it.

It deepened instant by instant.

It became consternation.

It became unutterable horror.

She started to shake her head. She couldn’t articulate. She could only shake wildly. As if in denial of this trick her eyes were playing upon her. He righted the lamp. The light broadened, naturalized, swam out about the room now as it should have.

He turned to see if that would moderate the stark terror that seemed to have engulfed her. It didn’t. It augmented it, as if the more of him she could see, the greater became her unreasoning terror.

She gave a startled leap to her feet, as if the divan were afire. But it was *he* she was looking at. He remained with one knee crouched on it, half-sitting, half-standing.

She tried to scream. She couldn’t articulate that either. He saw the cords of her neck swell out, then contract again. No sound came. Her larynx was paralyzed with horror.

She kept shaking her head, as if her only salvation, her very sanity, depended on denying what had taken place, and believing in her own denial.

She took a tottering step, as if to turn and flee. Instead, she clawed at the table the lamp had originally been on. A drawer leaped out from it, and her fingers groped inside. There was a flash as they knotted, swept high up over her head. The light exploded along a gleaming knife blade in her hand.

He was too transfixed to move in time; she would have surely had him.

The threatened blow never fell. Instead it crumpled, seemed to disintegrate into a swaying lurch that rocked her whole body. The knife fell, loosened from her fingers. Her hand dropped, limp, and clutched at her heart.

With the other she pointed, quivering, toward the opened drawer, as if asking him to help her. A bluish cast had overspread her lips.

She was trying to whisper something. “Heart-drops——quick!”

He turned and dredged a small vial from the drawer. Then before he could turn back and reach her with it, a swirl of violently agitated air rushed past him, as when something goes over.

When he turned back to her, the fall had already completed itself. She lay there still, one hand vaguely reaching toward her heart.

He picked her up and put her on the divan. He felt for her heartbeat.

He couldn’t find it; it had expired.

Too panic-stricken to believe the evidence of his own senses, he snatched up the mirror-lined cigarette box, strewing its contents all over the floor. Then he held the inside of the lid to her lips. It was unadulterated horror. A miniature waltz started to play, there in front of her face. But the mirrored surface remained unclouded.

She was dead.

He whispered hoarsely aloud.

“She’s dead. My God, she’s dead!”

He didn’t know what to do. He was so stunned at the suddenness of it, its inexplicability, that he sat there numbed, beside her, for a moment or two.

He picked up the knife after awhile, looked at it, dazed. Then he looked over at the door.

He rose at last, started to go toward it, to open it, to call to Freshman.

Then he stopped short, stood where he was, knife in hand.

He looked at it. Then he looked at the door. Then he turned his head and glanced at her, where she lay in new death.

At last he went back to her.

He tested her one last time for signs of life. She was gone irremediably. Nothing could ever bring her back again. He picked up the heart-drops and put them into his own pocket.

Then he crouched over her as he had been before, one knee resting on the divan, half-sitting, half-standing. He raised the knife high overhead.

After a moment he shut his eyes, and the knife in his hand drove downward and he felt something soft and thick stop it, at the hilt.

He left it in her, and got up from there without looking. He went toward the door. This time he didn't stop. He didn't walk in a very straight line; he swayed, as though he were a little unbalanced himself.

He swung the door back. All the way back, flat against the wall, so there was a good unobstructed view of the room.

Freshman was standing there, a little to one side. The detective's head started to swing around toward him. He didn't wait for it to finish.

"I've just killed her, Freshman," he said in a strangely steady voice. "You'd better come in here."

* * * *

This time it was Jones doing the hanging around waiting outside the door. For just a moment or two, perhaps, but waiting alone, unguarded, just the same. Standing straight and stiff as a cigar-store Indian, his back to the room, the way Freshman had been before. He could hear Freshman moving around inside. He didn't look in to watch what he was doing. He kept his head turned the other way.

Freshman finished at last. He came out and carefully closed the door after him.

"I notice you didn't stir, did you?" he commented. "You had plenty of chance to make a break for it."

"Are you kidding?" Jones answered. "You could have dropped me with a shot straight down the stair-well from up here."

"Are you sure that's the only reason you stayed put?" Freshman asked drily. "Come on, let's go," he said.

They went down the stairs together and out into the street. They walked a preliminary block or so, until Freshman could flag a cab. Then they both got in. Not a word was said by either of them.

“Downtown,” was all Freshman said to the driver.

That could mean either the main police headquarters or Jones’ rooms at the Victoria, to wait for the following evening and the boat for New York. Either one was downtown from Valencia Street.

Jones didn’t ask him which one it was going to be. Freshman didn’t tell him. Spanish custody, or American. Leniency or lynch-law.

Jones kept telling off each intersection as they crossed it. You could tell he was doing that by the way his head gave a little side-turn each time. He was breathing kind of fast, though he was only sitting still in a taxi. His forehead glistened a little each time a streetlight washed over it. Finally he turned in desperation and stared into Freshman’s face.

“What are you going to do about it?” he said hoarsely. “Why didn’t you report it in from there?”

Freshman didn’t answer. He kept looking straight ahead, as if he were made of stone.

“I’ll tell them, if you don’t!” Jones panted. “I’ll holler it from the cab window.”

“Now I’ve heard everything,” Freshman murmured.

They hit the Plaza de Catalunya, the big light-frosted amphitheatre. And there the two eventual directions split. Until then they’d been identical, you couldn’t tell one from the other. But now the giveaway had to come. The hotel was just offside, a few doors to the left. Headquarters was further down the Rambla.

The driver slowed and glanced around at Freshman.

“Which way now, senor?” Almost as though he knew of the decision that had to be made, but he couldn’t have. It

was just that this was a traffic hub, a wheel from which spokes shot out all over town.

"*Para un momento*," Freshman said.

They came to a dead halt.

The meter went pounding on. So did Jones' heart.

"Two murders now, one here, one back home," Freshman said, as though he were talking for his own benefit.

He'd taken out the pair of dice Jones had given him earlier in the evening, was tossing them up and down in his hand, knocking them together. The left, not the gun hand. "But they don't stack up alike, do they?"

When Jones moistened his lips and tried to say something, Freshman cut him short with a chop of his hand.

"Save your breath, I'm way ahead of you. You don't have to give it to me. I'll give it to *you*. This is a Latin country. They're lenient toward crimes of passion. Anything with a woman in it, and love, and jealousy. On the books, you could get death. But you won't. You're popular here—almost an idol. And the public influences judges and juries. Because judges and juries *are* part of the public, themselves.

"You'd get twenty years; maybe even only ten. With time off, with the public rooting for you, you could be out in five. With the bankroll waiting, to take up where you left off. And even if you got the rope here, that would still be a lot better than the lynching you're afraid you'll get back there.

"Those odds aren't bad. You don't have to be much of a gambler to take them. You're betting on almost a sure thing."

"Isn't there one thing you're overlooking?" Jones panted. "I didn't do the other one. I did do this."

"I'm not overlooking anything," Freshman let him know harshly. "Not a single damn thing, from beginning to end! You're the one overlooking something. And that's that possession is nine-tenths of the law. I've got you and they haven't."

Jones shut up, and his head canted down upon his chest, in admission of defeat.

Freshman gave a flick of his wrist, and the dice shot out of his hand and hit the asphalt outside the window. And bounced, and rolled, and finally lay still.

“Call that shot,” he ordered.

“Two,” Jones answered wanly, without lifting his head.

A big gasoline tank-truck rumbled by, and they vanished, kicked out of the way like gravel.

“Only God will ever know if you called it right or not,” Freshman mused.

He leaned forward and banged the glass with his knuckles.

“Straight on down,” he said. “To the Barcelona General Police Headquarters. I want to turn this man in.”

Jones gave a sigh so deep that it was almost like three years of accumulated fear and misery rising up and drifting out of him, leaving him for good.

Going up the steps Freshman stopped and shoved his hand at him.

“Just a minute. Give me the heart-drops. I’ll carry them from now on. The first thing they’ll do is search you.” He dropped the vial into his own coat pocket.

They went inside. He twisted Jones’ arm around behind his back, held it gripped that way from then on.

They saw the man they were supposed to see, the higher-up. Freshman knew how to work it. He showed his credentials.

An effusive Spanish greeting, complete with genuflections, was elicited.

“Ah, a fellow professional. At your service, Senor Freshman. What can I do for you?”

Freshman read from the jottings he’d made back there. “In the Apartment Forty-four in the house at One-twenty-six Valencia Street, there is a woman lying dead with a knife in her heart. The divorcee Blanca Fuentes, former wife of an

industrialist, age twenty-seven, no living relatives. Better send somebody over there.

"This man has already admitted to me he did it. He gave himself up to me at the door. They were alone together in the room. Although I have a warrant for his extradition, he belongs to you."

"You will have to waive that, senor. He cannot leave Spanish soil now." He raised his finger. "Officers!"

Two policemen sprang forward. Jones changed hands.

They started to drag him out of the room between them. He dragged very easily, almost gracefully, muscles all relaxed.

Then suddenly he thought of something, balked. "Just one word more," he begged. "Just let me have one word more with him."

They brought him back beside Freshman again.

"I just thought of something," he said in English. "How did—how did you know I was carrying those heart-drops away with me in my pocket? I took them out of the drawer before I let you into the room."

"You damn fool," Freshman slurred, so low no one else in the room could have caught it even if it hadn't been in English. "What makes you think I wasn't down on one knee at the keyhole the whole time, from first to last?"

"Thanks," Jones breathed gratefully as they led him away to be booked for murder. You could hardly hear it. He said it more with his eyes and the expression on his face than with his voice.

Freshman came down the steps of the police station again a few minutes later, alone.

He reached in his pocket for a cigarette, and found the little vial of heart-drops. He switched his arm carelessly sideward, straight across his own body, and chucked it away.

* * * *

In the hotel rooms late the next day Nunez was packing up Jones' belongings, under the watchful scrutiny of Freshman. The valet kept shaking his head mournfully from time to time.

"I miss him," he murmured. "This was the time I always woke him up. He always woke up with a grouch. I miss that, too." He sighed deeply. "I used to swipe little things from him while he lay sleeping. Cigarettes, change from his pockets. I'd gladly put them back again, if I could only have him sleeping there again."

Outside, the lights began to twinkle in the Plaza de Catalunya, the little side streets off the Rambla vanished one by one in a night-blue blanket, the guardian mountain Tibidabo stood out against the western glow. But the bed was empty. A pair of fresh white-kid gloves lay on it, ready for use.

Freshman went over to the door between the two rooms, looked out. They were all waiting in the outside room, the same as every other night, hanging around expecting to be fed.

"Blow," he said curtly. "No supper tonight. The party's over."

They filed out, singly and in twos. Trumpet, and girl. Drums, and girl. Bass trombone and piano. And two girls that were nobody's girls, but just there for the food.

They didn't resent the brush-off. They all looked sort of sad. The last one to go turned, in the doorway, and raised her arm and gave Freshman a sort of half-hearted wave of farewell.

"If you should ever see him again, wherever he is, tell him good luck from Rosario."

Freshman raised his own arm and gave her a solemn wave back.

The door closed. The party was over. The music was through.

He went back to the inside room and resumed his inventory.

Somebody knocked.

“See who that is,” he told the valet.

Nunez came back, his face chalky, his jaw hanging slack.

“What’s the matter? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I—I have just received a message from one,” Nunez faltered. “She must be one!” He crossed himself.

Freshman took the box from him, examined the giant white carnation. He tore open the enclosed note and read it:

But if you will wear my flower in your coat, and if you will play Symphonie for me, you will make me supremely happy.

An aficionada who has not the courage to come closer.

* * * *

“Every night, for three weeks now,” the terrified Nunez quavered. “It must be flowers from the dead!”

Freshman sat down suddenly on a chair. He stayed there for several moments without saying anything. Then he got up again as suddenly and bolted out.

“I’ve got things to do!” he exclaimed. “I’ll be back. Don’t touch anything.”

He returned an hour later. Nunez was still hanging around, too unnerved by the shock he had received to loot the place and clear out, as he would have done under ordinary circumstances. He smelled strongly of Jones’ brandy, but he was cold sober none the less.

“It’s all right,” Freshman said. “I went down to headquarters and compared the two notes for handwriting. Then I went to the Club New York and cross-questioned the waiter. After that I went to a couple of other addresses, and talked to a couple of other people.”

“She—she is alive, senor?”

“If you mean the woman who’s been sending Jones these carnations every night for three weeks, she sure is. And she’s going to be sitting there tonight in the club big as life and wondering what became of him.”

“Then why are they still holding him? Why don’t they let him go?”

“Because the woman who invited him to Apartment Forty-four, One-twenty-six Valencia Street, is just as surely dead. She’s lying in the morgue right now. I just saw her with my own two eyes.”

Nunez shuddered, his eyes rolling in his head.

“These are two different women, amigo,” Freshman explained. “That’s the waiter’s dumbness, and my own carelessness in not comparing the two notes while he still had them both on him, and this damn Spanish indoor sport of sending mash-notes around night clubs by the dozen. The note wasn’t meant for him; it was meant for somebody else. Two different people, carrying on a quiet little flirtation of their own from table to table, for some weeks past.”

Freshman frowned thoughtfully. “I think what must have happened is, her admirer was sitting between her and Jones, and the waiter carried it to the wrong man. Instead of waiting to see that it had arrived safely, she grew timid and hurried away. Then the party it was intended for, also got up and left, thinking he’d been turned down.

“I don’t blame the waiter too much. He’s supposed to take orders for drinks, not play the part of Cupid.”

Nunez carefully folded a hand-painted French necktie. He signed ponderously.

“But why did my patron kill her? That part is what mystifies me. It was not like him. I know him, I worked for him too long. He has a heart of gold. He would not hurt anyone. He would give the shirt off his back—”

“That part isn’t going to make much sense to you,” Freshman admitted. “You see, he was already wanted for something like this back in his own country. And if he *had* to

stand trial for murder, he wanted it to be here in Spain, and not—”

He didn’t finish it. He saw masked men, a burning barn, the screams of a roasting human being.

“I still don’t understand,” Nunez said helplessly. “Why commit a crime just because you want to be tried for it in some particular place? All you have to do is not commit it in the first place, then you wouldn’t have to be tried for it any place at all.”

“I knew *you* wouldn’t understand,” Freshman said, closing the last valise. “He does, though. And *I* do.” And then he added softly, “And I guess that’s just something between the two of us.

THE DANCING DETECTIVE

Patsy Marino was clocking us as usual when I barged in through the foyer. He had to look twice at his watch to make sure it was right when he saw who it was. Or pretended he had to, anyway. It was the first time in months I'd breezed in early enough to climb into my evening dress and powder up before we were due on the dance floor.

Marino said, "What is the matter, don't you feel well?"

I snapped, "D'ya have to pass a medical examination to get in here and earn a living?" and gave him a dirty look across the frayed alley-cat I wore on my shoulder.

"The reason I asked is you're on time. Are you sure you are feeling well?" he pleaded sarcastically.

"Keep it up and you won't be," I promised, but soft-pedaled it so he couldn't quite get it. He was my bread and butter after all.

The bam looked like a morgue. It always did before eight—or so I'd heard. They didn't have any of the "pash" lights on yet, those smoky red things around the walls that gave it atmosphere. There wasn't a cat in the box, just five empty gilt chairs and the coffin. They had all the full-length windows overlooking the main drag open to get some ventilation in, too. It didn't seem like the same place at all; you could actually breathe fresh air in it!

My high heels going back to the dressing room clicked hollowly in the emptiness, and my reflection followed me upside down across the waxed floor, like a ghost. It gave me

a spooky feeling, like tonight was going to be a bad night. And whenever I get a spooky feeling, it turns out to be a bad night all right.

I shoved the dressing-room door in and started, “Hey, Julie, why didn’t you wait for me, ya getting too high-hat?” Then I quit again.

She wasn’t here either. If she wasn’t at either end, where the hell was she?

Only Mom Henderson was there, reading one of tomorrow morning’s tabs. “Is it that late?” she wanted to know when she saw me.

“Aw, lay off,” I said. “It’s bad enough I gotta go to work on an empty stomach.” I slung my cat-pelt on a hook. Then I sat down and took off my pumps and dumped some foot powder in them, and put them back on again.

“I knocked on Julie’s door on my way over,” I said, “and didn’t get any answer. We always have a cup of java together before we come to work. I don’t know how I’m going to last the full fifteen rounds . . .”

An unworthy suspicion crossed my mind momentarily: Did Julie purposely dodge me to get out of sharing a cup of coffee with me like I always took with her other nights? They allowed her to make it in her rooming house because it had a fire escape; they wouldn’t allow me to make it in mine. I put it aside as unfair. Julie wasn’t that kind; you could have had the shirt off her back—only she didn’t wear a shirt, just a brassiere.

“Matter?” Mom sneered. “Didn’t you have a nickel on you to buy your own?”

Sure I did. Habit’s a funny thing, though. Got used to taking it with a sidekick and—X didn’t bother going into it with the old slob.

“I got a feeling something’s going to happen tonight,” I said, hunching my shoulders.

“Sure,” said Mom. “Maybe you’ll get fired.”

I thumbed my nose at her and turned the other way around on my chair. She went back to the paper. “There haven’t been any good murders lately,” she lamented. “Damn it, I like a good, juicy murder wanst in a while.”

“You’re building yourself up to one right in here.” I scowled into the mirror at her.

She didn’t take offense; she wasn’t supposed to, anyway. “Was you here when that thing happened to that Southern girl, Sally, I think was her name?”

“No!” I snapped. “Think I’m as old as you? Think I been dancing here all my life?”

“She never showed up to work one night, and they found her . . . That was only, let’s see now”—she figured it out on her fingers—“three years ago.”

“Cut it out!” I snarled. “I feel low enough as it is.”

Mom was warming up now. “Well, for that matter, how about the Fredericks kid? That was only a little while before you come here, wasn’t it?”

“I know,” I cut her short. “I remember hearing all about it. Do me a favor and let it lie.”

She parked one finger up alongside her mouth. “You know,” she breathed confidentially, “I’ve always had a funny feeling one and the same guy done away with both of them.”

“If he did, I know who I wish was third on his list!” I was glowering at her, when thank God the rest of the chain gang showed up and cut the death watch short. The blonde came in, and then the Raymond tramp, and the Italian frail, and all the rest of them—all but Julie.

I said, “She was never as late as this before!” and they didn’t even know who or what I was talking about. Or care. Great bunch.

A slush pump started to tune up outside, so I knew the cats had come in, too.

Mom Henderson got up, sighed. “Me for the white tiles and rippling waters,” and waddled out to her beat.

I opened the door on a crack and peeped out, watching for Julie. The pash lights were on now and there were customers already buying tickets over the bird cage. All the other taxi dancers were lining up—but not Julie.

Somebody behind me yelled, “Close that door! Think we’re giving a free show in here?”

“You couldn’t interest anyone in that secondhand hide of yours even with a set of dishes thrown in!” I squelched absentmindedly, without even turning to find out who it was. But I closed it anyway.

Marino came along and banged on it and hollered, “Outside, you in there! What do I pay you for anyway?” and somebody yelled back, “I often wonder!”

The cats exploded into a razzmatazz just then with enough oompah to be heard six blocks away, so it would pull them in off the pave. Once they were in, it was up to us. We all came out single file, to a fate worse than death, me last. They were putting the ropes up, and the mirrored tops started to go around in the ceiling and scatter flashes of light all over everything, like silver rain.

Marino said, “Where you goin’, Ginger?” and when he used your front name like that, it meant he wasn’t kidding.

I said, “I’m going to phone Julie a minute, find out what happened to her.”

“You get out there and goona-goo!” he said roughly. “She knows what time the session begins! How long’s she been working here, anyway?”

“But she’ll lose her job. you’ll fire her,” I wailed.

He hinged his watch. “She is fired already,” he said flatly.

I knew how she needed that job, and when I want to do a thing, I do it. A jive artist was heading my way, one of those barnacles you can’t shake off once they fasten on you. I knew he was a jive because he’d bought enough tickets to last him all week; a really wise guy only buys them from stretch to stretch. The place might burn down for all he knows.

I grabbed his ticket and tore it quick, and Marino turned and walked away. So then I pleaded, “Gimme a break, will you? Lemme make a phone call first. It won’t take a second.”

The jive said, “I came in here to danst.”

“It’s only to a girl friend,” I assured him. “And I’ll smile pretty at you the whole time.” *(Clink! Volunteer* 8-IIII.) “And I’ll make it up to you later, I promise I will.” I grabbed him quick by the sleeve. “Don’t go way, stand here!”

Julie’s landlady answered. I said, “Did Julie Bennett come back yet?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I ain’t seen her since yesterday.”

“Find out for me, will ya?” I begged. “She’s late and she’ll lose her job over here.”

Marino spotted me, came back and thundered, “I thought I told you—”

I waved the half ticket in his puss. “I’m working,” I said. “I’m on this gentleman’s time,” and I goona-gooed the jive with teeth and eyes, one hand on his arm.

He softened like ice cream in a furnace. He said, “It’s all right, Mac,” and felt big and chivalrous or something. About seven cents’ worth of his dime was gone by now.

Marino went away again, and the landlady came down from the second floor and said, “She don’t answer her door, so I guess she’s out.”

I hung up and I said, “Something’s happened to my girl friend. She ain’t there and she ain’t here. She wouldn’ta quit cold without telling me.”

The goona-goo was beginning to wear off the jive by this time. He fidgeted, said, “Are you gonna danst or are you gonna stand there looking blue?”

I stuck my elbows out. “Wrap yourself around this!” I barked impatiently. Just as he reached, the cats quit and the stretch was on.

He gave me a dirty look. “Ten cents shot to hell!” and he walked off to find somebody else.

I never worry about a thing after it’s happened, not when I’m on the winning end anyway. I’d put my call through, even if I hadn’t found out anything. I got back under the ropes, and kept my fingers crossed to ward off garlic eaters.

By the time the next stretch began, I knew Julie wasn’t coming anymore that night. Marino wouldn’t have let her stay even if she had, and I couldn’t have helped her get around him anymore, by then, myself. I kept worrying, wondering what had happened to her, and that creepy feeling about tonight being a bad night came over me stronger than ever, and I couldn’t shake it off no matter how I goona-gooed.

The cold orangeade they kept buying me during the stretches didn’t brace me up any either. I wasn’t allowed to turn it down, because Marino got a cut out of the concession profits.

The night was like most of the others, except I missed Julie. I’d been more friendly with her than the rest of the girls, because she was on the square. I had the usual run of freaks.

“With the feet, with the feet,” I said wearily, “lay off the belt-buckle crowding.”

“What am I supposed to do, build a retaining wall between us?”

“You’re supposed to stay outside the three-mile limit,” I flared, “and not try to go mountain climbing in the middle of the floor. Do I look like an Alp?” And I glanced around to see if I could catch Marino’s eye.

The guy quit pawing. Most of them are yellow like that. But on the other hand, if a girl complains too often, the manager begins to figure her for a troublemaker. “Wolf!” you know, so it don’t pay.

It was about twelve when they showed up, and I'd been on the floor three and a half hours straight, with only one more to go. There are worse ways of earning a living. You name them. I knew it was about twelve because Duke, the front man, had just wound up "The Lady Is a Tramp," and I knew the sequence of his numbers and could tell the time of night by them, like a sailor can by bells. Wacky, eh? Half past—"Limehouse Blues."

I gandered at them when I saw them come into the foyer, because customers seldom come in that late. Not enough time left to make it worth the general admission fee. There were two of them: One was a fat, bloated little guy, the kind we call a belly wopper, the other was a pip. He wasn't tall, dark, and handsome because he was medium height, light-haired, and clean-cut-looking without being pretty about it, but if I'd had any dreams left, he coulda moved right into them. Well, I didn't, so I headed for the dressing room to count up my ticket stubs while the stretch was on; see how I was making out. Two cents out of every dime when you turn them in.

They were standing there sizing the barn up, and they'd called Marino over to them. Then the three of them turned around and looked at me just as I made the door, and Marino thumbed me. I headed over to find out what was up. Duke's next was a rumba, and I said to myself, "If I draw the kewpie, I'm going to have kittens all over the floor." Marino said, "Get your things, Ginger." I thought one of them was going to take me out; they're allowed to do that, you know, only they've got to make it up with the management for taking you out of circulation. It's not as bad as it sounds; you can still stay on the up and up, si! with them in some laundry and listen to their troubles. It's all up to you yourself.

I got the backyard sable and got back just in time to hear Marino say something about, "Will I have to go bail for her?"

Fat said, “Naw, naw, we just want her to build up the background a little for us.”

Then I tumbled, got jittery, squawked, “What is this, a pinch? What’ve I done? Where you taking me?”

Marino soothed, “They just want you to go with them, Ginger. You be a good girl and do like they ast.” Then he said something to them I couldn’t figure. “Try to keep the place here out of it, will you, fellas? I been in the red for six months as it is.”

I cowered along between them like a lamb being led to the slaughter, looking from one to the other. “Where you taking me?” I wailed, going down the stairs.

Maiden’s Prayer answered, in the cab. “To Julie Bennett’s, Ginger.” They’d gotten my name from Marino, I guess.

“What’s she done?” I half sobbed.

“May as well tell her now, Nick,” Fat suggested. “Otherwise she’ll take it big when we get there.”

Nick said, quietly as he could, “Your friend Julie met up with some tough luck, babe.” He took his finger and he passed it slowly across his neck.

I took it big right there in the cab, Fat to the contrary. “Ah, no!” I whispered, holding my head. “She was on the floor with me only last night! Just this time last night we were in the dressing room together having a smoke, having some laughs! No! She was my only friend!” And I started to bawl like a two-year-old, straight down my makeup onto the cab floor.

Finally this Nick, after acting embarrassed as hell, took a young tent out of his pocket, said, “Have yourself a time on this, babe.”

I was still working on it when I went up the rooming-house stairs sandwiched between them. I recoiled just outside the door. “Is she—is she still in there?”

“Naw, you won’t have to look at her,” Nick reassured me.

I didn’t, because she wasn’t in there anymore, but it was worse than if she had been. Oh, God, that sheet, with one tremendous streak down it as if a chicken had been—! I swiveled, played puss-in-the-comer with the first thing I came up against, which happened to be this Nick guy’s chest. He sort of stood still like he liked the idea. Then he growled, “Turn that damn thing over out of sight, will you?”

The questioning, when I was calm enough to take it, wasn’t a grill, don’t get that idea. It was just, as they’d said, to fill out her background. “When was the last time you saw her alive? Did she go around much, y’know what we mean? She have any particular steady?”

“I left her outside the house door downstairs at one-thirty this morning, last night, or whatever you call it,” I told them. “We walked home together from Joyland right after the session wound up. She didn’t go around at all. She never dated the boys afterward and neither did I.”

The outside half of Nick’s left eyebrow hitched up at this, like when a terrier cocks its ear at something. “Notice anyone follow the two of you?”

“In our racket they always do; it usually takes about five blocks to wear them out, though, and this is ten blocks from Joyland.”

“You walk after you been on your pins all night?” Fat asked, aghast.

“We should take a cab, on our earnings! About last night, I can’t swear no one followed us, because I didn’t look around. That’s a come-on, if you do that.”

Nick said, “I must remember that,” absentmindedly.

I got up my courage, faltered, “Did it—did it happen right in here?”

“Here’s how it went: She went out again after she left you the first time—”

“I knew her better than that!” I yipped. “Don’t start that. Balloon Lungs, or I’ll let you have this across the snout!” I swung my catpiece at him.

He grabbed up a little box, shook it in my face. “For this,” he said. “Aspirin! Don’t try to tell us different, when we’ve already checked with the all-night drugstore over on Sixth!” He took a couple of heaves, cooled off, sat down again. “She went out, but instead of locking the house door behind her, she was too lazy or careless; shoved a wad of paper under it to hold it on a crack till she got back. In that five minutes or less, somebody who was watching from across the street slipped in and lay in wait for her in the upper hallway out here. He was too smart to go for her on the open street, where she might have had a chance to yell.”

“How’d he know she was coming back?”

“The unfastened door woulda told him that; also the drug clerk tells us she showed up there fully dressed, but with her bare feet stuck in a pair of carpet slippers to cool ’em. The killer musta spotted that, too.

“Why didn’t she yell out here in the house, with people sleeping all around her in the different rooms?” I wondered out loud.

“He grabbed her too quick for that, grabbed her by the throat just as she was opening her room door, dragged her in, closed the door, finished strangling her on the other side of it. He remembered later to come out and pick up the aspirins that had dropped and rolled all over out there. All but one, which he overlooked and we found. She wouldn’t ’ve stopped to take one outside her door. That’s how we know about that part of it.”

I kept seeing that sheet, which was hidden now, before me all over again. I couldn’t help it, I didn’t want to know, but still I had to know. “But if he strangled her, where did all that blood”—I gestured sickly—“come from?”

Fat didn’t answer, I noticed. He shut up all at once, as if he didn’t want to tell me the rest of it, and looked kind of sick himself. His eyes gave him away. I almost could have been a detective myself, the way I pieced the rest of it together just by following his eyes around the room. He

didn’t know I was reading them, or he wouldn’t have let them stray like that.

First they rested on the little portable phonograph she had there on a table. By using bamboo needles she could play it late at night, soft, and no one would hear it. The lid was up and there was a record on the turntable, but the needle was worn down halfway, all shredded, as though it had been played over and over.

Then his eyes went to a flat piece of paper, on which were spread out eight or ten shiny new dimes; I figured they’d been put aside like that, on paper, for evidence. Some of them had little brown flecks on them, bright as they were. Then lastly his eyes went down to the rug; it was all pleated up in places, especially along the edges, as though something heavy, inert, had been dragged back and forth over it.

My hands flew up to my head and I nearly went wacky with horror. I gasped it out because I hoped he’d say no, but he didn’t, so it was yes. “You mean he danced with her *after* she was gone? Gave her dead body a dime each time, stabbed her over and over while he did?”

There was no knife, or whatever it had been, left around, so either they’d already sent it down for prints or *he’d* taken it out with him again.

The thought of what must have gone on here in this room, of the death dance that must have taken place . . . All I knew was that I wanted to get out of here into the open, couldn’t stand it anymore. Yet before I lurched out, with Nick holding me by the elbow, I couldn’t resist glancing at the label of the record on the portable: “Poor Butterfly.”

Stumbling out the door I managed to say, “She didn’t put that on there. She hated that piece, called it a drip. I remembered once I was up here with her and started to play it, and she snatched it off, said she couldn’t stand it, wanted to bust it then and there, but I kept her from doing it. She was off love and men, and it’s a sort of a mushy

piece, that was why. She didn't buy it, they were all thrown in with the machine when she picked it up secondhand."

"Then we know his favorite song, if that means anything. If she couldn't stand it, it would be at the bottom of the stack of records, not near the top. He went to the trouble of skimming through them to find something he liked."

"With her there in his arms already!" That thought was about the finishing touch, on top of all the other horror. We were on the stairs going down, and the ground floor seemed to come rushing up to meet me. I could feel Nick's arm hook around me just in time, like an anchor, and then I did a clothespin act over it. And that was the first time I didn't mind being pawed.

When I could see straight again, he was holding me propped up on a stool in front of a lunch counter a couple doors down, holding a cup of coffee to my lips.

"How's Ginger?" he said gently.

"Fine," I dribbled mournfully all over my lap. "How's Nick?"

And on that note the night of Julie Bennett's murder came to an end.

Joyland dance hall was lonely next night. I came in late, and chewing cloves, and for once Marino didn't crack his whip over me. Maybe even he had a heart. "Ginger," was all he said as I went hurrying by, "don't talk about it while you're on the hoof, get me? If anyone asks you, you don't know nothing about it. It's gonna kill business."

Duke, the front man, stopped me on my way to the dressing room. "I hear they took you over there last night," he started.

"Nobody took nobody nowhere, schmaltz," I snapped. He wore feathers on his neck, that's why I called him that; it's the word for long-haired musicians in our lingo.

I missed her worse in the dressing room than I was going to later on out in the barn; there'd be a crowd out there around me, and noise and music, at least. In here it was like

her ghost was powdering its nose alongside me at the mirror the whole time. The peg for hanging up her things still had her name penciled under it.

Mom Henderson was having herself a glorious time; you couldn't hear yourself think, she was jabbering away so. She had two tabloids with her tonight, instead of just one, and she knew every word in all of them by heart. She kept leaning over the gals' shoulders, puffing down their necks: "And there was a dime balanced on each of her eyelids when they found her, and another one across her lips, and he stuck one in each of her palms and folded her fingers over it, mind ye! D'ye ever hear of anything like it? Boy, he sure must've been down on you taxis—"

I yanked the door open, planted my foot where it would do the most good, and shot her out into the barn. She hadn't moved that fast from one place to another in twenty years. The other girls just looked at me, and then at one another, as much as to say, "Touchy, isn't she?"

"Get outside and break it down; what do I pay you for anyway?" Marino yelled at the door. A gobstick tootled plaintively, out we trooped like prisoners in a lockstep, and another damn night had started in.

I came back in again during the tenth stretch ("Dinah" and "Have You Any Castles, Baby?") to take off my kicks a minute and have a smoke. Julie's ghost came around me again. I could still hear her voice in my ears, from the night before last! "Hold that match, Gin. I'm trying to duck a cement mixer out there. Dances like a slap-happy pug. Three little steps to the right, as if he were priming for a standing broad jump. I felt like screaming, For Pete's sake, if you're gonna jump, jump!"

And me, "What're you holding your hand for, been dancing upside down?"

"It's the way he holds it. Bends it back on itself and folds it under. Like this, look. My wrist's nearly broken. And look

what his ring did to me!" she had shown me a strawberry-sized bruise.

Sitting there alone, now, in the half-light, I said to myself, "I bet *he* was the one! I bet *that's* who it was! Oh, if I'd only gotten a look at him, if I'd only had her point him out to me! If he enjoyed hurting her that much while she was still alive, he'd have enjoyed dancing with her after she was dead." My cigarette tasted rotten. I threw it down and got out of there in a hurry, back into the crowd.

A ticket was shoved at me and I ripped it without looking up. Gliding backward, all the way around on the other side of the bam, a voice finally said a little over my ear, "How's Ginger?"

I looked up and saw who it was said, "What're you doing here?"

"Detailed here," Nick said.

I shivered to the music. "Do you expect him to show up *again,* after what he's done already?"

"He's a dance-hall killer," Nick said. "He killed Sally Arnold and the Fredericks girl, both from this same mill, and he killed a girl in

Chicago in between. The prints on Julie Bennett's phonograph records match those in two of the other cases, and in the third case—where there were no prints—the girl was holding a dime clutched in her hand. He'll show up again sooner or later. There's one of us cops detailed to every one of these mills in the metropolitan area tonight, and we're going to keep it up until he does."

"How do you know what he looks like?" I asked.

He didn't answer for a whole bar. "We don't," he admitted finally. "That's the hell of it. Talk about being invisible in a crowd! We only know he isn't through yet, he'll keep doing it until we get him!"

I said, "He was here that night, he was right up here on this floor with her that night, before it happened; I'm sure of it!" And I sort of moved in closer. Me, who was always

griping about being held too tight. I told him about the impression the guy's ring had left on her hand, and the peculiar way he'd held it, and the way he'd danced.

"You've got something there," he said, and left me flat on the floor and went over to phone it in.

Nick picked me up again next dance.

He said, shuffling off, "That was him all right who danced with her. They found a freshly made impression still on her hand, a little offside from the first, which was almost entirely obliterated by then. Meaning the second had been made after death, and therefore stayed uneffaced, just like a pinhole won't close up in the skin after death. They made an impression of it with moulage, my lieutenant just tells me. Then they filled that up with wax, photographed it through a magnifying lens, and now we know what kind of a ring he's wearing. A seal ring shaped like a shield, with two little jewel splinters, one in the upper right-hand corner, the other in the lower left."

"Any initials on it?" I gaped, awestricken.

"Nope, but something just as good. He can't get it off, unless he has a jeweler or locksmith file it off, and he'll be afraid to do that now. The fact that it would press so deeply into her hand proves that he can't get it off, the flesh of his finger has grown around it; otherwise it would have had a little give to it, the pressure would have shifted the head of it around a little."

He stepped all over my foot, summed up, "So we know how he dances, know what his favorite song is, 'Poor Butterfly,' know what kind of a ring he's wearing. And we know he'll be back sooner or later."

That was all well and good, but I had my own health to look out for; the way my foot was throbbing! I hinted gently as I could. "You can't do very much watching out for him, can you, if you keep dancing around like this?"

"Maybe you think I can't. And if I just stand there with my back to the wall it's a dead giveaway. He'd smell me a mile

away and duck out again. Keep it quiet what I'm doing here, don't pass it around. Your boss knows, of course, but it's to his interest to cooperate. A screwball like that can put an awful dent in his receipts."

"You're talking to the original sphinx," I assured him. "I don't pal with the rest of these twists anyway. Julie was the only one I was ever chummy with."

When the session closed and I came downstairs to the street, Nick was hanging around down there with the other lizards. He came over to me and took my arm and steered me off like he owned me. "What's this?" I said.

He said, "This is just part of the act, make it look like the McCoy."

"Are you sure?" I said to myself, and I winked to myself without him seeing me.

All the other nights from then on were just a carbon copy of that one, and they started piling up by sevens. Seven, fourteen, twenty-one. Pretty soon it was a month since Julie Bennett had died. And not a clue as to who the killer was, where he was, what he looked like. Not a soul had noticed him that night at Joyland, too heavy a crowd. Just having his prints on file was no good by itself.

She was gone from the papers long ago, and she was gone from the dressing-room chatter, too, after a while, as forgotten as though she'd never lived. Only me, I remembered her, because she'd been my pal. And Nick Ballestier, he did because that was his job. I suppose Mom Henderson did, too, because she had a morbid mind and loved to linger on gory murders. But outside of us three, nobody cared.

They did it the wrong way around, Nick's superiors at homicide, I mean. I didn't try to tell him that, because he would have laughed at me. He would have said, "Sure! A dance-mill pony knows more about running the police department than the commissioner does himself! Why don't you go down there and show 'em how to do it?"

But what I mean is, the dance mills didn't need all that watching in the beginning, the first few weeks after it happened, like they gave them. Maniac or not, anyone would have known he wouldn't show up *that* soon after. They needn't have bothered detailing anyone at all to watch the first few weeks. He was lying low then. It was only after a month or so that they should have begun watching real closely for him. Instead they did it just the reverse. For a whole month Nick was there nightly. Then after that he just looked in occasionally, every second night or so, without staying through the whole session.

Then finally I tumbled that he'd been taken off the case entirely and was just coming for—er, the atmosphere. I put it up to him unexpectedly one night. "Are you still supposed to come around here like this?" He got all red, admitted, "Naw, we were all taken off this duty long ago. I—er, guess I can't quit because I'm in the habit now or something."

"Oh, yeah?" I said to myself knowingly. I wouldn't have minded that so much, only his dancing didn't get any better, and the wear and tear on me was something awful. It was like trying to steer a steamroller around the place.

"Nick," I finally pleaded one night, when he pinned me down with one of his size twelves and then tried to push me out from under with the rest of him, "be a detective all over the place, only please don't ask me to dance anymore, I can't take it."

He looked innocently surprised. "Am I that bad?"

I tried to cover up with a smile at him. He'd been damn nice to me even if he couldn't dance.

When he didn't show up at all the next night, I thought maybe I'd gone a little too far, offended him maybe. But the big hulk hadn't looked like the kind that was sensitive about his dancing, or anything else for that matter. I brought myself up short with a swift, imaginary kick in the pants at this point. What the heck's the matter with *you?* I said to myself. You going soft? Didn't I tell you never to do that!

And I reached for the nearest ticket, and tore it, and I goona-gooed with a, “Grab yourself an armful, mister, it’s your dime.”

I got through that night somehow but I had that same spooky feeling the next night like I’d had *that* night—like tonight was going to be a bad night. Whenever I got that spooky feeling, it turns out to be a bad night all right. I tried to tell myself it was because Nick wasn’t around. I’d got used to him, that was all, and now he’d quit coming, and the hell with it. But the feeling wouldn’t go away. Like something was going to happen before the night was over. Something bad.

Mom Henderson was sitting in there reading tomorrow morning’s tab. “There hasn’t been any good juicy murders lately,” she mourned over the top of it. “Damn it, I like a good murder y’can get your teeth into wanst in a while!”

“Ah, dry up, you ghoul!” I snapped. I took off my shoes and dumped powder into them, put them on again. Marino came and knocked on the door. “Outside, freaks! What do I pay you for anyway?”

Someone jeered, “I often wonder!” and Duke, the front man, started to gliss over the coffin, and we all came out single file, me last, to a fate worse than death.

I didn’t look up at the first buyer, just stared blindly at a triangle of shirtfront level with my eyes. It kept on like that for a while; always that same triangle of shirtfront. Mostly white, but sometimes blue, and once it was lavender, and I wondered if I ought to lead. The pattern of the tie across it kept changing too, but that was all.

Butchers and barbers and rats from the harbors
Are the sweethearts my good luck has brought me.

“Why so downcast, Beautiful?”

“If you were standing where I am, looking where you are, you’d be downcast too.”

That took care of him. And then the stretch.

Duke went into a waltz, and something jarred for a minute. My timetable. This should have been a gut bucket (low-down swing music) and it wasn't. He'd switched numbers on me, that's what it was. Maybe a request. For waltzes they killed the pash lights and turned on a blue circuit instead, made the place cool and dim with those flecks of silver from the mirror-top raining down.

I'd had this white shirt triangle with the diamond pattern before; I remembered the knitted tie, with one tier unraveled on the end. I didn't want to see the face, too much trouble to look up. I hummed the piece mentally, to give my blank mind something to do. Then words seemed to drop into it, fit themselves to it, of their own accord, without my trying, so they must have belonged to it. "Poor butterfly by the blossoms waiting."

My hand ached, he was holding it so darned funny. I squirmed it, tried to ease it, and he held on all the tighter. He had it bent down and back on itself . . .

"The moments pass into hours . . ."

Gee, if there's one thing I hate it's a guy with a ring that holds your mitt in a straitjacket! And he didn't know the first thing about waltzing. Three funny little hops to the right, over and over and over. It was getting my nerves on edge. "If you're gonna jump, jump!" Julie's voice came back to me from long ago. She'd run into the same kind of a . . .

"I just must die, poor butterfly!"

Suddenly I was starting to get a little scared and a whole lot excited.

I kept saying to myself, Don't look up at him, you'll give yourself away. I kept my eyes on the knitted tie that had one tier unraveled. The lights went white and the stretch came on. We separated, he turned his back on me and I turned mine on him. We walked away from each other without a word. They don't thank you, they're paying for it.

I counted five and then I looked back over my shoulder, to try to see what he was like. He looked back at me at the same time, and we met each other's looks. I managed to slap on a smile, as though I'd only looked back because he'd made a hit with me, and that I hoped he'd come around again.

There was nothing wrong with his face, not just to look at anyway. It was no worse than any of the others around. He was about forty, maybe forty-five, hair still dark. Eyes speculative, nothing else, as they met mine. But he didn't answer my fake smile, maybe he could see through it. We both turned away again and went about our business.

I looked down at my hand, to see what made it hurt so. Careful not to raise it, careful not to bend my head, in case he was still watching. Just dropped my eyes to it. There was a red bruise the size of si small strawberry on it, from where his ring had pressed into it the whole time. I knew enough not to go near the box. I caught Duke's eye from where I was and hitched my head at him, and we got together sort of casually over along the wall.

"What'd you play "Poor Butterfly' for that last time?" I asked.

"Request number," he said.

I said, "Don't point, and don't look around, but whose request was it?"

He didn't have to. "The guy that was with you the last two times. Why?" I didn't answer, so then he said, "I get it." He didn't at all. "All right, chiseler," he said, and handed me two dollars and a half, splitting a fiver the guy had slipped him to play it. Duke thought I was after a kickback.

I took it. It was no good to tell him. What could he do? Nick Ballestier was the one to tell. I broke one of the singles at the orangeade concession—for nickels. Then I started to work my way over toward the phone, slow and aimless. I was within a yard of it when the cats started up again!

And suddenly *he* was right next to me, he must have been behind me the whole time.

“Were you going any place?” he asked.

I thought I saw his eyes flick to the phone, but I wasn’t positive. One thing sure, there wasn’t speculation in them any more, there was—decision.

“No place,” I said meekly. “I’m at your disposal,” I thought, If I can only hold him here long enough, maybe Nick’ll show up.

Then just as we got to the ropes, he said, “Let’s skip this. Let’s go out to a laundry and sit a while.”

I said, smooth on the surface, panic-stricken underneath, “But I’ve already tom your ticket, don’t you want to finish this one out at least?” And tried to goona-goo him for all I was worth, but it wouldn’t take. He turned around and flagged Marino, to get his okay.

His back was to me, and across his shoulder I kept shaking my head, more and more violently, to Marino—no, no, I don’t want to go with him. Marino just ignored me. It meant more money in his pocket this way.

When I saw that the deal was going through, I turned like a streak, made the phone, got my buffalo in it. It was no good trying to tell Marino, he wouldn’t believe me, he’d think I was just making it up to get out of going out with the guy. Or if I raised the alarm on my own, he’d simply duck down the stairs before anyone could stop him and vanish again. Nick was the only one to tell, Nick was the only one who’d know how to nail him here.

I said, “Police headquarters, quick! Quick!” and turned and looked over across the barn. But Marino was already alone out there. I couldn’t see where the guy had gone, they were milling around so, looking over their prospects for the next one.

A voice came on and I said, “Is Nick Ballestier there? Hurry up, get him for me.”

Meanwhile Duke had started to break it down again; real corny. It must have carried over the open wire. I happened to raise my eyes, and there was a shadow on the wall in front of me, coming across my shoulders from behind me. I didn't move, held steady, listening.

I said, "All right, Peggy, I just wanted to know when you're gonna pay me back that five bucks you owe me," and I killed it.

Would he get it when they told him? They'd say, "A girl's voice asked for you, Nick, from somewhere where there was music going on, and we couldn't make any sense out of what she said, and she hung up without waking." A pretty slim thread to hold all your chances on.

I stood there afraid to turn. His voice said stonily, "Get your things, let's go. Suppose you don't bother any more tonight about your five dollars." There was a hidden meaning, a warning, in it.

There was no window in the dressing room, no other way out but the way I'd come in, and he was right there outside the door. I poked around all I could, mourning, Why don't Nick come? and, boy, I was scared. A crowd all around me and no one to help me. He wouldn't stay; the only way to hang onto him for Nick was to go with him and pray for luck. I kept casing him through the crack of the door every minute or so. I didn't think he saw me, but he must have. Suddenly his heel scuffed at it brutally, and made me jump about an inch off the floor.

"Quit playing peek-a-boo, I'm waiting out here!" he called in sourly.

I grabbed up Mom Henderson's tab and scrawled across it in lipstick; "Nick: He's taking me with him, and I don't know where to. Look for my ticket stubs. Ginger."

Then I scooped up all the half tickets I'd accumulated all night long and shoved them loose into the pocket of my coat; then I came sidling out to him. I thought I heard the phone on the wall starting to ring, but the music was so

loud I couldn't be sure. We went downstairs and out on the street.

A block away I said, "There's a joint. We all go there a lot from our place," and pointed to Chan's. He said, "Shut up!" I dropped one of the dance checks on the sidewalk. Then I began making a regular trail of them.

The neon lights started to get fewer and fewer, and pretty soon we were in a network of dark lonely side streets. My pocket was nearly empty now of tickets. My luck was he didn't take a cab. He didn't want anyone to remember the two of us together, I guess.

I pleaded, "Don't make me walk anymore, I'm awfully tired."

He said, "We're nearly there, it's right ahead." The sign on the next comer up fooled me; there was a chop-suey joint, there, only a second-class laundry, but I thought that was where we were going.

But in between us and it there was a long dismal block, with tumbledown houses and vacant lots on it. And I'd run out of dance checks. All my take gone, just to keep alive. He must have worked out the whole setup carefully ahead of time, known I'd fall for that sign in the distance that we *weren't* going to.

Sure, I could have screamed out at any given step of the way, collected a crowd around us. But you don't understand. Much as I wanted to get away from him, there was one thing I wanted even more: to hold him for Nick. I didn't just want him to slip away into the night, and then do it all over again at some future date. And that's what would happen if I raised a row. They wouldn't believe me in a pinch, they'd think it was some kind of shakedown on my part. He'd talk himself out of it or scram before a cop came.

You have to live at night like I did to know the real callousness of passersby on the street, how seldom they'll horn in, lift a finger to help you. Even a harness cop

wouldn’t be much good, would only weigh my story against his, end up by sending us both about our business.

Maybe the thought came to me because I spotted a cop ahead just then, loitering toward us. I could hardly make him out in the gloom, but the slow steady walk told me. I didn’t really think I was going to do it until we came abreast of him.

The three of us met in front of a boarded-up condemned house. Then, as though I saw my last chance slipping away —because Nick couldn’t bridge the gap between me and the last of the dance checks anymore, it was too wide—I stopped dead.

I began in a low tense voice, “Officer, this man here—”

Julie’s murderer had involuntarily gone on a step without me. That put him to the rear of the cop. The whole thing was so sudden, it must have been one of those knives that shot out of their own hilts. The cop’s eyes rolled, I could see them white in the darkness, and he coughed right in my face, warm, and he started to come down on top of me, slow and lazy. I sidestepped and he fell with a soft thud and rocked a couple of times with his own fall and then lay still.

But the knife was already out of him long ago, and its point was touching my side. And where the cop had been a second ago, *he* was now. We were alone together again.

He said in a cold, unexcited voice, “Go ahead, scream, and I’ll give it to you right across him.”

I didn’t, I just pulled in all my breath.

He said, “Go ahead, down there,” and steered me with his knife down a pair of steps into the dark areaway of the boarded-up house it had happened in front of. “Stand there, and if you make a sound—you know what I told you.” Then he did something to the cop with his feet, and the cop came rolling down into the areaway after me.

I shrank back and my back was against the boarded-up basement door. It moved a little behind me. I thought, This must be where he’s taking me. If it is, then it’s open. I

couldn’t get out past him, but maybe I could get *in* away from him.

I turned and clawed at the door, and the whole framed barrier swung out a little, enough to squeeze in through. He must have been hiding out in here, coming and going through here, all these weeks. No wonder they hadn’t found him.

The real basement door behind it had been taken down out of the way. He’d seen what I was up to, and he was already wriggling through the gap after me. I was stumbling down a pitch-black hallway by then.

I found stairs going up by falling down on top of them full length. I sobbed, squirmed up the first few on hands and knees, straightened up as I went.

He stopped to light a match. I didn’t have any, but his helped me too, showed me the outline of things. I was on the first-floor hall now, flitting down it. I didn’t want to go up too high—he’d only seal me in some dead end up there—but I couldn’t stand still down here.

A broken-down chair grazed the side of my leg as I went by, and I turned, swung it up bodily, went back a step and pitched it down over the stairwell on top of him. I don’t know if it hurt him at all but his match went out.

He said a funny thing then. “You always had a temper, Muriel.”

I didn’t stand there listening. I’d seen an opening in the wall farther ahead, before the match went out. Just a blackness. I dived through it and all the way across with swimming motions, until I hit a jutting mantel slab over some kind of fireplace. I crouched down and tucked myself in under it. It was one of those huge old-fashioned ones. I groped over my head and felt an opening there, lined with rough brickwork and furry with cobwebs, but it wasn’t wide enough to climb up through. I squeezed into a corner of the fireplace and prayed he wouldn’t spot me.

He'd lit another match, and it came into the room after me, but I could only see his legs from the fireplace opening, it cut him off at the waist. I wondered if he could see me; he didn't come near where I was.

The light got a little stronger, and he'd lit a candle stump. But still his legs didn't come over to me, didn't bend down, or show his face peering in at me. His legs just kept moving to and fro around the room. It was awfully hard, after all that running, to keep my breath down.

Finally he said out loud, "Chilly in here," and I could hear him rattling newspapers, getting them together. It didn't sink in for a minute what was going to happen next. I thought. Has he forgotten me? Is he that crazy? Am I going to get away with it? But there'd been a malicious snicker in his remark; he was crazy like a fox.

Suddenly his legs came over straight to me; without bending down to look, he was stuffing the papers in beside me. I couldn't see out anymore past them. I heard the scrape of a match against the floorboards. Then there was the momentary silence of combustion. I was sick, I wanted to die quick, but I didn't want to die that way. There was the hum of rising flame, and a brightness just before me, the papers all turned gold. I thought, Oh, Nick! Nick! Here I go!

I came plunging out, scattering sparks and burning newspapers.

He said, smiling, pleased with himself, casual, "Hello, Muriel. I thought you didn't have any more use for me? What are you doing in my house?" He still had the knife—with the cop's blood on it.

I said, "I'm not Muriel, I'm Ginger Allen from the Joyland. Oh, mister, please let me get out of here, please let me go!" I was so scared and so sick I went slowly to my knees. "Please!" I cried up at him.

He said, still in that casual way, "Oh, so you're not Muriel? You didn't marry me the night before I embarked for France, thinking I'd be killed, that you'd never see me

again, that you'd get my soldier's pension?" And then getting a little more vicious, "But I fooled you, I was shell-shocked but I didn't die. I came back even if it was on a stretcher. And what did I find? You hadn't even waited to find out! You'd married another guy and you were both living on my pay. You tried to make it up to me, though, didn't you, Muriel? Sure; you visited me in the hospital, bringing me jelly. The man in the next cot died from eating it. Muriel, I've looked for you high and low ever since, and now I've found you."

He moved backward, knife still in hand, and stood aside, and there was an old battered relic of a phonograph standing there on an empty packing case. It had a great big horn to it, to give it volume. He must have picked it up off some ash heap, repaired it himself. He released the catch and cranked it up a couple of times and laid the needle into the groove.

"We're going to dance, Muriel, like we did that night when I was in my khaki uniform and you were so pretty to look at. But it's going to have a different ending this time."

He came back toward me. I was still huddled there, shivering. "No!" I moaned. "Not me! You killed her, you killed her over and over again. Only last month, don't you remember?"

He said with pitiful simplicity, like the tortured thing he was, "Each time I think I have, she rises up again." He dragged me to my feet and caught me to him, and the arm with the knife went around me, and the knife pressed into my side.

The horrid thing over there was blaring into the emptiness, loud enough to be heard out on the street: "Poor Butterfly." It was horrible, it was ghastly.

And in the candle-lit pallor, with great shadows of us looming on the wall, like two crazed things we started to go round and round. I couldn't hold my head up on my neck; it hung way back over my shoulders like an overripe apple.

My hair got loose and went streaming out as he pulled me and turned me and dragged me around . . .

"I just must die, poor butterfly!"

Still holding me to him, he reached in his pocket and brought out a palmful of shiny dimes, and flung them in my face.

Then a shot went off outside in front of the house. It sounded like right in the areaway where the knifed cop was. Then five more in quick succession. The blare of the music must have brought the stabbed cop to. He must've got help.

He turned his head toward the boarded-up windows to listen. I tore myself out of his embrace, stumbled backward, and the knife point seemed to leave a long circular scratch around my side, but he didn't jam it in in time, let it trail off me.

I got out into the hall before he could grab me again, and the rest of it was just kind of a flight nightmare. I don't remember going down the stairs to the basement; I think I must have fallen down them without hurting myself—just like a drunk does.

Down there a headlight came at me from the tunneliike passage. It must have been just a pocket torch, but it got bigger and bigger, then went hurtling on by. Behind it a long succession of serge-clothed figures brushed by me.

I kept trying to stop each one, saying, "Where's Nick? Are you Nick?"

Then a shot sounded upstairs. I heard a terrible death cry. "Muriel!" and that was all.

When I next heard anything it was Nick's voice. His arm was around me and he was kissing the cobwebs and tears off my face. "How's Ginger?" he asked.

"Fine," I said, "and how's Nick?"

DEATH BETWEEN DANCES

Every Saturday night you'd see them together at the country-club dance. Together, and yet far apart. One sitting back against the wall, never moving from there, never once getting up to dance the whole evening long. The other swirling about the floor, passing from partner to partner, never still a moment.

The two daughters of Walter Brainard (widower, 52, stocks and bonds, shoots 72 at golf, charter member of the country club).

Nobody seeing them for the first time ever took them for sisters. It wasn't only the difference in their ages, though that was great enough and seemed even greater than it actually was. There was about twelve years' difference between them, and fifty in outlook.

Even their names were peculiarly appropriate. Jane, as plain as her name, sitting there against the wall, dark hair drawn severely back from her forehead, watching the festivities through heavy-rimmed glasses that gave her an expression of owlish inscrutability. And Sunny, dandelion-colored hair, blue eyes, a dancing sunbeam, glinting around the floor, no one boy ever able to hold her for very long (you can't make sunbeams stay in one place if they don't want to). Although Tom Reed, until just recently, had had better luck at it than the rest. But the last couple of Saturday nights he seemed to be slipping or something; he'd become just one of the second-stringers again.

Sunny was usually in pink, one shade of it or another. She favored pink; it was her color. She reminded you of pink spun-sugar candy. Because it's so good, and so sweet, and so harmless. But it also melts so easily . . .

One of them had a history, one hadn't. Well, at eighteen you can't be expected to have a history yet. You can make one for yourself if you set out to, but you haven't got it yet. And as for the history—Jane's—it wasn't strictly that, either, because history is hard-and-fast facts, and this was more of a formless thing, a whispered rumor, a half forgotten legend. It had never lived, but it had never died either.

Some sort of blasting infatuation that had come along and changed her from what she'd been then, at eighteen—the darling of the dance floors, as her sister was now—into what she was now: a wallflower, an onlooker who didn't take part. She'd gone away for a while around that time, and then she'd suddenly been back again.

From the time she'd come back, she'd been as she was now. That was all that was definitely known—the rest was pure surmise. Nobody had ever found out exactly who the man was. It was generally agreed that it wasn't anyone from around here. Some said there had been a quiet annulment. Some—more viperishly—said there hadn't been anything to annul.

One thing was certain. She was a wallflower by choice and not by compulsion. As far back as people could remember, anyone who had ever asked her to dance received only a shake of her head. They stopped asking, finally. She wanted to be left alone, so she was. Maybe, it was suggested, she had first met him, whoever he was, while dancing, and that was why she had no use for dancing any more. Then in that case, others wondered, why did she come so regularly to the country club? To this there were a variety of answers, none of them wholly satisfactory.

"Maybe," some shrugged, "it's because her father's a charter member of the club—she thinks it's her duty to be

present.”

“Maybe,” others said, “she sees ghosts on the dance floor—sees someone there that the rest of us can’t see.”

“And maybe,” still others suggested, but not very seriously, “she’s waiting for him to come back to her—thinks he’ll suddenly show up sometime in the Saturday-night crowd and come over to her and claim her. That’s why she won’t dance with anyone else.”

But the owlish glasses gave no hint of what was lurking behind them; whether hope or resignation, love or indifference or hate.

At exactly 9:45 this Saturday, this Washington’s Birthday Saturday, tonight, the dance is on full-blast; the band is playing an oldie, “The Object of My Affections,” Number Twenty in the leader’s book. And Jane is sitting back against the wall. Sunny is twinkling about on the floor, this time in the arms of Tom Reed, the boy who loved her all through high school, the man who still does, now, at this very moment—

She stopped short, right in the middle of the number, detached his arm from her waist, and stepped back from its half embrace. “Wait here, Tom. I just remembered. I have to make a phone call.”

“I no sooner get you than I lose you again.”

But she’d already turned and was moving away from him, looking back over her shoulder now.

He tried to follow her. She laughed and held him back. A momentary flattening of her hands against his shirtfront was enough to do that. ‘“No, you can’t come with me. Oh, don’t look so dubious. It’s just to Martha, back at our house. Something I forgot to tell her when we left. You wouldn’t be interested.”

“But we’ll lose this dance.”

“I’ll give you—I’ll give you one later, to make up for it,” she promised. “I’ll foreclose on somebody else’s.” She gave him a smile, and even a little wink, and that held him. “Now, be a good boy and stay in here.”

She made sure that he was standing still first. It was like leaving a lifesize toy propped up—you wait a second to make sure it won’t fall over. Then she turned and went out into the foyer.

She looked back at him from there, once more. He was standing obediently stock-still in the middle of the dance floor like an ownerless pup, everyone else circling around him. She raised a cautioning index finger, shook it at him. Then she whisked from sight.

She went over to the checkroom cubbyhole.

“Will you let me have that now, Marie.”

“Leaving already, Miss Brainard?” The girl raised a small overnight case from the floor—it hadn’t been placed on the shelves, where it might have been seen and recognized—and passed it to her.

Sunny handed her something. “You haven’t seen me go, though.”

“I understand, Miss Brainard,” the girl said.

She hurried out of the club with it. She went over to where the cars were parked, found a small coffee-colored roadster, and put the case on the front seat.

Then she got in after it and drove off.

The clubhouse lights receded in the indigo February darkness. The music got fainter, and then you couldn’t hear it any more. It stayed on in her mind, though: still playing, like an echo.

“The object of my affection
Can change my complexion
From white to rosy-red—”

The car purred along the road. She looked very lovely, and a little wild, her uncovered hair streaming backward in the wind. The stars up above seemed to be winking at her, as though she and they shared the same conspiracy.

After a while she took one hand from the wheel and fumbled in the glittering little drawstring bag dangling from her wrist.

She took out a very crumpled note, its envelope gone. The note looked as though it had been hastily crushed and thrust away to protect if from discovery immediately after first being received.

She smoothed it out now as best she could and reread it carefully by the dashboard light. A part of it, anyway.

"—There's a short cut that'll bring you to me even quicker, darling. No one knows of it but me, and now I'm sharing it with you. It will keep you from taking the long way around, on the main road, and risk being seen by anyone. Just before you come to that lighted filling station at the intersection, turn off, sharp left. Even though there doesn't seem to be anything there, keep going, don't be frightened. You'll pick up a back lane, and that'll bring you safely to me. I'll be counting the minutes—"

She pressed it to her lips, the crumpled paper, and kissed it fervently. Love is a master alchemist: it can turn base things to gold.

She put it back in her bag. The stars were still with her, winking. The music was still with her, playing for her alone.

"Every time he holds my hand
And tells me that he's mine."

Just before she came to that lighted filling station at the intersection, she swung the wheel and turned off sharp left into gritty nothingness that rocked and swayed the car.

Her headlights picked up a screen of trees and she went around to the back of them. She found a disused dirt lane there—as love had promised her she would—and clung to it over rises and hollows, and through shrubbery that hissed at her.

And then at last a little rustic lodge. A hidden secret place. Cheerful amber light streaming out to welcome her. Another car already there, offside in the darkness—his.

She braked in front of it. She took out her mirror, and by the dashboard light she smoothed her hair and touched a golden tube of lipstick lightly to her mouth. Very lightly, for there would be kisses that would take it away again soon.

She tapped the horn, just once.

Then she waited for him to come out to her.

The stars kept winking up above the pointed fir trees. Their humor was a little crueler now, as though someone were the butt of it. And in the lake that glistened like dark-blue patent leather down the other way, their winking still went on, upside down in the water.

She tapped her horn again, more heavily this time, twice in quick succession.

He didn't come out. The yellow thread outlining the lodge-door remained as it was; it grew no wider.

An owl hooted somewhere in the trees, but she wasn't afraid. She'd only just learned what love was; how should she have had time to learn what fear was?

She opened the car door abruptly and got out. Her footfalls crunched on the sandy ground that sloped down from here all the way to the lake. Silly, fragile sandals meant for the dance floor, their spike heels pecking into the crusty frosty ground.

She went up onto the plank porch, and there they sounded hollow. She knocked on the door, and that sounded hollow too. Like when you knock on an empty shell of something.

The door moved at last, but it was her own knock that had done it; it was unfastened. The yellow thread widened.

She pushed it back, and warmth and brightness gushed out, the night was driven to a distance.

“Hoo-hoo,” she called softly. “You have a caller. There’s a young lady at your door, to see you.”

A fire was blazing in the natural-stone fireplace, gilding the walls and coppering the ceiling with its restless tides of reflection. There was a table, all set and readied for two. The feast of love. Yellow candles were twinkling on it; their flames had flattened for a moment, now they straightened again as she came in and closed the door behind her.

Flowers were on it in profusion, and sparkling, spindly-stemmed glasses. And under it there was a gilt ice pail, with a pair of gold-capped bottles protruding from it at different angles.

And on the wooden peg projecting from the wall, his hat and coat were hanging. With that scarf she knew so well dangling carelessly from one of the pockets.

She laughed a little, mischievously.

As she passed the table, on her way deeper into the long room, she helped herself to a salted almond, crunched it between her teeth. She laughed again, like a little girl about to tease somebody. Then she picked up a handful of almonds and began throwing them one by one against the closed bedroom-door, the way you throw gravel against a windowpane to attract someone’s attention behind it.

Each one went *tick!* and fell to the floor.

At last, when she’d used up all the almonds, she gave vent to a deep breath of exasperation, that was really only pretended exasperation, and stepped directly up to it and knocked briskly.

“Are you asleep in there, or what?” she demanded. “Is this any way to receive your intended? After I come all the way up here—”

Silence.

A log in the fire cracked sharply. One of the gilt-topped bottles slumped lower in the pail, the ice supporting it crumbling.

"I'm coming in there, ready or not."

She flung the door open.

He was asleep. But in a distorted way, as she'd never yet seen anyone sleep. On the floor alongside the bed, with his face turned upward to the ceiling, and one arm flung over his eyes protectively.

Then she saw the blood. Stilled, no longer flowing. Not very old, but not new either.

She ran to him, for a second only, tried to raise him, tried to rouse him. And all she got was soddenness. Then after that, she couldn't touch him any more, couldn't go near him again. It wasn't him any more. He'd gone, and left this—this *thing*—behind him. This awful thing that didn't even talk to you, take you in its arms, hold you to it.

She didn't scream. Death was too new to her. She barely knew what it was. She hadn't lived long enough.

She began to cry. Not because he was dead, but because she'd been cheated, she had no one to take her in his arms now. First heartbreak. First love. Those tears that never come more than once.

She was still kneeling there, near him.

Then she saw the gun lying there. Dark, ugly, dangerous-looking. His, but too far across the room for him to have used it himself. Even she, dimly, realized that. How could it get all the way over there, with him all the way over here?

She began crawling toward it on hands and knees.

Her hand went out toward it, hesitated, finally closed on it, picked it up. She knelt there, holding it between both hands, staring at it in fascinated horror—

"Drop that! Put it down!"

The voice was like a whip across her face, stinging in its suddenness, its lashing sharpness. Then leaving her quivering all over, as an aftermath.

Tom Reed was standing in the doorway like a tuxedoed phantom.

Bare-headed, coatless, just as he'd left the dance floor and run out after her into the cold of the February night.

"You fool," he breathed with soft, suppressed intensity. "You fool, oh you little fool!"

A single frightened whimper, like the mewing of a helpless kitten left out in the rain, sounded from her.

He went over to her, for she was crouched there incapable of movement; he raised her in his arms, caught her swiftly to him, turned her away with a gesture that was both rough and tender at the same time. The toe of his shoe edged deftly forward and the gun slithered out of her sight somewhere along the floor.

"I didn't do it!" she protested, terrified. "I didn't! Oh, Tom, I swear—"

"I know you didn't," he said almost impatiently. "I was right behind you coming up here. I would have heard the shot and I didn't." All she could say to that was, "Oh, Tom," with a shudder.

"Yes, 'oh, Tom,' after the damage is done. Why wasn't it 'oh, Tom' before that?" His words were a rebuke, his gestures a consolation that belied them. "I saw you leave and came right after you. Who did you think you were fooling, with your phone-call home? You blind little thing. I was too tame for you. You had to have excitement. Well, now you've got it." And all the while his hand stroked the sobbing golden-haired head against his shoulder. "You wanted to know life. You couldn't wait. Well, now you do. How do you like it?"

"Is this—?" she choked.

"This is what it *can* be like if you don't watch where you're going."

"I'll never—I'll never—oh, Tom, I'll never—"

"I know," he said. "They all say that. All the little, helpless purring things. After it's too late."

Her head came up suddenly, in renewed terror. “Oh, Tom, is it too late?”

“Not if I can get you back to that dance unnoticed—you’ve only been away about half an hour—” He drew his head back, still holding her in his arms, and looked at her intently. “Who was he?”

“I met him last summer when I was away. All of a sudden he showed up here. I never expected him to. He’s only been here a few days. I lost my head, I guess—”

“How is it nobody ever saw him around here, even the few days you say he’s been here? Why did he make himself so inconspicuous?”

“He wanted it that way, and I don’t know—I guess to me it seemed more romantic.”

He murmured something under his breath that sounded like, “Sure, at eighteen it would.” Then aloud, and quite bitterly, he said, “What was he hiding from? Who was he hiding from?”

“He was going to—we were going to be married,” she said.

“You wouldn’t have been married,” he told her with quiet scorn.

She looked at him aghast.

“Oh, there would have been a ceremony, I suppose. For how long? A week or two, a month. And then you’d come creeping back alone. The kind that does his courting under cover doesn’t stick to you for long.”

“How do you know?” she said, crushed.

“Ask your sister Jane sometime. They say she found that out once, long ago. And look at her now. Embittered for all the rest of her life. Eaten up with hate—”

He changed the subject abruptly. He tipped up her chin and looked searchingly at her. “Are you all right now? Will you do just as I tell you? Will you be able to—go through with this, carry it off?”

She nodded. Her lips formed the words, barely audible, “If you stay with me.”

“I’m with you. I was never so with you before.”

With an arm about her waist, he led her over toward the door. As they reached and passed it, her head stirred slightly on his shoulder. He guessed its intent, quickly forestalled it with a quieting touch of his hand.

“Don’t look at him. Don’t look back. *He isn’t there. You were never here either.* Those are the two things you have to keep saying to yourself. We’ve all had bad dreams at times, and this was yours. Now wait here outside the door a minute. I’ve got things to do. Don’t watch me.”

He left her and went back into the room again.

After a moment or two she couldn’t resist: the horrid fascination was too strong, it was almost like a hypnotic compulsion. She crept back to the threshold, peered around the edge of the door-frame into the room beyond, and watched with bated breath what he was doing.

He went after the gun first. Got it back from where he’d kicked it. Picked it up and looked it over with painstaking care. He interrupted himself once to glance down at the form lying on the floor, and by some strange telepathy she knew that something about the gun had told him it belonged to the dead man, that it hadn’t been brought in from outside. Perhaps something about its type or size that she would not have understood; she didn’t know anything about guns.

Then she saw him break it open and do something to it with deft fingers, twist or spin something. A cartridge fell out into the palm of his hand. He stood that aside for a minute, upright on the edge of the dresser. Then he closed up the gun again. He took out his own handkerchief and rubbed the gun thoroughly all over with it.

Each time she thought he was through, he’d blow his breath on it and steam it up, and then rub it some more. He even pulled the whole length of the handkerchief through

the little guard where the trigger was, and made that click emptily a couple of times.

He worked fast but he worked calmly, without undue excitement, keeping his presence of mind.

Finally he wrapped the handkerchief in its entirety around the butt so that his own bare hand didn't touch it. Holding it in that way, he knelt down by the man. He took the hand, took it by the very ends, by the fingers, and closed them around the gun, first subtracting the handkerchief. He pressed the fingers down on it, pressed them hard and repeatedly, the way you do when you want to take an impression of something.

Then he fitted them carefully around it in a grasping position; even pushed one, the index-finger, through that same trigger guard. He watched a minute to see if the gun would hold that way on its own, without his supporting hand around the outside of the other. It did; it dipped a little, but it stayed fast. Then very carefully he eased it, and the hand now holding it, back to the floor, left them there together.

Then he got up and went back to the cartridge. He saw her mystified little face peering in at him around the edge of the door.

"Don't watch, I told you," he rebuked her.

But she kept right on, and he went ahead without paying any further attention to her.

He took out a pocketknife and prodded away at the cartridge with it until he had it separated into two parts. Then he went back to the dead man and knelt down by him. What she saw him do next was sheer horror.

But she had only herself to blame; he'd warned her not to look.

He turned the head slightly, very carefully, until he'd revealed the small, dark, almost neat little hole, where the blood had originally come from.

He took one half of the dissected cartridge, tilted it right over it, and shook it gently back and forth. As though—as though he were salting the wound from a small shaker. Her hands flew to her mouth to stifle the gasp this tore from her.

He thrust the pieces of cartridge into his pocket, both of them. Then he struck a match. He held it for a moment to let the flame steady itself and shrink a little. Then he gave it a quick dab at the gunpowdered wound and then back again.

There was a tiny flash from the wound. For an instant it seemed to ignite. Then it went right out again. A slightly increased blackness remained around the wound now; he'd charred it. This time a sick moan escaped through her suppressing hands. She turned away at last.

When he came out he found her at the far end of the outside room with her back to him. She was twitching slightly, as though she'd just recovered from a nervous chill.

She couldn't bring herself to ask the question, but he could read it in her eyes when she turned to stare at him.

"The gun was his own, or the user wouldn't have left it behind. I had to do that other thing. A gun suicide's always a contact wound. They press it hard against themselves. And with a contact wound there are always powder burns."

Then he said with strange certainty, "A woman did it."

"How do you—?"

"I found this in there with him. There must have been tears at first, and then later she dropped it when she picked up the gun."

He handed it to her. There wasn't anything distinctive about it—just a gauzy handkerchief. No monogram, no design. It could have been anyone's, anyone in a million. A faint fragrance reached her, invisible as a finespun wire but just as tenuous and for a moment she wondered at the scent.

Like lilacs in the rain.

“I couldn’t leave it in there,” he explained, “because it doesn’t match the setup as I’ve arranged it. It would have shown that somebody was in there, after all.” He smiled grimly. “I’m doing somebody a big favor, a much bigger favor than she deserves. But I’m not doing it for her, I’m doing it for you, to keep even a whisper of your name from being brought into it.”

Absently she thrust the wisp of stuff into her own evening bag, where she carried her own, drew the drawstring tight once more.

“Get rid of it,” he advised. “You can do that easier than I can. But not anywhere around here, whatever you do.”

He glanced back toward the inside room. “What else did you touch in there—besides the gun?”

She shook her head. “I just stepped in and—you found me.”

“You touched the door?”

She nodded.

He whipped out his handkerchief again, crouched low on one knee, and like a strange sort of porter in a dinner jacket scoured the doorknobs on both sides, in and out.

“What about these? Did you do that?” There were some almonds lying on the floor.

“I threw them at the door, like pebbles—to attract his attention.”

“A man about to do what he did wouldn’t munch almonds.” He picked them up, all but one which had already been stepped on and crushed. “One won’t matter. He could have done that himself,” he told her. “Let me see your shoe.” He bent down and peered at the tilted sole. “It’s on there. Get rid of them altogether when you get home. Don’t just scrape it; they have ways of bringing out things like that.”

“What about the whole supper table itself? It’s for two.”

“That’ll have to stay. Whoever he was expecting didn’t come and in a fit of depression aging Romeo played his last

role, alone. That'll be the story it tells. At least it'll show that no one *did* come. If we disturb a perfect setup like that, we may prove the opposite to what we're trying to."

He put his arm about her. "Are you ready now? Come on, here we go. And remember: *you were never here*. *None of this ever happened.*"

A sweep of his hand behind his back, a swing of the door, and the light faded away—they were out in the starry blue night together. "Whose car is that?"

"My own. The roadster Daddy gave me. I had Rufus run it down to the club for me and leave it outside after we all left for the dance."

"Did he check it?"

"No, I told him not to."

He heaved a sigh of relief. "Good. We've got to get them both out of here. I'll get in mine. You'll have to get back into the one you brought, by yourself. I'll lead the way. Stick to my treads, so you don't leave too clear a print. It will probably snow again before they find him, and that'll save us."

He went on ahead to his own car, got in, and started the motor. Suddenly he left it warming up, jumped out again, and came back to her.

"Here," he said abruptly, "hang onto this until I can get you back down there again." And pressed his lips to hers with a sort of tender encouragement.

It was the strangest kiss she'd ever had. It was one of the most selfless, one of the nicest.

The two cars trundled away, one behind the other. After a little while the echo of their going drifted back from the lonely lake. And then there was just silence.

The lights and the music, like a warm friendly tide, came swirling around her again. He stopped her for a moment,

just outside the entrance, before they went in.

"Did anyone see you leave?"

"Only Marie, the check girl. The parking attendant didn't know about the car."

"Hand me your lipstick a minute," he ordered.

She got it out and gave it to him. He made a little smudge with it, on his own cheek, high up near the ear. Then another one farther down, closer to the mouth. Not too vivid, faint enough to be plausible, distinct enough to be seen.

He even thought of his tie, pulled it a little awry. He seemed to think of everything. Maybe that was because he was only thinking of one thing: of her.

He slung a proprietary arm about her waist. "Smile," he instructed her. "Laugh. Put *your* arm around *my* waist. Act as if you really cared for me. We're having a giddy time. We're just coming in from a session in a parked car outside."

The lights from the glittering dance floor went up over them like a slowly raised curtain. They strolled past the checkroom girl, arm over arm, faces turned to one another, prattling away like a pair of grammar-school kids, all taken up in one another. Sunny threw her head back and emitted a paean of frivolous laughter at something he was supposed to have said just then.

The check girl's eyes followed them with a sort of wistful envy.

It must be great, she thought, to be so carefree and have such a good time. Not a worry on your mind.

At the edge of the floor they stopped. He took her in his arms to lead her.

"Keep on smiling, you're doing great. We're going to dance. I'm going to take you once around the floor until we

get over to where your father and sister are. Wave to people, call out their names as we pass them. I want everyone to see you. Can you do it? Will you be all right?”

She took a deep, resolute breath. “If you want me to. Yes. I can do it.”

They went gliding out into the middle of the floor.

The band was back to Number Twenty in the books—the same song they had been playing when she left. It must have been a repeat by popular demand, it couldn’t have been going on the whole time, she’d been away too long. What a different meaning it had now.

“But instead I trust him implicitly
I’ll go where he wants to go,
Do what he wants to do, I don’t care—”

That sort of fitted Tom. That was for him—nobody else. Sturdy reliability. That was what you wanted, that was what you came back to, if you were foolish enough to stray from it in the first place. Sometimes you found that out too late—sometimes it took you a lifetime, it cost you your youth. Like what they said had happened to poor Jane ten or twelve years ago when she herself, Sunny, had been still a child.

But Sunny was lucky, she had found it out in time. It had only taken her—well, the interval between a pair of dance selections, played the same night, at the same club. It had only cost her—well, somebody else had paid the debt for her.

And so, it was back where it had begun. And as it had begun.

At exactly 10:55 this Saturday, this Washington’s Birthday Saturday, the dance is still on full-blast; the band is playing “The Object of My Affections,” Number Twenty in the leader’s book. Jane is sitting back against the wall. And Sunny is twinkling about on the floor, once more in the arms of Tom Reed, the boy who loved her all through high

school, the man who still does now at this very moment, the man who always will, through all the years ahead—

"Here are your people," he whispered warningly. "I'm going to turn you over to them now."

She glanced at them across his shoulder. They were sitting there, Jane and her father, so safe, so secure. Nothing ever happened to them. Less than an hour ago she would have felt sorry for them. Now she envied them.

She and Tom came to a neat halt in front of them.

"Daddy," she said quietly. And she hadn't called him that since she was fifteen. "Daddy, I want to go home now. Take me with you."

He chuckled. "You mean before they even finish playing down to the very last half note? I thought you never got tired dancing." "Sometimes I do," she admitted wistfully. "And I guess this is one of those times."

He turned to his other daughter. "How about you, Jane? Ready to go now?"

"I've been ready," she said, "ever since we first got here, almost." The father's eyes had rested for a moment on the telltale red traces on Tom's cheek. They twinkled quizzically, but he tactfully refrained from saying anything.

Not Jane. "Really, Sunny," she said disapprovingly. And then, curtly, to Tom: "Fix your cheek."

He went about it very cleverly, pretending he couldn't find it with his handkerchief for a minute. "Where? Here?"

"Higher up," said Jane. And this time Mr. Brainard smothered an indulgent little smile.

Sunny and Tom trailed them out to the entrance, when they got up to go. "Give me your spare garage key," he said in an undertone. "I'll run the roadster home as soon as you leave and put it away for you. I can get up there quicker with it than you will with the big car. I'll see that Rufus doesn't say anything; I'll tell him you and I were going to elope tonight and changed our minds at the last minute."

"He's always on my side anyway," she admitted.

He took a lingering leave of her by the hand.

“I have a question to ask you. But I’ll keep it until next Saturday. The same place? The same time?”

“I have the answer to give you. But I’ll keep that until next Saturday too. The same place. The same time.”

She got in the back seat with her father and sister, and they drove off.

“It’s beginning to snow,” Jane complained.

Thanks, murmured Sunny, unheard, *Thanks,* as the first few flakes came sifting down.

Jane bunched her shoulders defensively. “It gets too hot in there with all those people. And now it’s chilly in the car.” She stifled a sneeze, fumbled in her evening bag. “Now, what did I do with my handkerchief?”

“Here, I’ll give you mine,” offered Sunny, and heedlessly passed her something in the dark, out of her own bag.

A faint fragrance, invisible as a finespun wire but just as tenuous. Like lilacs in the rain.

Jane raised it toward her nose, held it there, suddenly arrested. “Why, this *is* mine! Don’t you recognize my sachet? Where’d you find it?”

Sunny didn’t answer. Something had suddenly clogged her throat. She recognized the scent now. Lilacs in the rain.

“Where did you find it?” Jane insisted.

“Hattie—Hattie turned it over to me in the ladies’ lounge. You must have lost it in there—”

“Why, I wasn’t—” Jane started to say. Then just as abruptly she didn’t go ahead.

Sunny knew what she’d been about to say. “I wasn’t in there once the whole evening.” Jane disliked the atmosphere of gossip that she imagined permeated the lounge, the looks that she imagined would be exchanged behind her back. Sunny hadn’t thought quickly enough. But it was too late now.

Jane was holding the handkerchief pressed tight to her mouth. Just holding it there.

Impulsively Sunny reached out, found Jane's hand in the dark, and clasped it warmly and tightly for a long moment.

It said so much, that warm clasp of hands, without a word being said. It said: I understand. We'll never speak of it, you and I. Not a word will ever pass my lips. And thank you, thank you for helping me as you have, though you may not know you did.

Presently, tremulously, a little answering pressure was returned by Jane's hand. There must have been unseen tears on her face, tears of gratitude, tears of release. She was dabbing at her eyes in the dark.

Their father, sitting comfortably and obliviously between them, spoke for the first time since the car had left the club.

"Well, another Saturday-night dance over and done with. They're all pretty much alike—once you've been to one, you've been to them all. Same old thing week in and week out. Music playing, people dancing. Nothing much ever happens. They get pretty monotonous. Sometimes I wonder why we bother going every week, the way we do."

THE MOON OF MONTEZUMA

This is a story you can never forget. It is a tale of terror, of murder in the night, of justice beyond the laws of man. The background is modern Mexico . . . yet its long-dead past, when the Aztecs ruled and Montezuma and Cuauhtemoc were as gods, pushes inexorably into the lives of a beautiful American girl and her infant son. There can be only one result . . .

The hired car was very old. The girl in it was very young.

They were both American. Which was strange here in this far-off place, this other world, as remote from things American as anywhere could be.

The car was a vintage model, made by some concern whose very name has been forgotten by now; a relic of the Teens or early Twenties, built high and squared-off at the top, like a box on wheels.

It crawled precariously to the top of the long, winding, sharply ascending rutted road—wheezing, gasping, threatening to slip backward at any moment, but never doing so; miraculously managing even to inch on up.

It stopped at last, opposite what seemed to be a blank, biscuit-colored wall. This had a thick door set into it, but no other openings. A skimpy tendril or two of bougainvillea, burningly mauve, crept downward over its top here and

there. There were cracks in the wall, and an occasional place where the plaster facing had fallen off to reveal the adobe underpart.

The girl peered out from the car. Her hair was blonde, her skin fair. She looked unreal in these surroundings of violent color; somehow completely out of key with them. She was extremely tired-looking; there were shadows under her blue eyes. She was holding a very young baby wrapped into-a little cone-shaped bundle in a blanket. A baby not more than a few weeks old. And beside the collar of her coat a rosebud was pinned. Scarcely opened, yet dying already. Red as a glowing coal. Or a drop of blood. She looked at the driver, then back to the blank wall again. “Is this where?”

He shrugged. He didn’t understand her language. He said something to her. A great deal of something.

She shook her head bewilderedly. His language was as mysterious to her. She consulted the piece of paper she was holding in her hand, then looked again at the place where they’d stopped. “But there’s no house here. There’s just a wall.”

He flicked the little pennant on his meter so that it sprang upright. Underneath it said “7.50”. She could read that, at least. He opened the creaking door, to show her what he meant. “Pay me, Señorita. I have to go all the way back to the town.”

She got out reluctantly, a forlorn, lost figure. “Wait here,” she said. “Wait for me until I find out.”

He understood the sense of her faltering gesture. He shook his head firmly. He became very voluble. He had to go back to where he belonged, he had no business being all the way out here. It would be dark soon. His was the only auto in the whole town.

She paid him, guessing at the unfamiliar money she still didn’t understand. When he stopped nodding, she stopped giving it to him. There was very little left—a paper bill or

two, a handful of coins. She reached in and dragged out a bulky bag and stood that on the ground beside her. Then she turned around and looked at the inscrutable wall.

The car turned creakily and went down the long, rutted road, back into the little town below.

She was left there, with child, with baggage, with a scrap of paper in her hand. She went over to the door in the wall, looked about for something to ring. There was a short length of rope hanging there against the side of the door. She tugged at it and a bell, the kind with hanging clapper, jangled loosely.

The child opened its eyes momentarily, then closed them again. Blue eyes, like hers.

The door opened, narrowly but with surprising quickness. An old woman stood looking at her. Glittering black eyes, gnarled face the color of tobacco, blue reboso coifed about her head to hide every vestige of hair, one end of the scarf looped rearward over her throat. There was something malignant in the idol-like face, something almost Aztec.

“Señorita wishes?” she breathed suspiciously.

“Can you read?” The girl showed her the scrap of paper. That talisman that had brought her so far.

The old woman touched her eyes, shook her head. She couldn’t read.

“But isn’t this—isn’t this—” Her tired tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar words. “Caminode . . .”

The old woman pointed vaguely in dismissal. “Go, ask them in the town, they can answer your questions there.” She tried to close the heavy door again.

The girl planted her foot against it, held it open. “Let me in. I was told to come here. This is the place I was told to come. I’m tired, and I have no place to go.” For a moment her face was wreathed in lines of weeping, then she curbed them. “Let me come in and rest a minute until I can find out. I’ve come such a long way. All night long, that terrible train from Mexico City, and before that the long trip down

from the border . . .” She pushed the door now with her free hand as well as her foot.

“I beg you, Señorita,” the old woman said with sullen gravity, “do not enter here now. Do not force your way in here. There has been a death in this house.”

“¿Qué pasa?”a younger, higher voice suddenly said, somewhere unseen behind her.

The crone stopped her clawing, turned her head. Suddenly she had whisked from sight as though jerked on a wire, and a young girl had taken her place in the door opening.

The same age as the intruder, perhaps even a trifle younger. Jet-black hair parted arrow-straight along the center of her head. Her skin the color of old ivory. The same glittering black eyes as the old one, but larger, younger. Even more liquid, as though they had recently been shedding tears. There was the same cruelty implicit in them too, but not yet as apparent. There was about her whole beauty, and she was beautiful, a tinge of cruelty, of barbarism. That same mask-like Aztec cast of expression, of age-old racial inheritance. “¿Si?”

“Can you understand me?” the girl pleaded, hoping against hope for a moment.

There was a flash of perfect white teeth, but the black hair moved negatively. “The señorita is lost, perhaps?”

Somehow, the American sensed the meaning of the words. “This is where they told me to come. I inquired in Mexico City. The American consul. They even told me how to get here, what trains. I wrote him, and I never heard. I’ve been writing him and writing him, and I never heard. But this must be the place. This is where I’ve been writing, Camino de las Rosas . . . A dry sob escaped with the last.

The liquid black eyes had narrowed momentarily. “The señorita looks for who?”

“Bill. Bill Taylor.” She tried to turn it into Spanish, with the pitiful resources at her command. “Señor Taylor. Señor Bill Taylor. Look, I’ll show you his picture.” She fumbled in her handbag, drew out a small snapshot, handed it to the waiting girl. It was a picture of herself and a young man. “Him. I’m looking for him. Now do you understand?”

For a moment there seemed to have been a sharp intake of breath, but it might have been an illusion. The dark-haired girl smiled ruefully. Then she shook her head.

“Don’t you know him? Isn’t he here? Isn’t this his house?” She pointed to the wall alongside. “But it must be. Then whose house is it?”

The dark-haired girl pointed to herself, then to the old woman hovering and hissing surreptitiously in the background. “Casa de nosotros. The house of Chata and her mother. Nobody else.”

“Then he isn’t here?” The American leaned her back for a moment hopelessly against the wall, turning the other way, to face out from it. She let her head roll a little to one side. “What am I going to do? Where is he, what became of him? I haven’t even enough money to go back. I have nowhere to go. They warned me back home not to come down here alone like this, looking for him—oh, I should have listened!”

The black eyes were speculatively narrow again, had been for some time. She pointed to the snapshot. “Hermano? He is the brother of the señorita, or—?”

The blonde stranger touched her own ring finger. This time the sob came first. “He’s my husband! I had to pawn my wedding ring, to help pay my way here. I’ve got to find him! He was going to send for me later—and then he never did.”

The black eyes had flicked downward to the child, almost unnoticeably, then up again. Once more she pointed to the snapshot.

The blonde nodded. “It’s his. Ours. I don’t think he even knows about it. I wrote him, and I never heard back . . .”

The other’s head turned sharply aside for a moment, conferring with the old woman. In profile, her cameo-like beauty was even more expressive. So was the razor-sharpness of its latent cruelty.

Abruptly she had reached out with both hands. “Entra. Entra. Come in. Rest. Refresh yourself.” The door was suddenly open at full width, revealing a patio in the center of which was a profusion of white roses. The bushes were not many, perhaps six all told, but they were all in full bloom, weighted down with their masses of flowers. They were arranged in a hollow square. Around the outside ran a border of red-tiled flooring. In the center there was a deep gaping hole—a well, either being dug or being repaired. It was lined with a casing of shoring planks that protruded above its lip. A litter of construction effluvia lay around, lending a transient ugliness to the otherwise beautiful little enclosure: a wheelbarrow, several buckets, a mixing trough, a sack of cement, shovels and picks, and an undulating mound of misplaced earth brought up out of the cavity.

There was no one working at it now, it was too late in the day. Silence hung heavily. In the background was the house proper, its rooms ranged single file about three sides of the enclosure, each one characteristically opening onto it with its own individual doorway. The old houses of Moorish Africa, of which this was a lineal descendant, had been like that: blind to the street, windowless, cloistered, each living its life about its own inner, secretive courtyard. Twice transplanted—first to Spain, then to the newer Spain across the waters.

Now that entry had at last been granted, the blonde girl was momentarily hesitant about entering. “But if—but if this isn’t his house, what good is it to come in?”

The insistent hands of the other reached her, drew her, gently but firmly, across the threshhold. In the background

the old woman still looked on with a secretive malignancy that might have been due solely to the wizened lines in her face.

“Pase, pase,” the dark-haired girl was coaxing her. Step in.

“Descansa.” Rest. She snapped her fingers with sudden, concealed authority behind her own back, and the old woman, seeming to understand the esoteric signal, sidled around to the side of them and out to the road for a moment, looked quickly up the road, then quickly down, picked up the bag standing there and drew it inside with her, leaning totteringly against its weight.

Suddenly the thick wall-door had closed behind her and the blonde wayfarer was in, whether she wanted to be or not.

The silence, the remoteness, was as if a thick, smothering velvet curtain had fallen all at once. Although the road had been empty, the diffuse, imponderable noises of the world had been out there somehow. Although this patio courtyard was unroofed and open to the same evening sky, and only a thick wall separated it from the outside, there was a stillness, a hush, as though it were a thousand miles away, or deep down within the earth.

They led her, one on each side of her—the girl with the slightest of forward-guiding hands just above her waist, the old woman still struggling with the bag—along the red-tiled walk skirting the roses, in under the overhanging portico of the house proper, and in through one of the doorways. It had no door as such; only a curtain of wooden-beaded strings was its sole provision for privacy and isolation. These clicked and hissed when they were stirred. Within were cool plaster walls painted a pastel color halfway up, allowed to remain undyed the rest of the way; an equally cool tiled flooring ; an iron bedstead; an ebony chair or two,

stiff, tortuously hand-carved, with rush-bottomed seats and backs. A serape of burning emerald and orange stripes, placed on the floor alongside the bed, served as a rug. A smaller one, of sapphire and cerise bands, affixed to the wall, served as the only decoration there was.

They sat her down in one of the chairs, the baby still in her arms. Chata, after a moment's hesitancy, summoned up a sort of defiant boldness, reached out and deliberately removed the small traveling-hat from her head without asking permission. Her expressive eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed again, as they took in the exotic blonde hair in all its unhampered abundance.

Her eyes now went to the child, but more as an afterthought than as if that were her primary interest, and she leaned forward and admired and played with him a little, as women do with a child, and women, of any race. Dabbing her finger at his chin, at his little button of a nose, taking one of his little hands momentarily in hers, then relinquishing it again. There was something a trifle mechanical about her playing; there was no real feeling for the child at all.

She said something to the old woman, and the latter came back after a short interval with milk in an earthenware bowl.

"He'll have to drink it with a nipple," the young mother said. "He's too tiny." She handed him for a moment to Chata to hold for her, fumbled with her bag, opened it and got out his feeding-bottle. She poured some of the milk into that, then recapped it and took him up to feed him.

She had caught a curious look on Chata's face in the moment or two she was holding him. As though she were studying the child closely; but not with melting fondness, with a completely detached, almost cold, curiosity.

They remained looking on for a few moments; then they slipped out and left her, the old woman first, Chata a moment later, with a few murmured words and a halfgesture toward the mouth, that she sensed as meaning she was to come and have something to eat with them when she was ready.

She fed him first, and then she turned back the covers and laid him down on the bed. She found two large-size safety-pins in her bag and pinned the covers down tight on either side of him, so that he could not roll off and fall down. His eyes were already closed again, one tiny fist bent backward toward his head. She kissed him softly, with a smothered sob—that was for the failure of the long pilgrimage that had brought her all this way—then tiptoed out.

There was an aromatic odor of spicy cooking hovering disembodiedly about the patio, but just where it was originating from she couldn’t determine. Of the surrounding six doorways, three were pitch-black. From one there was a dim, smouldering red glow peering. From another a paler, yellow light was cast subduedly. She mistakenly went toward this.

It was two doors down from the one from which she had just emerged. If they were together in there, they must be talking in whispers. She couldn’t hear a sound, not even the faintest murmur.

It had grown darker now; it was full night already, with the swiftness of the mountainous latitudes. The square of sky over the patio was soft and dark as indigo velour, with magnificent stars like many-legged silver spiders festooned on its underside. Below them the white roses gleamed phosphorescently in the starlight, with a magnesium-like glow. There was a tiny splash from the depths of the well as a pebble or grain of dislodged earth fell in.

She made her way toward the yellow-ombre doorway. Her attention had been on other things: the starlight, the

sheen of the roses; and she turned the doorway and entered the room too quickly, without stopping outside to look in first.

She was already well over the threshhold and in before she stopped short, frozen there, with a stifled intake of fright and an instinctive clutching of both hands toward her throat.

The light came from two pairs of tapers. Between them rested a small bier that was perhaps only a trestled plank shrouded with a cloth. One pair stood at the head of it, one pair at the foot.

On the bier lay a dead child. An infant, perhaps days younger than her own. In fine white robes. Gardenias and white rosebuds disposed about it in impromptu arrangement, to form a little nest or bower. On the wall was a religious image; under it in a red glass cup burned a holy light.

The child lay there so still, as if waiting to be picked up and taken into its mother’s arms. Its tiny hands folded on its breast.

She drew a step closer, staring. A step closer, a step closer. Its hair was blond; fair, golden blond.

There was horror lurking in this somewhere. She was suddenly terribly frightened. She took another step, and then another. She wasn’t moving her feet, something was drawing them.

She was beside it now. The sickening, cloying odor of the gardenias was swirling about her head like a tide. The infant’s little eyes had been closed. She reached down gently, lifted an eyelid, then snatched her hand away. The baby’s eyes had been blue.

Horror might have found her then, but it was given no time. She whirled suddenly, not in fright so much as mechanistic nervousness, and Chata was standing motionless in full-center of the doorway, looking in at her.

The black head gave a toss of arrogance. “My child, yes. My little son.” And in the flowery language that can express itself as English never can, without the risk of being ridiculous: “The son of my heart.” For a moment her face crumbled and a gust of violent emotion swept across it, instantly was gone again.

But it hadn’t been grief, it had been almost maniacal rage. The rage of the savage who resents a loss, does not know how to accept it.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know—I didn’t mean to come in here —”

“Come, there is some food for you,” Chata cut her short curtly. She turned on her heel and went down the shadowy arcade toward the other lighted doorway, the more distant one her self-invited guest should have sought out in the first place.

The American went more slowly, turning in the murky afterglow beyond the threshhold to look lingeringly back inside again: I will not think of this for a while. Later, I know, I must, but not now. That in this house where he said he lived there is a child lying dead whose hair is golden, whose eyes were blue.

Chata had reappeared in the designated doorway through which she wanted her to follow, to mark it out for her, to hasten her coming. The American advanced toward it, and went in in turn.

They squatted on the floor to eat, as the Japanese do. The old woman palmed it, and Chata palmed it in turn, to have her do likewise, and to show her where.

She sank awkwardly down as they were, feeling her legs to be too long, but managing somehow to dispose of them with a fanned-out effect to the side. An earthenware bowl of rice and red beans was set down before her.

She felt a little faint for a moment, for the need of food, as the aroma reached her, heavy and succulent. She wanted to

crouch down over it, and up-end the entire bowl against her face, to get its entire contents in all at one time.

The old woman handed her a tortilla, a round flat cake, paper-thin, of pestled maize, limp as a wet rag. She held it in her own hand helplessly, did not know what to do with it. They had no eating utensils.

The old woman took it back from her, deftly rolled it into a hollowed tube, returned it. She did with it as she saw them doing with theirs; held the bowl up closer to her mouth and scooped up the food in it by means of the tortilla.

The food was unaccustomedly piquant; it prickled, baffled the taste-buds of her tongue. A freakish thought from nowhere suddenly flitted through her mind: I should be careful. If they wanted to poison me . . . And then: But why should they want to harm me? I've done them no harm; my being here certainly does them no harm.

And because it held no solid substance, the thought misted away again.

She was so exhausted, her eyes were already drooping closed before the meal was finished. She recovered with a start, and they had both been watching her fixedly. She could tell that by the way fluidity of motion set in again, as happens when people try to cover up the rigid intentness that has just preceded it. Each motion only started as she resumed her observation of it.

"Tienes sueño," Chata murmured. "¿Quieresacostarte?" And she motioned toward the doorway, without looking at it herself.

Somehow the American understood the intention of the words by the fact of the gesture, and the fact that Chata had not risen from the floor herself, but remained squatting. She was not being told to leave the house, she was being told that she might remain within the house and go and lie down with her child if she needed to.

She stumbled to her feet awkwardly, almost threatened to topple for a moment with fatigue. Then steadied herself.

“Gracia,” she faltered. “Gracia, mucho.” Two pitiful words.

They did not look at her. They were looking down at the emptied food bowls before them. They did not turn their eyes toward her as when somebody is departing from your presence. They kept them on the ground before them as if holding them leashed, waiting for the departure to have been completed.

She draggingly made the turn of the doorway and left them behind her.

The patio seemed to have brightened while she’d been away. It was bleached an almost dazzling white now, with the shadows of the roses and their leaves an equally intense black. Like splotches and drippings of ink beneath each separate component one. Or like a lace mantilla flung open upon a snowdrift.

A raging, glowering full moon had come up, was peering down over the side of the sky-well above the patio.

That was the last thing she saw as she leaned for a moment, inert with fatigue, against the doorway of the room in which her child lay. Then she dragged herself in to topple headlong upon the bed and, already fast asleep, to circle her child with one protective arm, moving as if of its own instinct.

Not the meek, the pallid, gentle moon of home. This was the savage moon that had shone down on Montezuma and Cuauhtemoc, and came back looking for them now. The primitive moon that had once looked down on terraced heathen cities and human sacrifices. The moon of Anahuac.

Now the moon of the Aztecs is at the zenith, and all the world lies still. Full and white, the white of bones, the white of a skull; blistering the center of the sky-well with its throbbing, not touching it on any side. Now the patio is a

piebald place of black and white, burning in the downward-teeming light. Not a leaf moves, not a petal falls, in this fierce amalgam.

Now the lurid glow from within the brazero has dimmed, and is just a threaded crimson outline against contrasting surfaces, skipping the space in between. It traces, like a fine wire, two figures coifed with rebosos. One against the wall, inanimate, like one of the mummies of her race that used to be sat upright in the rock catacombs. Eyes alone move quick above the mouth-shrouded reboso.

The other teetering slightly to and fro. Ever so slightly, in time to a whispering. A whispering that is like a steady sighing in the night; a whispering that does not come through the muffling rebosos.

The whispering stops. She raises something. A small stone. A whetstone. She spits. She returns it to the floor again. The whispering begins once more. The whispering that is not of the voice, but of a hungry panting in the night. A hissing thirst.

The roses sleep pale upon the blackness of a dream. The haunted moon looks down, lonely for Montezuma and his nation, seeking across the land.

The whispering stops now. The shrouded figure in the center of the room holds out something toward the one propped passive against the wall. Something slim, sharp, grip foremost. The wire-outline from the brazero-mouth finds it for a moment, runs around it like a current, flashes into a momentary highlight, a burnished blur, then runs off it again and leaves it to the darkness.

The other takes it. Her hands go up briefly. The reboso falls away from her head, her shoulders. Two long plaits of dark glossy hair hang down revealed against the copper satin that is now her upper body. Her mouth opens slightly. She places the sharp thing crosswise to it. Her teeth fasten on it. Her hand leaves it there, rigid, immovable.

Her hands execute a swift circling about her head. The two long plaits whip from sight, like snakes scampering to safety amidst rocks. She twines them, tucks them up.

She rises slowly with the grace of unhurried flexibility, back continuing to the wall. She girds her skirt up high about her thighs and interlaces it between, so that it holds itself there. Unclothed now, save for a broad swathing about the waist and hips, knife in mouth, she begins to move. Sideward toward the entrance, like a ruddy flame coursing along the wall, with no trace behind it.

Nothing is said. There is nothing to be said.

Nothing was said before. Nothing needed to be said. Dark eyes understood dark eyes. Dark thoughts met dark thoughts and understood, without, the need of a word.

Nothing will be said after it is over. Never, not in a thousand days from now, not in a thousand months. Never again.

The old gods never had a commandment not to kill. That was another God in another land. The gods of Anahuac demanded the taking of human life, that was their nature. And who should know better than the gods what its real value is, for it is they who give it in the first place.

The flame is at the doorway now, first erect, then writhing, the way a flame does. Then the figure goes down on hands and knees, low, crouching, for craft, for stealth, for the approach to kill. The big cats in the mountains do it this way, belly-flat, and the tribe of Montezuma did it this way too, half a thousand years ago. And the blood remembers what the heart has never learned. The approach to kill.

On hands and knees the figure comes pacing along beside the wall that flanks the patio, lithe, sinuous, knife in mouth perpendicular to its course. In moonlight and out of

it, as each successive archway of the portico circles high above it, comes down to join its support, and is gone again to the rear.

The moon is a caress on supple skin. The moon of Anahuac understands, the moon is in league, the moon will not betray.

Slowly along the portico creeps the death-approach, now borax-white in archway-hemisphere, now clay-blue in slanted support-ephemera. The knife-blade winks, like a little haze-puff of white dust, then the shadow hides it again.

The roses dream, the well lies hushed, not a straggling grain topples into it to mar it. No sound, no sound at all. Along the wall crawls life, bringing an end to life.

Past the opening where the death-tapers burn all night. She doesn’t even turn her head as she passes. What is dead is gone. What is dead does not matter any more. There were no souls in Anahuac, just bodies that come to stir, then stop and stir no longer.

What is dead does not matter any more. The love of a man, that is what matters to a woman. If she has not his child, she cannot hold his love. If she loses his child, then she must get another.

And now the other entrance is coming nearer as the wraithlike figure creeps on. Like smoke, like mist, flickering along at the base of a wall. It seems to move of its own accord, sidling along the wall as if it were a black slab or panel traveling on hidden wheels or pulleys at the end of a draw-cord. Coming nearer all the time, black, coffin-shaped, against the bluish-pale wall. Growing taller, growing wider, growing greater.

And then a sound, a small night sound, a futile, helpless sound—a child whimpers slightly in its sleep.

But instantly the figure stops, crouched. Is as still as if it had never moved a moment ago, would never move again. Not a further ripple, not a fluctuation, not a belated muscular contraction, not even the pulsing of breath. As the mountain lioness would stop as it stalked an alerted kill.

The child whimpers troubledly again. It is having a dream perhaps. Something, someone, stirs. Not the child. A heavier, a larger body than the child. There is a faint rustling, as when someone turns against overlying covers.

Then the sibilance of a soothing, bated voice, making a hushing sound. “Sh-h-h. Sh-h-h.” Vibrant with a light motion. The motion of rocking interfolded arms.

A drowsy murmur of words, almost inchoate. “Sleep, darling. We’ll find your daddy soon.”

The moon glares down patiently, remorselessly, waiting. The moon will wait. The night will wait.

Seconds of time pass. Breathing sounds from within the doorway on the stillness now, in soft, slow, rhythmic waves. With little ripples in the space between each wave. Breathing of a mother, and elfin echo of her arm-cradled child. The shadow moves along the wall.

The open doorway, from within, would be a sheet of silver or of mercury, thin but glowing, if any eye were open there upon it. Then suddenly, down low at its base, comes motion, comes intrusion. A creeping, curved thing circles the stone wall-breadth, loses itself again in the darkness on the near side. Now once again the opening is an unmarred sheet of silver, fuming, sheeny.

Not even a shadow glides along the floor now, for there is no longer light to shape one. Nothing. Only death moving in invisibility.

The unseen current of the breathing still rides upon the darkness, to and fro, to and fro; lightly upon the surface of the darkness, like an evanescent pool of water stirring this way and that way.

Then suddenly it plunges deep, as if an unexpected vent, an outlet, had been driven through for it, gurgling, swirling, hollowing and sinking in timbre. A deep, spiralling breath that is the end of all breaths. No more than that. Then evaporation, the silence of death, in an arid, a denuded place.

The breathing of the child peers through again in a moment, now that its overshadowing counterpoint has been erased. It is taken up by other arms. Held pressed to another breast.

In the room of the smouldering brazero the other figure waits; patient, head inclined, reboso-coifed. The soft pad of bare feet comes along the patio-tiles outside, exultant-quick. No need to crawl now. There are no longer other ears to overhear. Bare feet, proud and graceful; coolly firm, like bare feet wading through the moon-milk.

She comes in triumphant, erect and willowy, holding something in her arms, close to her breast. What a woman is supposed to hold. What a woman is born to hold.

She sinks down there on her knees before the other, the other who once held her thus in turn. She turns her head slightly in indication, holds it bent awkwardly askance, for her hands are not free. The old woman’s hands go to her coil-wound hair, trace to the back of her head, draw out the knife for her.

Before her on the floor stands an earthenware bowl holding water. The knife splashes into it. The old woman begins to scrub and knead its blade dexterously between her fingers.

The younger one, sitting at ease now upon the backs of her heels, frees one hand, takes up the palm-leaf, fans the brazero to a renewed glow. Scarlet comes back into the

room, then Vermillion. Even light orange, in splashes here and there, upon their bodies and their faces.

She speaks, staring with copper-plated mask into the orange maw of the brazero. “My man has a son again. I have his son again. I will not lose my man now.”

“You have done well, my daughter. You have done as a woman should.” Thus a mother’s approbation to her daughter, in olden Anahuac.

She places the baby’s head to her breast, the new-made mother, and begins to suckle him.

The moon of Montezuma, well-content, is on the wane now, slanting downward on the opposite side of the patio. Such sights as these it once knew well in

Anahuac; now its hungering loneliness has been in a measure assuaged, for it has glimpsed them once again.

The moon has gone now; it is the darkness before dawn. Soon the sun will come, the cosmic male-force. The time of women is rapidly ending, the time of men will be at hand.

They are both in the room with the trestle bier and the flowers and the gold-tongued tapers. The little wax doll is a naked wax doll now, its wrappings taken from it, cast aside. Lumpy, foreshortened, like a squat clay image fashioned by the soft-slapping hands of some awkward, unpractised potter.

The old woman is holding a charcoal sack, black-smudged, tautly wide at its mouth. She brings it up just under the bier, holds it steady, in the way of a catch-all.

Chata’s hands reach out, scoop, roll something toward her.

The bier is empty and the charcoal sack has swelled full at the bottom.

The old woman quickly folds it over and winds it about itself. She passes it to Chata. Deft swirling and tightening of Chata’s reboso about her own figure, and it has gone, and Chata’s arms with it, hidden within.

The old woman takes apart the bier. Takes down the two pitiful planks from the trestles that supported them. A gardenia-petal or two slides down them to the floor.

“Go far,” she counsels knowingly.

“I will go far up the mountain, where it is bare. Where the buzzards can see it easily from overhead. By the time the sun goes down it will be gone. Small bones like this they will even carry up with them and scatter.”

The old woman pinches one taper-wick and it goes out.

She moved on toward another and pinches that.

Darkness blots the room. In the air a faint trace of gardenias remains. How long does the scent of gardenias last? How long does life last? And when each has gone, where is it each has gone?

They move across the moonless patio now, one back of the other. The wooden door in the street wall jars and creaks back aslant. The old woman sidles forth. Chata waits. The old woman reinserts herself. Her finger flicks permissive safety toward the aperture.

The girl slips out, just an Indian girl enswathed, a lump under her reboso, the margin of it drawn up over her mouth against the unhealthful night air.

It is daybreak now. Clay-blue and dove-gray, rapidly paling with white. The old woman is sitting crouched upon her haunches, in patient immobility, just within the door.

She must have heard an almost wraith-like footfall that no other ears could have caught. She rose suddenly. She waited a bated moment, inclined toward the door, then she unfastened and swung open the door.

Chata slipped in on the instant, reboso flat against her now. No more lump saddling her hip.

The old woman closed the door, went after her to deeper recesses of the patio. “You went far?”

Chata unhooded her reboso from head and shoulders with that negligent racial grace she was never without. “I went far. I went up where it is bare rock. Where no weed grows that will hide it from the sailing wings in the sky. They will see it. Already they were coming from afar as I looked back from below. By sundown it will be gone.”

The old woman nodded. “You have done well, my daughter,” she praised her dignifiedly.

Beside the well in the patio there was something lying now. Another mound beside the mound of disinterred earth. And alongside it, parallel to one side of the well, a deep narrow trough lay dug, almost looking like a grave.

The rose bushes had all been pulled out and lay there expiring on their sides now, roots striking skyward like frozen snakes.

“They were in the way,” the old woman grunted. “I had to. I deepened it below where they left it when they were here last. The new earth I took out is apart, over there, in that smaller pile by itself. So we will know it from the earth they took out when they were last here. See, it is darker and fresher.”

“He liked them,” Chata said. “He will ask why it is, when he comes back.”

“Tell him the men did it, Fulgencio and his helper.”

“But if he asks them, when he goes to pay them for the work, they will say they did not, they left them in.”

“Then we will plant them in again, lightly at the top, before they come back to resume their work. I will cut off their roots short, so that it can be done.”

“They will die that way.”

The old woman nodded craftily. “But only after a while. He will see them still in place, though dead. Then we will say it was the work of the men did it. Then Fulgencio and his helper will not be able to say they did not do it. For they were alive when the work began, and they will be dead when it was done.”

Chata did not have to ask her to help. With one accord, with no further words between them, they went to the mound beside the mound of earth. The mound that was not earth. The mound that was concealing rags and bundled charcoal sacking. One went to one end, one to the other. Chata pried into the rags for a moment, made an opening, peered into it. It centered on a red rosebud, withered and falling apart, but still affixed by a pin to the dark-blue cloth of a coat.

"She wore a rose upon her coat," she hissed vengefully. "I saw it when, she came in last night. She must have brought it with her from Tapatzingo, for there are none of that color growing here. He must have liked to see them on her." She swerved her head and spat into the trough alongside. "It is dead now," she said exultingly.

"As she is," glowered the old woman, tight-lipped.

"Let it go with her, for the worms to see."

They both scissored their arms, and the one mound overturned and dropped, was engulfed by the other. Then Chata took up the shovel the workmen had left, and began lessening the second mound, the mound that was of earth. She knew just what they did and how they went about it, she had watched them for so many days now. The old woman, spreading her reboso flat upon the ground nearby, busied herself palming and urging the newer fill over onto it, the fill that she herself had taken out to make more depth.

When it was filled, she tied the corners into a bundle and carried it from sight. She came back with the reboso empty and began over again. After the second time, the pile of new fill was gone.

Chata had disappeared from the thighs down, was moving about as in a grave, trampling, flattening, with downbeating of her feet.

In midmorning, when Fulgencio and his nephew came, languid, to their slow-moving work, the white roses were all luxuriating around the well again, with a slender stick

lurking here and there to prop them. Everything was as it had been. If the pile of disinterred earth they had left was a little lower, or if the depression waiting to take it back was a little shallower, who could tell? Who measured such things?

The old woman brought out a jug of pulque to them, so that they might refresh themselves. Their eyes were red when they left at sundown, and their breaths and their sweat were sour. But it had made their work go quicker, with snatches of song, and with laughter, and with stumblings of foot. And it had made the earth they shoveled back, the hollow they filled, the tiles they cemented back atop, the roses they brushed against and bent, all dance and blur in fumes of maguey.

But the task was completed, and when the door was closed upon their swaying, drooping-lidded forms, they needed to come back no more.

Seven times the sun rises, seven times it falls. Then fourteen. Then, perhaps, twenty-one. Who knows, who counts it? Hasn't it risen a thousand years in Anahuac, to fall again, to rise again?

Then one day, in its declining hours, there is a heavy knocking of men's hands on the outside of the wooden door in the street-wall. The hands of men who have a right to enter, who may not be refused; their knocking tells that.

They know it for what it is at first sound, Chata and the old woman. They have known it was coming. There is another law in Anahuac now than the old one.

Eyes meet eyes. The trace of a nod is exchanged. A nod that confirms. That is all. No fear, no sudden startlement. No fear, because no sense of guilt. The old law did not depend on signs of fear, proofs and evidences, witnesses. The old law was wise, the new law is a fool.

The old woman struggles to her feet, pads forth across the patio toward the street-door, resounding now like a drum. Chata remains as she was, dexterously plaiting

withes into a basket, golden-haired child on its back on the sun-cozened ground beside her, little legs fumbling in air.

The old woman comes back with two of mixed blood. Anahuac is in their faces, but so is the other race, with its quick mobility of feature that tells every thought. One in uniform of those who enforce the law, one in attire such as Chata's own man wears when he has returned from his prospecting trips in the distant mountains and walks the streets of the town with her on Sunday, or takes his ease without her in the cantina with the men of the other women.

They come and stand over her, where she squats at her work, look down on her. Their shadows shade her, blot out the sun in the corner of the patio in which she is. Are like thick blue stripes blanketing her and the child from some intangible serape.

Slowly her eyes go upward to them, liquid, dark, grave, respectful but not afraid, as a woman's do to strange men who come where she has a right to be.

"Stand. We are of the police. From Tapatzingo, on the other side of the mountain. We are here to speak to you."

She puts her basket-weaving aside and rises, graceful, unfrightened.

"And you are?" the one who speaks for the two of them, the one without uniform, goes on. "Chata."

"Any last name?"

"We use no second name among us." That is the other race, two names for every one person.

"And the old one?"

"Mother of Chata."

"And who is the man here?"

"In the mountains. That way, far that way. He goes to look for silver. He works it when he finds it. He has been long

gone, but he will come soon now, the time is drawing near."

"Now listen. A woman entered here, some time three weeks ago. A woman with a child. A nortena, a gringa, understand ? One of those from up there. She has not been seen again. She did not go back there to where she came from. To the great City of Mexico. In the City of Mexico the consul of her country has asked the police to find out where she is. The police of the City of Mexico have asked us to learn what became of her."

Both heads shake. "No. No woman entered here."

He turns to the one in uniform. "Bring him in a minute."

The hired-car driver shuffles forward, escorted by the uniform.

Chata looks at him gravely, no more. Gravely but untroubledly.

"This man says he brought her here. She got out. He went back without her."

Both heads nod now. The young one that their eyes are on, the old one disregarded in the background.

"There was a knock upon our door, one such day, many days ago. A woman with a child stood there, from another place. She spoke, and we could not understand her speech. She showed us a paper, but we cannot read writing. We closed the door. She did not knock again."

He turns on the hired-car driver. "Did you see them admit her?"

"No, Señor," the latter falters, too frightened to tell anything but the truth. "I only let her out somewhere along here. I did not wait to see where she went. It was late, and I wanted to get back to my woman. I had driven her all the way from Tapatzingo, where the train stops."

"Then you did not see her come in here?"

“I did not see her go in anywhere. I turned around and went the other way, and it was getting dark.”

“This child here, does it look like the one she had with her?”

“I could not see it, she held it to her.”

“This is the child of my man,” Chata says with sultry dignity. “He has yellow hair like this. Tell, then.”

“Her man is gringo, everyone has seen him. She had a gringo child a while ago, everyone knows that,” the man stammers unhappily.

“Then you, perhaps, know more about where she went, than these two do! You did bring her out this way! Take him outside and hold him. At least I’ll have something to report on.”

The policeman drags him out again, pleading and whining. “No, Señor, no! I do not know—I drove back without her! For the love of God, Señor, the love of God!”

He turns to Chata. “Show me this house. I want to see it.”

She shows it to him, room by room. Rooms that know nothing, can tell nothing. Then back to the patio again. The other one is waiting for him there, alone now.

“And this pozo? It seems cleaner, newer, this tiling, than elsewhere around it.” He taps his foot on it.

“It kept falling in, around the sides. Cement was put around them to hold the dirt back.”

“Who had it done?”

“It was the order of my man, before he left. It made our water bad. He told two men to do it for him while he was away.”

“And who carried it out?”

“Fulgencio and his nephew, in the town. They did not come right away, and they took long, but finally they finished.”

He jotted the name. “We will ask.”

She nodded acquiescently. “They will tell.”

He takes his foot off it at last, moves away. He seems to be finished, he seems to be about to go. Then suddenly, curtly, “Come.” And he flexes his finger for her benefit.

For the first time her face shows something. The skin draws back rearward of her eyes, pulling them oblique.

“Where?” she whispers.

“To the town. To Tapatzingo. To the headquarters.”

She shakes her head repeatedly, mutely appalled. Creeps backward a step with each shake. Yet even now it is less than outright fear; it is more an unreasoning obstinacy. An awe in the face of something one is too simple to understand. The cringing of a wide-eyed child.

“Nothing will happen to you,” he says impatiently. “You won’t be held. Just to sign a paper. A statement for you to put your name to.”

Her back has come to rest against one of the archway supports now. She can retreat no further. She cowers against it, then sinks down, then turns and clasps her arms about it, holding onto it in desperate appeal.

“I cannot write. I do not know how to make those marks.”

He is standing over her now, trying to reason with her.

“Valgame dios! What a criatura!”

She transfers her embrace suddenly from the inanimate pilaster to his legs, winding her arms about them in supplication.

“No, patrón, no! Don’t take me to Tapatzingo! They’ll keep me there. I know how they treat our kind. I’ll never get back again.”

Her eyes plead upward at him, dark pools of mournfulness.

He looks more closely at her, as if seeming to see her face for the first time. Or at least as if seeming to see it as a woman’s face and not just that of a witness.

“And you like this gringo you house with?” he remarks at a tangent. “Why did you not go with one of your own?”

“One goes with the man who chooses one.”

“Women are thus,” he admits patronizingly. Asi son las mujeres.

She releases his pinioned legs, but still crouches at his feet, looking questioningly upward.

He is still studying her face. “He could have done worse.” He reaches down and wags her chin a little with two pinched fingers.

She rises, slowly turns away from him. She does not smile. Her coquetry is more basic than the shallow superficiality of a smile. More gripping in its pull. It is in the slow, enfolding way she draws her reboso tight about her and hugs it to her shoulders and her waist. It is in the very way she walks. It is in the coalescing of the sunlit dust-motes all about her in the air as she passes, forming almost a haze, a passional halo.

In fact, she gives him not another look. Yet every step of the way she pulls his eyes with her. And as she passes where a flowering plant stands in a green glazed mould, she tears one of the flowers off. She doesn’t drop it, just carries it along with her in her hand.

She approaches one of the room-openings, and still without turning, still without looking back, goes within.

He stands there staring at the empty doorway.

The old woman squats down by the child, takes it up, and lowers her head as if attentively waiting.

He looks at the policeman, and the policeman at him, and everything that was unspoken until now is spoken in that look between them.

“Wait for me outside the house. I’ll be out later.”

The policeman goes outside and closes the wall-door after him.

Later she comes out of the room by herself, ahead of the man. She rejoins the old woman and child, and squats down

by them on her knees and heels. The old woman passes the child into her arms. She rocks it lullingly, looks down at it protectively, touches a speck from its brow with one finger. She is placid, self-assured.

Then the man comes out again. He is tracing one side of his mustache with the edge of one finger.

He comes and stops, standing over her, as he did when he and the other one first came in here.

He smiles a little, very sparingly, with only the corner of his mouth. Half-indulgently, half-contemptuously.

He speaks. But to whom?

Scarcely to her, for his eyes go up over her, stare thoughtfully over her head; and the policeman isn't present to be addressed. To his own sense of duty, perhaps, reassuring it. "Well—you don't need to come in, then, most likely. You've told me all you can. No need to question you further. I can attend to the paper myself. And we always have the driver, anyway, if they want to go ahead with it."

He turns on his heel. His long shadow undulates off her.

"Adios, india," he flings carelessly at her over his shoulder, from the wall-door.

"Adios, patrón," she murmurs obsequiously.

The old woman goes over to the door in his wake, to make sure it is shut fast from the inside. Comes back, sinks down again.

Nothing is said.

In the purple bloodshed of a sunset afterglow, the tired horse brings its tired rider to a halt before the biscuit-colored wall with the bougainvillea unravelling along it. Having ridden the day, having ridden the night, and many days and many nights, the ride is at last done.

For a moment they stand there, both motionless, horse with its neck slanted to ground, rider with his head dropped

almost to saddle-grip. He has been riding asleep for the past hour or so. But riding true, for the horse knows the way.

Then the man stirs, raises his head, slings his leg off, comes to the ground. Face mahogany from the high sierra sun, golden glisten filming its lower part, like dust of that other metal, the one even more precious than that he seeks and lives by. Dust-paled shirt opened to the navel. Service automatic of another country, of another army, that both once were his, bedded at his groin. Bulging saddle-bags upon the burro tethered behind, of ore, of precious crushed rock, to be taken to the assay office down at Tapatzingo. Blue eyes that have forgotten all their ties, and thus will stay young as they are now forever. Bill Taylor's home. Bill Taylor, once of Iowa, once of Colorado.

Home? What is home? Home is where a house is that you come back to when the rainy season is about to begin, to wait until the next dry season comes around. Home is where your woman is, that you come back to in the intervals between a greater love—the only real love—the lust for riches buried in the earth, that are your own if you can find them.

Perhaps you do not call it home, even to yourself. Perhaps you call them "my house", "my woman". What if there was another "my house", "my woman", before this one? It makes no difference. This woman is enough for now.

Perhaps the guns sounded too loud at Anzio or at Omaha Beach, at Guadalcanal or at Okinawa. Perhaps when they stilled again some kind of strength had been blasted from you that other men still have. And then again perhaps it was some kind of weakness that other men still have. What is strength, what is weakness, what is loyalty, what is perfidy?

The guns taught only one thing, but they taught it well: of what consequence is life? Of what consequence is a man? And, therefore, of what consequence if he tramples love in one place and goes to find it in the next? The little moment

that he has, let him be at peace, far from the guns and all that remind him of them.

So the man who once was Bill Taylor has come back to his house, in the dusk, in the mountains, in Anahuac.

He doesn't have to knock, the soft hoof-plod of his horse has long ago been heard, has sent its long-awaited message. Of what use is a house to a man if he must knock before he enters? The door swings wide, as it never does and never will to anyone but him. Flitting of a figure, firefly-quick, and Chata is entwined about him.

He goes in, faltering a little from long weariness, from long disuse of his legs, she welded to his side, half-supporting, already resting, restoring him, as is a woman's reason for being.

The door closes behind them. She palms him to wait, then whisks away.

He stands there, looking about.

She comes back, holding something bebundled in her arms.

"What happened to the roses?" he asks dimly.

She does not answer. She is holding something up toward him, white teeth proudly displayed in her face. The one moment in a woman's whole life. The moment of fulfilment. "Your son," she breathes dutifully.

Who can think of roses when he has a son?

Two of the tiles that Fulgencio had laid began to part. Slowly. So slowly who could say they had not always been that way? And yet they had not. Since they could not part horizontally because of the other tiles all around them, their parting was vertical, they began to slant upward out of true. At last the strain became too great. They had no resiliency by which to slant along the one side, remain flat along the other. They cracked along the line of greatest

strain, and then they crumbled there, disintegrated into a mosaic. And then the smaller, lighter pieces were disturbed still more, and finally lay about like scattered pebbles, out of their original bed.

And then it began to grow. The new rosebush.

There had been rosebushes there before. Why should there not be one there now again?

It was full-grown now, the new rosebush. And he had gone and come again, Bill Taylor; and gone, and come again. Then suddenly, in the time for roses to bloom, it burst into flower. Like a splattering of blood, drenching that one particular part of the patio. Every rose as red as the heart.

He smiled with pleasant surprise when he first saw it, and he said how beautiful it was. He called to her and made her come out there where he was and stand beside him and take the sight in.

“Look. Look what we have now. I always liked them better than the white ones.”

“I already saw them,” she said sullenly. “You are only seeing them now for the first time, but I saw them many days ago, coming through little by little.”

And she tried to move away, but he held her there by the shoulder, in command. “Take good care of it now. Water it. Treat it well.”

In a few days he noticed that the sun was scorching it, that the leaves were burning here and there.

He called her out there, and his face was dark. His voice was harsh and curt, as when you speak to a disobedient dog. “Didn’t I tell you to look after this rosebush?

Why haven’t you? Water it now! Water it well!”

She obeyed him. She had to. But as she moved about it, tending to it, on her face, turned from him, there was the

ancient hatred of woman for woman, when there is but one man between the two of them.

She watered it the next day, and the next. It throve, it flourished, jeering at her with liquid diamonds dangling from each leaf, and pearls of moisture rolling lazily about the crevices of its tight-packed satin petals. And when his eyes were not upon her, and she struck at it viciously with her hand, it bit back at her, and tore a drop of blood from her palm.

Of what use to move around the ground on two firm feet, to be warm, to be flesh, if his eyes scarce rested on you any more? Or if they did, no longer saw you as they once had, but went right through you as if you were not there?

Of what use to have buried her in the ground if he stayed now always closer to her than to you, moving his chair now by her out there in the sun? If he put his face down close to her and inhaled the memory of her and the essence of her soul?

She filled the patio with her sad perfume, and even in the very act of breathing in itself, he drew something of her into himself, and they became one.

She held sibilant conference with the old woman beside the brazero in the evening as they prepared his meal. “It is she. She has come back again. He puts his face down close, down close to her many red mouths, and she whispers to him. She tries to tell him that she lies there, she tries to tell him that his son was given him by her and not by me.”

The old woman nodded sagely. These things are so. “Then you must do again as you did once before. There is no other way.”

“He will be angered as the thunder rolling in a mountain gorge.”

“Better a blow from a man’s hand than to lose him to another woman.”

Again the night of a full moon, again she crept forth, hands to ground, as she had once before. This time from his very side, from his very bed. Again a knife between her teeth blazed intermittently in the moonlight. But this time she didn’t creep sideward along the portico, from room-entry to room-entry; this time she paced her way straight outward into mid-patio. And this time her reboso was twined tight about her, not cast off; for the victim had no ears with which to hear her should the garment impede or betray; and the victim had no feet on which to start up and run away.

Slowly she toiled and undulated under the enormous spotlight of the moon. Nearer, nearer. Until the shadows of the little leaves made black freckles on her back.

Nearer, nearer. To kill a second time the same rival.

Nearer, nearer. To where the rosebush lay floating on layers of moon-smoke.

They found her the next morning, he and the old woman. They found the mute evidences of the struggle there had been; like a contest between two active agencies, between two opposing wills. A struggle in the silent moonlight.

There was a place where the tiled surfacing, the cement shoring, faultily applied by the pulque-drugged Fulgencio and his nephew, had given way and dislodged itself over the lip of the well and down into it, as had been its wont before the repairs were applied. Too much weight incautiously brought too near the edge, in some terrible, oblivious throe of fury or of self-preservation.

Over this ravage the rosebush, stricken, gashed along its stem, stretched taut, bent like a bow; at one end its manifold roots still clinging tenaciously to the soil, like

countless crooked grasping fingers; at the other its flowered head, captive but unsubdued, dipping downward into the mouth of the well.

And from its thorns, caught fast in a confusion hopeless of extrication, it supported two opposite ends of the reboso, whipped and wound and spiralled together into one, from some aimless swaying and counter-swaying weight at the other end.

A weight that had stopped swaying long before the moon waned; that hung straight and limp now, hugging the wall of the well. Head sharply askew, as if listening to the mocking voice whispering through from the soil alongside, where the roots of the rosebush found their source.

No water had touched her. She had not died the death of water. She had died the death that comes without a sound, the death that is like the snapping of a twig, of a broken neck.

They lifted her up. They laid her tenderly there upon the ground.

She did not move. The rosebush did; it slowly righted to upward. Leaving upon the ground a profusion of petals, like drops of blood shed in combat.

The rosebush lived, but she was dead.

Now he sits there in the sun, by the rosebush; the world forgotten, other places that once were home, other times, other loves, forgotten. It is good to sit there in the sun, your son playing at your feet. This is a better love, this is the only lasting love. For a woman dies when you do, but a son lives on. He is you and you are he, and thus you do not die at all.

And when his eyes close in the sun and he dozes, as a man does when his youth is running out, perhaps now and then a petal will fall upon his head or upon his shoulder from some near-curving branch, and lie there still. Light as

a caress. Light as a kiss unseen from someone who loves you and watches over you.

The old woman squats at hand, watchful over the child. The old woman has remained, ignored. Like a dog, like a stone. Unspeaking and unspoken to.

Her eyes reveal nothing. Her lips say nothing. They will never say anything, for thus it is in Anahuac.

But the heart knows. The skies that look forever down on Anahuac know. The moon knows.

THE NIGHT OF JUNE 20th, 1896

THE lights were going on in the St. Anselm Hotel for the first time. The last mason had left a week ago. The last painter and carpenter had left two days ago. The last decorators were still busy, in some of the rooms on some of the floors, working overtime, working like mad, unrolling carpets, tacking up drapes, unpacking mirrors. Everyone was new at his job, from the manager down to the merest bellboy; everyone was confused, highly excited, uncertain just what was expected of him, and how to go about what was expected of him. Everyone was asking the personnel member just over him what to do and how to do it, and then getting it wrong because he'd been told wrong. The bellboys were asking the bell captain, the bell captain was asking the desk clerk, the desk clerk was asking the manager. It stopped there; the manager had no one higher than himself to ask. So he passed the blame in reverse direction, and it started down the line again: to desk clerk, to bell captain, to bellboy. Then, when it got there, it had to stop once more and start up-rank again. But everyone was making allowances, so there was no great harm done, except to nervous energy. Everyone knew no one could be expected to be letter-perfect. Everyone knew they'd do better in a day or so, or a week. Everyone knew things would calm down and straighten out.

This was opening day, and the hotel had been in business for exactly six hours, ever since high noon.

Now room by room the lights were going on. Window after window bloomed yellow, against the outer pre-summer darkness, as the rooms were taken. Not in direct order, one after the next, of course. Haphazardly; but still the desk clerk was working his registrations upward pretty much floor by floor, from lower to higher. It was simpler that way. The second and third had been all gone even days before the opening, by premature reservation. The fourth and fifth were sold out by midafternoon, and by nightfall he was already as high as the ninth, with just a scattering of back singles on the two immediately below. And a completely booked hotel in those days was no mean feat.

The carriage arrived a little before ten. Carriages had been arriving all day in unending succession, rolling up in an almost unbroken line, so no one gave it a second look. It was a hired carriage, not a private one. There were telltale grains of rice sprinkled on its black felt flooring. There was a fairly sizable amount of hand-luggage on the seat beside the driver. At the back some mischievous person had affixed a placard reading “Just Married.” There was also an empty soup can and an old shoe trailing along behind it at the end of a string, and clattering considerably over the pavement.

A young man alighted, rather nervously. He had on a starched collar the height of his neck. He had on a dark-blue jacket, pinched-in at the back and secured by a half-belt that ended at the sides. He had on white duck trousers, this being the beginning of the warm season. A flower from some recent function decorated the buttonhole of his lapel. He was about twenty-four.

He looked at the blazing hotel entrance. He looked extremely frightened. Then he turned back toward the carriage, and removed the flat-crowned, rigidly stiff straw hat he wore. This had a tri-colored band of blue, white and green around it, and was secured to one of the buttons of

his jacket by a black cord. He held out his hand toward the carriage, and, rather strainedly, forced a smile of reassurance. A reassurance that it was obvious he didn't feel himself at the moment, much less being able to pass it on to someone else.

A smaller hand reached out to take his, and its owner followed him down.

She was about eighteen. Perhaps not even that. She had dark-brown hair, piled high atop her head and drawn back from her face in what was called a pompadour. She wore a hat that went high up on one side and far down on the other. It stayed that way through the aid of numbers of pins. It had willow plumes on the side that was up, it had roses and green leaves on the side that was down. A collar as high as his gripped her throat. However, it was not starched linen, but lace, stiffened with whalebone ribs. She held the bottom of her dress up from the ground with one hand. This was highly necessary, for it not only touched the ground, it lay over it for quite a few inches on all sides of her when at rest.

But in spite of all this she would have been beautiful in any generation.

They stood there terrified together, hand clasping hand low at their sides, as if trying to hide this bond from the world.

One of the peripatetic bellboys appeared. "Take your luggage in, sir?" he inquired.

The boy could only nod mutely, too stricken to speak. He paid and tipped the coachman, with considerable agitated fumbling of hands.

"Thank you kindly," the coachman said. "Lots of luck to the two of you." He touched whip to horse-flank. "And may all your troubles be little ones," he added.

"I wonder how he could tell about us so easy?" the girl whispered with a nervous titter.

“They like to tease a lot,” he said soothingly. He curled her hand protectively about his arm. “Shall we go in?”

They went up the still-new entrance steps of the St. Anselm and into a marble-floored lobby that had, for the present occasion, been turned into almost a jungle of potted palms, ferns, and floral good-luck offerings. Most of these would be removed within a day or two, but at the moment it was almost like picking your way through a hothouse greenery.

“This way, sir, if you’d care to register,” the bellboy called helpfully to them. He was visible only above the waist, where he stood, and their baggage, presumably on the floor, had disappeared completely.

They approached the desk.

“Mr. Graham, please!” the bellboy called, addressing banked flowers.

Mr. Graham, the desk clerk, peered out at them from one side of a huge horseshoe of pink roses that partially screened his domain. They shifted over to the side he was on, since they had been erroneously standing over at the other side of the obstacle until then. Mr. Graham, however, had sought to adjust himself to them at the same moment as they did to him, so he had shifted back to the first side, by the time they left it and reached the second. Immediately, both parties corrected their mistake. Mr. Graham returned to the second side, his left; they returned to the first, their right.

Mr. Graham found a way of stopping the pendulum-like fluctuation at last, before it continued any further and died down of its own momentum. “Just stand there where you are now and wait for me,” he suggested wearily. “I’ll be right over.”

“I made a reservation,” the young man said timidly, when equipoise had been re-established. “John Compton.” He corrected himself. “Mr. Compton.” He corrected himself a

second time, and far more all-embracingly. “Mr. and Mrs. John Compton.”

The girl dropped her eyes for a moment at this point, both pleased and shy.

The young man leaned forward. “The—er—the special suite,” he said diffidently.

“Oh, the bridal suite,” blurted out the insensitive Mr. Graham. “Yes, of course. We received your reservation. I have it right here.”

The girl picked at one of the marginal roses on the horseshoe as a cover for her self-consciousness.

“I’m terribly sorry,” Mr. Graham said. “If we’d only known where to reach you in time—”

“Why? Is something wrong?” the young groom demanded tautly.

“There was a hitch,” Mr. Graham apologized. “We’ve been doing everything we can to be ready on time, but those things will happen. Well, the fact of the matter is, Mr. Compton, it’s not quite finished yet. I wouldn’t feel right about putting you in there, on an—on an occasion such as this.” He bestowed a glance on the dewy-eyed bride, which sent her back to rose-leaf plucking again in a hurry. “Won’t you let me put you elsewhere just for tonight, and then I promise you the suite will be yours, without fail, tomorrow?”

The young pair looked at one another.

“Do you mind?” he murmured.

“Do you?” she breathed back.

The two deferring questions should have neutralized one another and brought them right back where they were, but he already seemed to be able to translate her meanings without any difficulty, inexperienced husband though he was. “Well, all right,” he said, “if you’re sure we can have the other tomorrow.”

“I give you my word,” Mr. Graham promised. He turned to the rack behind him. “I have a lovely room, up on the

ninth. I’m sure you’ll find it satisfactory.” He handed a key to the bellboy. “Nine-twenty-three for Mr. and Mrs. Compton, Richard. Will you sign here, please, Mr. Compton?”

The groom bent over and wrote: “Mr. and Mrs. John T. Compton, Indiana.” He looked at it tenderly when he’d finished. Then he looked at her lovingly. “First time together—on paper,” he whispered.

She nodded eagerly, and clung closer to his arm, both her hands now clasped around it.

They went over and joined their waiting luggage and the bellboy in the brand-new elevator, its trellis-like ironwork still glistening with freshly applied gold-leaf.

The boy ushered them off at the ninth floor, stopped at a door, keyed and opened it, reached in. Some brand-new electric lights went on in bright welcome.

And at this point the story of Room 923 begins.

They followed him in and looked around.

“Oh, it’s nice, isn’t it?” she said.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” he agreed.

The bellboy bustled around, trying to make unnecessary actions look like highly necessary ones. Then he retired to the door and came to the crux of the matter. “Will there be anything else, sir, for now?”

“No, thank you.” Young Compton put something in his hand a little self-consciously.

The boy eyed it with widening eyes. “Thank you. Thank you very much, sir.” He backed out, closed the door, and they were alone.

The slightest of pauses followed.

Then she asked, “Did he bring everything up?”

“Yes,” he said. Then he contradicted himself by amending, “Wait, I’ll count,” and told off each separate piece with outpointed finger. “One, two, three—and that little one. Yes, he brought everything up.”

Another sliver of pause came between them; under other circumstances it would have been scarcely noticeable as such, but now they were acutely aware of every momentary silence that occurred between them.

“Don’t you want to take off your hat?” he suggested with an odd mixture of intimacy and abashed formality.

“Yes, I guess I may as well,” she assented.

She crossed to the dressing-table and seated herself at the glass. He remained where he was, watching.

“Gee, I always *did* think you had such pretty hair!” he blurted out suddenly with boyish enthusiasm. “The very first time I met you, I noticed that about you.”

She turned her head and smiled at him, equally girlish to his boyishness for an unguarded moment. “I remember, I’d just washed it that day. And Mamma had helped me put it up afterward. I told her that night how lucky it was we had.”

She turned back to the glass and looked at it intently in there. “It must be terrible to grow old and have it turn gray. I can’t picture that; the same hair, like it is now, should turn gray and still be on *me.*”

“But everyone’s does when they get old enough.”

“Yes, other people’s; but to have it happen to *you!*” She peered at herself more closely. “I can’t imagine it ever happening to me. But when it does, it won’t be me any more. It’ll be somebody else.” She touched her fingers to the sides of her face. “An old lady looking out of my eyes,” she said wonderingly. “A stranger inside of me. She won’t know me, and I won’t know her.”

“Then I’ll be a stranger too,” he said thoughtfully. “Two strangers, in a marriage that was begun by two somebody-elses.”

For a moment they were both frightened by this thing their nervously keyed prattle had conjured up. Then they both laughed, and the imminent fright went away.

He went over to her and touched his lips to the piled hair on the top of her head. She acknowledged the caress by placing her hand atop his, where it rested lightly on her shoulder.

“Are you tired?” he murmured close to her ear.

“Yes. Not-too much, though. Just from all the excitement.”

“Should we unpack our things?”

She welcomed the offered distraction. “All right, let’s. Because tomorrow we’ll be doing so much.”

“Want me to help you?”

“No, I can manage. I know which key belongs to which.”

He opened a door in the wall. “Look at the size of this closet.”

She came over beside him to look. “I want a closet that big when we have our own place. I love the way they smell when they’re new, don’t you? All clean wood-shavings and cedar. Just think, our things will be the first that were ever hung up in it. We sort of christen it.”

They smiled at each other. For a moment they were more like children playing house than two slightly bewildered, slightly frightened people about to enter on the most momentous stage of their personal lives.

“How’ll we do it?” he asked. “Should I take half, and you half?”

“I guess that’s what they—do,” she concurred vaguely.

“Which side do you want?” he invited.

“It doesn’t make any difference. I’ll take from here over, and you take from there over.”

He was already over at one of the valises, squatted down on his heels before it, applying himself perseveringly first to one lock, then the other. “My brother gave me this one,” he said, in apology for its recalcitrance. “I never can quite get

it the first time, as long as I've been using it. There it is." The lid went back and over.

She darted a quick glance of curiosity at the contents. "Oh, how many neckties! Does everybody have that many?"

"I've kept every one I ever owned, I guess," he admitted. "I've never thrown one away, from the very first one I wore when I first put on long pants."

"That's a pretty one there, on top. The one with the blue. Wear that one tomorrow. I'd like it on you."

"Ma gave me that on my birthday, when I was twenty-one. The last birthday—she was with us."

"Oh, well, then maybe—" she said with quick compunction.

"No, I like to wear it. I've worn it lots of times, since. That's what she wanted me to do. She bought it for me to wear." He extricated it from under the straps with a zigzag sawing motion. "I'll take it out now, and leave it on top here. So I'll remember in the morning."

He spread it flat along the top of the dresser. She stepped over after him and evened out, with her finger tips, a slight ripple that had remained in the topmost fold, as though the tie now belonged to the two of them alike, and must be cherished equally by both. "The bees are raised in it," she said with proprietary approval. "I like that."

They went back to their unpacking. They were not exactly with their backs to one another, but each with one shoulder given to the other, due to the position of the two pieces of luggage.

He glanced around after a moment. "It smells nice in there," he complimented her.

"Mamma put in two little bags of sachet, one in each corner, before I left."

Again they both returned to their unpacking.

With a double armful of fuming cambric layers, like someone holding newly trapped snow in her arms, she crossed to the dresser, opened the drawer, carefully put

them in. She carried the fleecy articles turned toward the side, away from him, so that he wouldn't get too close a look at them. Within a day or two it wouldn't matter, they would be as one about such things, but at the moment modesty still claimed her, for these were articles of under-apparel.

When he in turn made a trip to the bureau with a double armful from his own receptacle, he likewise held it turned away from her to conceal it from view as much as possible.

Self-consciousness, which had more or less glazed the two of them during those few moments, thawed away again now that that was done. Smiling across-shoulder at one another, he closed down his suitcase, she closed down hers. She brushed off her finger tips against their opposites, but to indicate completion rather than that the task had been dusty. "Well, that much is finished," she said with satisfaction.

"Yes," he agreed. "We won't have to do that now." Then he suggested, "Why don't you sit down? No sense standing."

She selected an armchair, deposited herself into it with a little bounce of possessiveness, due in part no doubt to the newness of the springs. She said again, as she had about the closet, "Oh, I'd love to have a chair like this when we have our own home."

He slung himself down beside her on one arm of the chair, and tucked his arm around her to her further shoulder, and feeling it there, she allowed her head to pillow back against it.

They were quiet for some moments, utterly, blissfully content. No need to talk, nor even to caress. Their being together like this, close like this, was in itself one big caress. He allowed his head to incline toward hers at last, that was the only thing, and remain there, cheek pressed to the top of her head.

Their eyes looked out straight ahead, into the distance, into the future, into a from-now-on, that was in the same

place for the two of them. Golden future, peach-bloom future, impossible to capture, and even had it been possible to capture, impossible to hold. And even had it been possible to hold, impossible to bear, to endure. Not of this world at all, a future without a cloud, without a pain, without a spiteful word; without a wrinkle, without a gray hair, without a stiffening bone. A dream within a dream within a dream. The Great Shortchange practiced on youth since time immemorial. The boy, the girl, and the Great Untruth, blinding them all alike, two by two, down the countless generations. The bait that traps them together. A Christmas-tree bauble that, when they try to touch it, let alone hold onto it, crumples into a thousand tinseled fragments. And when they look, they hold nothing in their hands, only silvery dust. Like when you pinch a moth by the wings. But even the moth at least is there, for the moment you pinch it. This other thing isn't.

Once during his double revery she said softly, "I can't believe it even yet, can you?"

He understood the unexpressed thought. "No," he said. "Me either."

"That there was a time, only a little while ago, when there wasn't any you yet, just me. By myself, alone."

"And now there's you and me, both."

"It must be terrible to be alone."

"Like we were a couple months ago."

"I can't remember it any more, can you? But it must be terrible. To go through each day without any—you."

"But now we don't have to any more," he said. "From now on, each day has you in it."

He took out a watch. She'd seen it before. It had been given to him on his graduation from high school. He'd told her so. It was gold-plated. He'd told her so. It had a fob of two little pennants of black moire ribbon. They hung from an inch-wide bar. That was gold-plated too. It was the only watch they had with them, but one was enough. They had

no separate needs of time; there was no time apart from one another. There was only time together.

He opened the lid with a spunky little click. She loved to look at the lid. It was bright as a mirror. It had on it: “To John, from Mother and Dad.”

He said, “I guess we better think about—” And then he stopped, because he hadn’t been ready in time with the right last word. The sentence really called for the terminal phrase “—going to bed,” but he didn’t want to use that. She didn’t want him to either.

He only stopped a moment; you could hardly notice it. Then he didn’t go back over the first part again. He only said “—retiring.”

“I guess we better,” she assented.

He got off the arm of the chair.

Then he said, “I guess I better go downstairs a minute-first.” Somebody must have told him this was the considerate thing to do. Maybe his father, maybe one of his friends.

“All right,” she said tractably.

She had stood up, too, now.

He came close and he kissed her.

His face didn’t have the handsome regularity of a Greek statue. But a Greek statue couldn’t smile, couldn’t show light in its eyes.

He went nearly as far as the door, but not quite.

Then he touched his pockets exploratively. His wallet, with his—their—money in it.

“I don’t need this,” he said. “I’ll leave it up here.”

He went over and he put it on the dresser-top. Not too far from where the necktie was, tomorrow’s necktie.

Then he did go to the door, all the way this time.

And he turned and looked at her so tenderly, so softly, that the look was a caress in itself. With just a touch of rue in it.

“Are you afraid?” he said.

“You mean now, about your going downstairs awhile?”

“No, I mean after—when I come back again.”

She dropped her eyes only momentarily. Then she quickly raised them again, and they looked directly into his, candidly and confidently. “No, because I know you love me. And even if part of love is strange, if the rest of it is good, then all of it has to be good. And soon there are no different parts to it, it is all just one love. Those are the words my mother told me, when she kissed me good-bye.”

“I love you,” he said, as devoutly as when you’re in a church saying a prayer meant only for God and yourself to hear. “So don’t be afraid.” Then he said only one thing more. “I’ll be back in just a little bit.”

Then he closed the door. But for a minute or two his face seemed to glow there where it had been. Then it slowly wore thin, and the light it had made went away.

Like the illusion of love itself does.

In a prim little flurry now she started disrobing. Intent on having it complete before she should be interrupted.

At the moment of passing from chemise to nightrobe, quite instinctively and without knowing she did it, she briefly closed her eyes. Then as the gown rippled downward to the floor, she opened them again. It was not, she had learned or been cautioned when still quite a little girl, nice to scrutinize your own body when it was unclothed. The gown was batiste, a trousseau gown, with eyelet embroidery and a bertha—that is to say, an ample capelike flap covering both shoulders; it was bluish in the shadows where it fell hollowed, pink where her body touched against it, but its actual color was snowy-white.

She had always brushed her hair before retiring. She did it now, for there was something comforting about the sense of normalcy it gave to do it; it was like something familiar to cling to in an eddy of imminent strangeness. She counted each stroke to herself, up to fifty; she longed to go past there, up to a hundred, for it would have seemed to help to

arrest time, not allow it to go forward, but she conscientiously curbed herself and refrained.

Then she gave a look around the room, inquiringly and still with that flurried intensity. There was nothing left to do now, no remaining detail unattended.

She went to the bed, turned her back to it, and entered it.

She drew the covers up tightly about one shoulder—the other was turned inward to the pillow.

She gave a little sigh, of finality, of satisfaction, of when there is utterly nothing left to do and one is content there isn't.

Her eyes remained fixed on the door. Not in a hard stare, but in soft expectancy. Nothing tenderer in this world, the eyes of youth looking for its love.

It tires you to look too long at any one object, no matter how gently. Her eyes left the door at last, and went over to the window. That didn't hold them nearly as long, for there was nothing to be expected of it. Love wouldn't enter through there. Then they went to the chair. There she made a discovery that cried for immediate reparation. One lace-cuffed leg-opening of her foreshortened pantaloons was hanging down in full, indelicate sight, escaping perversely from under everything else. It must have freed itself later, for she had painstakingly folded that particular article scrupulously from sight; it was the one thing of all she wished to have remain unnoticed.

"Will I have time to get over there and back before—?" she asked herself, appalled.

But it couldn't be allowed to remain that way; it was more than indelicate, it was almost brazen, rakish, the way it flaunted itself.

She suddenly braved the risk. The covers flew back, she gave a sprightly little vault out of the bed, reached the chair, interred the offending garment, and returned to the bed. The way a child steals from its bed for a moment and scrambles back again undetected by its parents.

Reinstated, again she watched the door.

Now this time it was her hands that tired first, and not her eyes. They tightened in their hold of one another. Soon they grew taut, almost strained; were crushing against one another. She straightened them out. Almost at once they crept toward one another again, crooked, interlocked; clung desperately together, as though each without the other would die.

At last she took them away from one another altogether, seeing she could do nothing with them. One sought out her hair, and nervously felt at it here and there to see if it was in order. It was left, for that matter, in less order than it had been at first. The other sought the shoulder of her gown and twisted that about a little.

Perhaps he was standing just outside the door, uncertain whether to come in. Perhaps young men had trepidations at such a delicate time as this, just as she—just as girls—did. Perhaps if she were to go to the door, open it, that would resolve his irresolution for him.

The decision to go to the door, open it and look out, far more daring than the sortie to the chair had been, grew on her for many minutes before she found the courage to carry it out. At last, pinning her underlip beneath her teeth as if to steel herself to the act, she emerged from the bed once more. Because this was a door, and outside was a public corridor, she put on her wrapper first and gathered it tight. Then she went over to it, the door, and stood there by it, summoning up fresh reserves of courage, sorely needed. She put her hand out gingerly toward the knob, the way you reach for something very hot that you’re afraid will burn you.

Then she hesitated there like that, hand on knob.

If he didn’t discover her in the act of doing this, she wouldn’t tell him—later—that she had done it. It smacked a little too much of boldness, or, what was equally as bad, impatience.

Now she touched the door with her other hand, and inclined her head closer toward it, as if trying not so much to listen but rather to divine by some other subtle sense whether he was present there on the other side of it—or not.

She opened the door and looked, and he wasn't; it was empty there on the other side.

She sighed, and the attentive forward-lean her body had taken relapsed into a backward inert slump of disappointment.

Perhaps he was further down the corridor, walking to and —? She tightened further her already tightened wrapper, and like an aerialist walking on a single wire, advanced through the door-opening and out to the corridor proper, one foot keeping in a straight line behind the other.

It was empty from end to end. Just carpeting, and light bulbs looking so lonely against the wall, like forgotten little orphan suns. She remembered the hall from before, from when they'd first come in, but it hadn't looked so lonely then. Maybe because she hadn't been so lonely then either.

She stood there long, long moments. But nothing, no one, came into sight. The emptiness stayed as empty as before. She re-entered the room at last, closed the door, and mournfully inclined her head against it on the inside in a desolate sort of way. Then that ended too, presently, as all attitudes and postures must sooner or later.

She moved away from there and roamed the room, without a destination, deep in thought, absently touching things as she went, to guide herself. He could not mean to stay away this long. He had lost track of the time. That must be it. That must be the explanation, there could be no other.

Perhaps if she called down, he would understand. Yes, but what genteel way was there to convey the message? "Would you ask my husband to come up, please?" She shuddered at that. It was so unthinkable it made her squeeze her eyes tightly shut for a moment. No, she couldn't say anything like

that. The man at the phone—She tried out several other phrases in her mind, and rejected them as being almost as indelicate if not equally so. “Could you tell me what the time is, please? Our watch has stopped up here.” But the mere fact that she was watching the watch; he’d read between the lines—“Could you please arrange to have us called at such-and-such an hour?” But that was unsatisfactory from another point of view; that was almost too neutral. The man down there might take the request literally, and while accepting it, fail entirely to convey it to her husband, in which case nothing would have been solved.

She had stopped meanwhile by one of the valises, her own, and this finally, as she glanced down and noticed it, gave her the sought-after inspiration. The perfect phrasing in which to imbed her unspoken message. Completely neutral, and yet personal enough to require his participation. She rehearsed it to herself, in order to have the wordage arranged right and not be caught faltering at the moment of pronouncing it. Then, letter-perfect, she went to the wall telephone and brought down the corded earpiece from it. She wound the little crank and the connection was established.

A man’s voice, frighteningly immediate and immediately frightening, the gruffest voice a man had ever used in the whole world before, the harshest, the raspiest, said: “Yes, please? Can I be of service?”

She began too low, and had to start over at once.

“Beg pardon?”

“I said, I can’t seem to open one of our suitcases. My husband—” She swallowed hard, and almost spoiled it, but recovered in time. “Would you ask him if he has the key with him, please?”

“I will without fail, madam, just as soon as I see him.”

She’d had the same sensation once years before, when a small boy in a tree had dropped a soft splashy snowball on

her as she passed below and it had struck and disintegrated at the nape of her neck.

"Oh, isn't he—? I thought he was—"

"He went out of the building, madam. I saw him as he went past."

"But are you sure it was—?"

"The night bellboy told me it was the young man from '23."

She didn't speak any further. She hadn't strength enough to hang up, she hadn't fortitude enough to continue listening.

He must have sensed an urgency she hadn't wanted to show. "Shall I send out and see if he's outside by the entrance?"

She didn't say anything. Her breath was too much in the way, rising up again before it had even finished going down, leaving no passage clear.

The wait was cruel and long. And this had nothing to do with measured time, for even had it been of no duration whatever, an immediate turnabout, it would have been no less cruel, no less long. The heart cannot measure, it can only feel; in a single instant it can feel as much as in a long slow hour, it cannot feel more than that.

There was a background murmur soon, as of tidings being brought, and then a clear-spoken address directly to her: "He doesn't seem to be out there right now, madam. He may have taken a short stroll away from the hotel. Just as soon as he returns I'll notify him that you—"

She heard him go, at the other end, and what was there to stay for anyway? But she stayed; just stayed there, on and on, through long slow minutes that never seemed to pass away.

At last she came away from there, a thin shining line down each cheek like silver threads unraveling from her eyes. She was cold suddenly, in mid-step, in mid-room, with a knifelike instantaneousness that temperature alone could

never have brought about. Quivering spasmodically, with clenched teeth and rigidity of movement. Clutching for the warmest thing she could lay hands on, a woolen bathrobe, she encased herself in it like a cocoon, muscles too chill-bound to allow her to insert arms through sleeves. Covered up to her very eyes, she huddled in the chair they had once shared, feet folded up, a lumpy little woolen mound of misery.

The chill soon stopped. Only misery went on; whether warm blood or cold, the same misery. Her eyes stared hauntedly, fixedly, from just above the upended robe-collar; darkly shadowed now by long strain, perhaps darkly shadowed too by the fact that they were so recessed within the sheltering robe. Her mouth was hidden, and most of her nose. Only the eyes, like low-burning lamps of despair. Never wavering, scarcely blinking. Duller now than they had been before. Tearless too, for grief was past its early weeping stage; had become a deeper, unseen thing.

The night wore on, with a hush like funeral velvet draperies.

When she was a little girl, she had feared the night, as most small children do. Once, awakening too early and in the dark, she had cowered there uneasy and sent up a little plea: “Make the light come soon; make the night go away.” Now, it was the day she feared, the coming of light. For while the night still lasted, it might yet return him. But when the day came, she would have lost him altogether. She knew that well, knew that well. It was in the night that he had gone, and if the night did not bring him back to her, the day never would. His absence would be sealed forever. So now she prayed for darkness, prayed for night, the punishing night, to last beyond its span.

“Don’t let the day come. Don’t let it come yet. Wait till he’s back first. Then let it come.”

But mercilessly the night thinned away, as if there were a giant unseen blackboard eraser at work, rubbing it out. And

in the new light he didn’t come, just as he hadn’t in the former dark. Still her eyes stared out over the woolen folds, looking nowhere, seeing nothing now. Duller than dull, hopelessly opaque.

She must have slept, or dozed awake at least. Her head went over a little to the side at last, became more inert. The eyes never fully closed, but lost some of their haunted fixity. The lids did not drop over them the whole way, but sagged to a somnolent meridian.

The fidgeting of the knob must have been hours after. No hope came with its fluttering, somehow. Hope would not come back; it had been dead too long perhaps. It didn’t even stir, strangely enough. Nor when the questioning tap came. Nor when it parted at the seams and a gap was made, empty the first few instants. Then an errant flounce of skirt peered momentarily, showing hope it had been right to lie there dead.

Above, a head looked cautiously in, everything else kept back.

The woman was in maid’s headgarb, niched cap atop a massive pillow of upturned red hair, kept walled in by barrettes. She was buxom, florid, maternal in every respect. Save perhaps the actuality.

“Did I come too soon, now?” she murmured softly.

The eyes just looked at her.

“They told me one of the rooms around here was a bride and groom, but sure it’s the first day for all of us, and I would be getting mixed up like this.”

The eyes just looked.

“Shall I step out and be coming back a little later then?”

A voice like the echo of far-off sound said: “It doesn’t matter.”

“Did the young man step out for a minute?”

The far-off voice said: “He’s gone.”

She advanced more fully into the room now, concerned. “What’s the matter, darlin’? What ails—?”

The bunched-up robe suddenly exploded like an overstuffed pod, lay there flaccid, the chair was empty, and she was clinging to her, and being clung to. Someone of one's own kind, another woman. Someone like your mother, someone like your sister. Someone like—you.

The maid held her, and patted her, and coaxed her. "Sh, darlin'. Sure and he'll be back before you know it. Any minute now, through the door he'll be coming."

"He won't. He won't. He never will again."

"How lang ago did he leave? How lang is it he's gone?"

"At twelve. I think it was at twelve. But I don't know any more. I can't remember any more."

"But sure, darlin', it's only a little after two o'clock now."

"At twelve last night."

The ruddy face whitened. For a moment her eyes were frightened too, then she covered it up. She patted the girl some more, she held her to her. Then she left her briefly, saying she'd be back. The girl just stood there exactly where she'd left her, like someone deprived of her own powers of locomotion.

When the maid came back she held a thick crockery mug of steaming tea. She led her, like an automaton, to the chair and into it, and held the mug up to her lips.

"Come, now. This'll do you good. They have a little closet on each floor at the back of the hall, with a gas-ring in it, so we maids can brew ourselves a cup of tea at noon." She stroked her hair a little as the girl tasted of it. She finally left the mug in her hands altogether. Then she turned to make the bed, from habit that was already fixed by morning-long practice. When she saw she had no need to, she drew in her lips in unspoken commiseration, and quickly turned away again with an almost pirouette-like rapidity.

She sat down herself then, in solacing camaraderie, but on the very edge of the chair, to show that her stay was stolen and had to be a short one.

She asked what her name was, the girl's. This brought on pain again, but the mug was there to conceal the flickering her lips made. "It was to have been Compton."

The maid quickly spoke of her own, to snare her mind away. "Mine's Ann, spelt shart, without the e. I don't know why they left it aff, but as long as they did, I might as well keep it that way. Ye can write it quicker that way."

She rose soon and had to leave her, telling her she had half the floor still to do, but promising to look in on her a little later. "I'll be right out there somewhere. Call me if you want anything, and I'll drop the broom and dustpan and come to you in a minute. Don't you want to get a little rest now."

The girl averted her eyes from the bed almost in horror. "I couldn't get in there. I couldn't."

"Let me fix you in the chair, then." She put a pillow behind her head and, daring the official wrath, for all the bedding was new, slipped another to the floor underneath her feet. She took one of the blankets and deftly spread it over her. She stroked her hair soothingly, before turning to go. "Is there no one ye want me to tell, for you, now?"

The girl said plaintively, "There was only he. Who else could there be?"

She left as she had entered the first time, gradually; her face remaining to peer back after the rest of her was already hidden.

"Come back soon, Ann," the girl whispered.

A flirt of skirt in the door-seam, just like the first time, and she was gone.

She had left the chair when Ann next entered. This was quite some hours later, and she was crouched on the floor, head and shoulder supported upright against the dresser. One of the drawers peered open. Against her she held pressed a man's white shirt, still buttoned in a flat oblong. One empty papery sleeve she had drawn up around her

own shoulder, as if seeking a phantom embrace. She was awake.

Ann said nothing, drew it subtly away from her, and it deftly vanished from sight. She got her back to the chair again. She had brought more tea, and this time slabs of buttered white bread. The tea she got her to take, the bread she couldn't.

"And is there no one you're going to tell about this, darlin'?" she breathed coaxingly.

"I have no one. Who is there?"

Then, belatedly, she noticed a change in her comforter's appearance. "You're going away. You're going to leave me."

Ann had on a short pinched-in jacket, a bell-shaped ground-trailing skirt, and on her head a flat saucer-like straw hat from which looped three cherries, one of them on a broken stem. "I have to, darlin'. Sure I finished up lang ago. I hung behind all I could. I even asked the housekeeper could I be staying with you in here tonight. 'An employee in one of the guestrooms? Out of the question!' You know how they talk."

The girl wrung her hands, and bowed her forehead against them. "Oh, what'll I do? All night in here, alone."

"I'll be here bright and early. I'll look in at you the first thing." She drew her from the chair, and tried to guide her across the room.

At the last minute the girl noticed the destination, shrank back. "I can't. Don't ask me to. I'll keep staring at the door, and the door'll keep staring at me. Like last night."

"Is it the door that bothers you, now?"

"All night long I'll watch it, waiting for it to open."

"If I cover it so ye can't see it, then will ye try to sleep?"

"But how can you?"

The purposeful Ann looked about, for a daring moment even eyed the drapes. Then, discarding such a job-risking choice, came to a heroic decision. Modestly she turned away from her protege. Up, in bunchy awkwardness, went

the ground-trailing skirt. Down, in sudden release, came a petticoat. Not new, not even whole perhaps, but her own, all she had to give. She stepped clear, the skirt subsided, and the diminution could not have been detected.

She picked it up, went to the door, and held it outspread against it in measurement. It was inadequate.

“Wait, now,” she said determinedly, though nothing had been said.

Her arms came close together, widened with a rending noise, and the petticoat had opened from waist to hem into twice its former area.

“Oh, no!” the girl protested too late. “Your petticoat—How’ll you get home?”

“Sure and many’s the time I hadn’t one to my name, and I still moved about. It’s June.”

She slipped out, came back with a palmful of thumbtacks filched from the supply room at the end of the hall. Using only the toil-toughened heel of her hand to drive them home, she obliterated the door for at least two-thirds of the way down with a sort of diagonal slipcover effect. The bottom third could not be seen from a prone position in the bed.

“There, darlin’,” she said, “it won’t hurt you anny more.”

“Now when I look at it,” the girl mused, “I’ll think of you, not of—”

Ann was able now to lead her docilely to the bed, help her in, and prod and plump the covers about her. The girl lay with her head flat on the pillow, staring straight up at the ceiling overhead. Ann stood there by her a moment, placed her hand on her forehead in consolation; looked down considering, decided, and finally put her lips to the girl’s forehead in a sisterly kiss of sympathy.

“Rest, now,” she coaxed her. “Till the marning, darlin’. We’ve been told to get here by seven, but I’ll make sure I’m here by six, so I can be with you a little bit.” She moved on toward the door, the ex-petticoat bellied out hugely for a

moment, there was a smothered latch-click, and she was gone.

The girl's eyes kept staring straight up at the ceiling overhead. Not right away, not soon even, but after a lengthy while they flickered closed, reopened briefly once or twice, and then at last she slept.

Her sleep was not without the continuing thoughts and images of her waking, however; its stresses and its longings kept on uninterrupted. And, as in most such dreams, there was a magic formula by which she could recover him, bring him back. Waiting there for her to use, if only she could. So easy that it tantalized, so simple that it tortured, made her twitch upon the bed. It was: just to speak his name, just to say it. That was all she had to do.

Other names like meteors flashed by, lighting up momentarily the black skies of her sleep, but always the wrong ones. "Arthur." "Wallace." And the strange name of a little boy she had once schooled with: "Ansel." While he waited patiently just out of sight to appear when she would have pronounced his own, the right one.

Faster and faster her head rolled to and fro on the pillow. She even arched her back clear of the bed time after time, to fall back again frustrated every time.

And suddenly, as she seized upon it at last, the effort of doing so shattered the dream like a dark-glass casing, too much violence for its fragile texture, and her eyes flew open and she awoke.

Saying it low first, then louder, louder still, then screaming it out, in vain effort to stay the dream and have it fulfill its promise. "Johnny! John-*eee!*"

But the dream wouldn't come back, and the magic formula was no good now.

Over and over she screamed it, hoping against hope that it would work. "John-*eee!* John-*eee!*" Then stopped at last only because she had no more breath to spend.

In a moment or so someone tapped tentatively on the other side of the door. She seized a comer of the pillow and stuffed it into her mouth, and closed her teeth on it, to keep from screaming any more.

Then the voice of a man said, speaking to someone beside him: “Nobody in there. It must have come from somewhere else, I guess.” And they went away again.

She whimpered awhile, and lay awake awhile, in the silence of the coffinlike night.

Then again she slept, and then again she dreamed. But the new dream was less exacting, producing him without requiring of her any magic formula.

The petticoat vanished and the naked door was there again.

Then it opened, and she knew he was there, just back out of sight. Her heart could feel his presence salving its hurt.

Then his head appeared, timorously. She had to call out, to reassure him: “It’s all right, Johnny. It’s all right.”

Then at last all of him, and there he was. The tie he’d worn, the suit. Even to his hat, thrown back upon his head, as she had seen him once do on the train, to relieve heat and haste.

He came all the way in, as far as the foot of the bed. As though he were staying now, as though he were staying now. He even rested both hands on the footrail of the bed. He was so near her now, and she to him. Almost she thought she could feel the warmth of his breath carried to her on the cold barren air. Almost she thought she could see those little glints of topaz, like spinning pinwheels, in his dark-brown eyes.

“I can explain,” he said. “I can explain why I stayed so long.”

“I know you can,” she said docilely. “I know you can, Johnny.”

“But only if I have time enough. If they don’t give me time enough—”

“Hurry, Johnny! Hurry, while you still have time—!”

But just as he started to, it was already too late. Time, the mysterious enemy, overtook him. Three cherries sprouted from the top of his head, and dangled over sideward, one on a broken stem.

His face got redder than it had been, and broader, and he was Ann the chambermaid, leaning over the foot of the bed and crooning pleadingly: “Don’t you know me, now? Don’t you remember me from yesterday?”

The girl murmured softly, but wistfully rather than with resentment, “Now he’ll never come. Now you’ve made him go away forever. And just when I almost had him.”

Ann stayed with her awhile, and gave her tea again. Then she left, promising, “I’ll be back soon, dear. As soon as ever I can.”

When she came it was several hours later, and she had someone else with her. She stood back by the doorway in deference, and let the other come forward alone and take command of the visit. The newcomer was a woman.

She wore pince-nez glasses. She wore a dress of sleek bronze-colored bombazine, iridescent like the breast feathers of a pouter pigeon, and at her waist a black alpaca apron with two pockets. In one was a writing-tablet, in the other a great mass of keys, resembling a porous chunk of ore that has been imperfectly smelted and failed to fuse properly. From her bosom hung an open-face gold watch, suspended upside-down so that it could be lifted and read with a single move of the hand. A lead pencil was thrust raffishly (but no doubt the raffishness was not intended) through one of the “rats” at the back of her head.

She patted the girl’s hand. It was meant kindly, but it was a perfunctory pat. She exuded no warmth, such as Ann breathed with every breath she drew. “Now, dear,” she said, “what is it?”

“Nothing,” the girl said. She could think of no other answer to make to a question like that.

“Now, dear,” the housekeeper said again, “what do you want us to do?”

“Nothing,” the girl said. She could think of no other answer to make to that question either.

“Is there nothing you would like us to do?”

This time the girl looked up at her with the plaintiveness of a sick child coaxing for a drink of water. “Can I have Ann back?”

The woman turned her head to where Ann stood. “Ann has her duties,” she replied disapprovingly. “She must not stay away from them too long.”

As though she understood the hint, Ann immediately slithered out the door and was gone.

The housekeeper gave the girl’s hand one more perfunctory pat, turned to go herself. At the open door she said, “Mr. Lindsey will have to be notified. He will have to decide what is to be done.” Then she closed the door after her.

The girl remained alone.

Some time after, a knock again interrupted her solitude. The knock did not wait for a response, but the door was opened immediately on its heels, and a dignified and well-dressed gentleman entered, with the air of someone who did not need to ask permission but was free to enter a room like this at any time he chose.

He was about her father’s age, and dressed somewhat as she had seen her father dressed; but not at ordinary times, only on rare occasions, such as churchgoing on an Easter Sunday morning. He had a very heavy down-turned mustache, glistening with wax, and wore a small flower, she did not know its name, in the buttonhole of his swallowtail coat.

“My poor child,” was his greeting to her. “I’ve come to see what can be done about this.” Then, after having already seated himself, he asked, “May I sit down a moment and have a little chat with you?”

Her face flickered briefly as the sympathy in his voice revived her grief. She nodded mutely; he made her feel less lost and lonesome.

"I'm Mr. Lindsey, dear," he introduced himself; and though he didn't add that he was the manager, somehow she knew that he must be. He had too much of an air of habitual authority about him.

"Tell me about yourself," he said artlessly.

And, hesitantly and awkwardly at first, but soon without any self-consciousness whatever or even awareness that she was doing so, she was answering the sprinkling of guiding questions that he put to shape the course of her talk. She did not even know that they were questions, they were so deftly inserted. She did not even know, in telling him about their house at home, that she had told him what street it was on, or what its number was, or of course what town it was situated in. Sitting back at ease in his chair, one knee crossed above the other, nodding benignly, he skillfully slanted the conversation.

Then almost in mid-word—hers, not his own—his knees had uncoupled, he was on his feet taking leave of her, and the refreshing little flow of confidence had ended. Mouth still open on an unfinished sentence, she watched him go to the door and open it, with a soothing "Forgive me, my child; I must hurry. There's an awful lot to do here today."

"Good-bye, Mr. Lindsey," she said forlornly, eyes hopeful to the end that he might change his mind and remain.

Just as he closed the door she heard him say, in a tactfully lowered voice to someone who must have remained out there waiting for him: "They must be sent for. She can't remain here alone like this."

He returned in about two hours' time—or perhaps it was even three; her standards of time were all awry now—and now there was another man with him. He opened the door on the concluding words of something they had just finished discussing, and she caught the tail-end of it. "—might be

better, as you say. The sight of it might frighten her.” He entered alone first; the second person lingered outside the door an additional moment or two. She had a vague impression, she didn’t know why, that he was disencumbering himself of something. She even glimpsed a stiffly outthrust arm for an instant, held as when one shucks a sleeve off it.

Then the other man came in at last. He was older than Mr. Lindsey. He could almost have been her Grandpa, if her Grandpa had still been alive. He came in smoothing down his mop of snowy-white hair, as if he had just finished removing something from his head. His attire was incomplete almost to the point of freakishness. She had never seen anyone dressed like that before, except in their own home. He had on dark-blue trousers, an undershirt with elbow-length sleeves, suspenders over this, and pinned to the undershirt as one would wear a medal, some sort of a shield or badge. Still, everything was so unreal to her now, so strange, that this one little bit of added strangeness held no meaning, glided by her almost unnoted.

He seated himself and promptly began to talk to her. Mr. Lindsey remained standing in the background, attentive but taking no part.

Like Mr. Lindsey, his whole conversation was in the form of questions. Unlike Mr. Lindsey, they were all about Johnny, not herself. About his family, about where he had come from, about how long she had known him. She found it very difficult to talk to him, mainly because the subject-matter held so much pain in it for her. It hadn’t been painful to talk about herself; it was painful to talk about Johnny. And some of the questions were so extremely private, that she could scarcely answer them at all. Questions such as only her own mother would have asked her—and even she had not. Did she know whether he had gone with girls at all before their engagement?

“I don’t know. I think he must have. All boys do.” And then, completely unsure of herself, she in turn transformed it into a question. “Don’t they?”

Had she any way of knowing whether he had ever kissed any girl, before he had kissed her?

Her eyes pleaded with Mr. Lindsey over her interlocutor’s shoulder, and his in turn tried to reassure her.

Her face felt warm and her voice was low. “He told me—when we first did—he never had before.”

“Did he tell you why?”

He had to lean forward to catch the whispered thread of sound. “He said he never liked anyone—enough to—until he knew me.”

Then at last he let her be, and rose, and went and stood beside Mr. Lindsey, and they spoke together for a long while. She could hear some of it, but it held little meaning for her. It seemed to be on some general topic, rather than on herself and Johnny. One of those dry general topics, like politics, that grown-up men always seemed to discuss when they got together.

“Too little general education on the subject. Everything’s kept hushed up, in this day and age of ours—”

“But you can’t shout those things out loud,” protested Mr. Lindsey.

“The girls grow up knowing nothing, and half of the boys grow up and what little they know is wrong, all wrong. Then we throw them at each other’s heads, and many times this is what happens.”

“But I’m a married man myself,” she heard Mr. Lindsey tell him. “And I don’t think anyone knew less than I did when I got married, and yet my marriage has turned out very happily.”

“Don’t doubt it,” said the other man obdurately. “But it’s still blind luck. Other things enter into it too. If a boy is brought up in a strict, religious household, and trained to believe all that is sinful—then his conscience will trouble

him about it later on. The more decent the boy, the more his conscience will trouble him. You can't break away from your early training, you know. Never altogether. And I think something like that is what's at the bottom of this. I think this boy ran away because he loved her, not because he didn't love her. He wanted to keep himself from doing something that he thought was sinful to her—"

Now they were talking about Johnny himself, she could tell. "Johnny wouldn't have done anything that was sinful to me," she wanted to say, but she couldn't, she was too ashamed. She covered up her reddened face with both her hands, and tried to hide it.

For the first time the other man turned and glanced over to her. "He certainly wasn't waylaid, or it would have been reported to us by this time.

The same if he'd been injured in an accident. That leaves just this, what we've been discussing, and one other possibility—which I don't think is very likely at his age. A sudden complete loss of memory. I'm not a doctor, so I can't think what they call it. But there is such a thing; very rare though. Anyway, if it were that, I think he would have come to us of his own accord for help by now. We'll keep looking—and waiting—and I'm afraid that's all we can do. What'd you say his name was, again?" He moved toward the dresser, where the billfold lay, and reached out a hand toward it.

She sprang up with a quickness they hadn't known she was capable of, and lunged between him and the dresser like the sideward thrust of a knife, shielding it—the billfold—with her back. Or rather, shielding its exact position, for this was fetishism, though the word had not been born yet.

"No," she pleaded wildly, "don't touch it! Don't move it! It's right where his fingers left it, right in the exact place. If it stays there, then he'll come back. If you move it, then he never will."

The man gave Mr. Lindsey a look and withdrew his seeking hand.

She turned and let her own fingers hover lovingly above the article, without, however, touching it. “His hand was the last one touched it,” she said. “His hand put it down right here. It’s like a magic spell, and it mustn’t be broken.” She gestured as if patting the air above it. “It means that he’ll come back.”

“Did he go out without his tie too?” the man asked, noticing the necktie placed neatly folded beside it.

“No, that was the one he put out to wear for tomorrow.” She stopped a moment, thought about it, pensively stroking her cheek with just two fingers. “But now tomorrow’s yesterday.” She turned to him bewilderedly, as if seeking his help. “Oh, what happened to tomorrow? Who took it away?” And turned to look, as if seeking it about the four corners of the room. “Who took tomorrow away?” And even took him by the sleeve and tugged at it repeatedly, like a small child demanding an answer to its question. “It was there. It was to have come. It never did. Yet now it’s gone. Who took it? Who?”

A thin haze of grayish smoke seemed to begin rising all about, until she couldn’t see him clearly any longer, nor Mr. Lindsey, nor the room itself. It didn’t make her cough, though, like real smoke does. Just hampered her vision. The floor tipped up and nudged her knees. It didn’t hurt though. She put her palms against it, to keep it from her face.

“You’re the very one should know,” she murmured. “You are a policeman. I understand that now; I didn’t when you first came in—That’s why you wear that little thing there—” She toppled over on her side, and shielded her eyes with one best forearm. “Please Mr. Policeman. Catch them, make them give tomorrow back.”

And then somebody’s strong arms went around her and gently lifted and held her. The strong arms carried her and placed her on something soft that sank a little under her. And the gray smoke rolled in like a blanket and covered her

all up. She could even feel it being tucked in around her chin.

When the haze that had misted her eyes had cleared away again, as at last it did, Papa was there in the room with her; he was the first one she saw. He was standing, back from the bed a little, beside a chair. In the chair sat Mamma, pressed close against him, his arm consolingly about her shoulder. Within her clenched hand, raised to just below her face, she held a tiny balled-up handkerchief, and from time to time would press it to her nose. But she was not crying now, though just previously she evidently had been. This was just the leftover corrective from when she had been crying. Both their faces were haunted with concern, their eyes were fixed troubledly on her, with a steadfastness which indicated they had been gazing at her like this for a long time past. They did not smile at her, seemed too deeply troubled to be able to, even when they saw that she recognized them. Papa's mustache even seemed to droop, for it was so heavy that it took whatever shape his mouth took under it, and his mouth therefore must have been turned deeply down.

Nearer at hand was someone else. She only noticed him last, for his head had been bent down low, listening to her breathing. She knew him to be a doctor, for she felt the tiny coolness his instrument made, moving here and there about her chest. She wasn't afraid; she had had doctors do this before with a stethoscope, for a bad cold in the chest, perhaps. This was home, a part of home; a part of being with Papa and Mamma, a part of being safe, of being cared for.

His face was wise and grave as a doctor's should be, as he righted his head at last. Glasses with a black cord at the side, and a trim, neat beard, not allowed to grow too long, and eyes that sympathized and gave you confidence.

"There, dear," he said, and patted her shoulder, and made a gesture to reclose the open neck of her gown,

which, however, he did not complete. She did it herself, her attention attracted to it by his gesture.

He put away his stethoscope, and turned to them, to Mamma and Papa, and said, “She is sound physically. There is no need for worry on that score. But—” And then he didn’t finish it.

Mamma’s face tightened up even more than it was already. “What is it, Doctor?” she said in a whisper that was almost superstitiously fearful.

“She has suffered great shock,” he said, and he rose now to finally face them in entirety, so that she could see only his back. He crossed the room before speaking further, and then, trickling water into a tumbler, said, “And those things sometimes take long to wear off.” Then bringing the tumbler back to her side, he took from his bag which sat open on the floor a neat little oblong paper packet, and deftly unfolded it to make a little trough of it, and from this allowed a white powder to sift into the water and cloud it to the hue of diluted milk. “And sometimes never,” he said, concluding at last his sentence.

Mamma gave a start and cried, “Oh, Doctor—Oh, no—!”

He stirred the dose by hand-motion alone, without the aid of any spoon, by giving his wrist a rotary motion. Then passed it to her and said, “Drink this, dear. Right down.”

She knew the taste, she’d experienced it before. Calomel.

“Now lie back and rest,” he said, when he’d taken the empty tumbler back from her, and gently placed his hand upon her forehead, again more as a gesture of what he wanted her to do than by exerting any actual pressure upon her.

She lay back and watched and listened, while he gave them his undivided attention at last.

Mamma said pleadingly, “What shall we do, Doctor? Doctor, what shall we do?”

“There is nothing you can do, except wait and see. Nothing I can do, nothing anyone can do. Except let time go

by.”

“Shall we take her back with us now, Doctor?” Mamma asked.

“Is it far?” he said.

She told him where it was, in Indiana. He closed his eyes briefly, as though he would have preferred it to be not that far. Then he said, “Yes, it’s better if you do, even if the trip is a tiring one. The sooner you take her out of this terrible room and what it spells for her, the better off she’ll be.”

Mamma got up at once, and went forthwith to the bureau drawers, almost briskly, as though the mere act of starting preparations eased her distress somewhat.

Papa looked out into the hall and called to someone unseen: “Will you send the porter up?” Then came back and reached into his pocket for his billfold.

The doctor took up his hat, and went to shake hands with Papa. Mamma quickly let the drawer be momentarily, to go and join in the leave-taking.

Someone knocked on the door, and the doctor went to it and looked out. He stood there awhile, just his back showing, while someone spoke to him.

When he had closed the door again, he motioned them to come nearer. “They’ve found him,” he breathed.

“Is he—?” Papa whispered.

“They found his body,” the doctor said. “The pockets were all inside out. He didn’t have his wallet with him. Maybe if he had had it on him, he wouldn’t have been killed.”

Mamma wrung her hands.

Papa looked down at the floor.

“I leave it up to you whether to tell her or not,” the doctor said. He sighed and shook his head. “Keep her to yourselves a lot. All you can. Don’t let people hurt her.”

Mamma said, “Who would want to hurt her, Doctor? Our little girl.”

“Nobody will want to. But everyone will. Every time she sees a boy holding a girl by the hand. Every time she sees a

couple dancing. Every time she sees a baby roll by in its carriage—Keep her to yourselves a lot. All you can, all you can."

"But after we're gone, Doctor?"

"Maybe it won't matter any more by then. That would be the kindest thing. Hope for that, pray for that. Maybe it won't matter any more by then."

Then he patted Mamma on the shoulder, as one who tries to give solace where none can be given; then he shook Papa's hand. Then he was gone.

Mamma returned to her, and kissed her on the forehead, but dry-eyed and calm and wise and strong now, as she had always been when her girl was a little girl; her tears and fears no more to be seen. She helped her from the bed and stood her there before her, and dressed her as she used to when she was small. From the inside to the out, button by button, and hook-and-eye by hook-and-eye. The only difference was—she, Mamma, no longer needed to bend down on the point of her knee as she had when she was six or seven, for she was taller now, a full-grown height, not a child's height any more.

Papa in the meanwhile moved about in the background, his back to them; all the things were gone from the drawers. But on the top of the bureau his tie for tomorrow still lay, untouched, just where he had put it. She wanted to go over to it and stroke it, but Mamma, with a quick glance to see what drew her, turned her gently, ever so gently, the other way. So gently that she could not be resisted, for there was no force there to resist, only gentleness and that is stronger than force.

A porter came in and took the valises out, but she was only dimly aware of that, for Mamma was standing before her blocking her view.

Mamma put her hat on for her last of all, and adjusted it, and thrust the pins through it. The hat that went way up on one side, way down on the other.

Then Mamma placed an arm about her waist, and kissed her once again on the forehead, the kiss that she remembered so well from her childhood, the kiss of security, the kiss of consolation, the kiss of belonging to someone, of being a part of them; the kiss of home. And Mamma murmured gently beside her ear, “Come, our little girl is coming home with us.”

Step by step, with her arm about her, she led her over to the door, then out past it to where Papa stood waiting, and reaching behind her, started to draw it tactfully closed after them.

But just as it was closing, the girl herself gave an abrupt turn, and pleading, “Just one moment—! Only one—!” stepped back to it and looked in once more, while Mamma’s arm still held her around the waist.

And staring around at the emptiness, as if seeking him everywhere and finding him nowhere, she called out with whispered intensity: “Good-bye, Johnny! Good-bye! And good-bye to me too. For we both died in here the other night.”

THE NIGHT OF SEPTEMBER 30th, 1957

She arrived at about nine, that last night. That last night of the hotel. She came alone in a taxi. It had to take its place in what almost amounted to a conveyor-belt of taxis, each stopping in turn at the entrance, then drawing away again. There was this difference: hers was bringing its fare to the hotel, the rest were all taking theirs from it.

She was very frail and very old, and looked very small the way she sat there in the exact center of the broad rear seat. Her face looked unlined and peaceful, as though care had passed over it lightly.

The driver stopped at the entrance, his car grazing the one ahead as it drew away, the one just in back grazing his as it closed in to wait its turn.

She leaned forward a trifle and asked, “Is it that now?”

He looked at his watch and said, “Yes, ma’am, exactly that.”

She nodded, gratified. “I wanted it to be that exactly.”

“It’s a hard thing to do,” he said. “Let you out somewhere at an exact certain minute. I had to take you around the block three times. That made the meter climb up.”

“I don’t mind,” she reassured him quickly. “I don’t care.” She paid him, and then when he turned in the seat to try and pass the change back to her, she put the flat of her

hand up against it. “No, I don’t want anything back,” she said.

“But that was a five,” he said.

“I know it was,” she said imperturbably. “My sight is good.” Then she added, as though that explained her generosity, “I don’t ride in taxis very often.”

He got out and opened the rear door for her and helped her down. She looked smaller than ever standing beside him there on the sidewalk and with two tremendous walls of baggage towering on both sides of her. He got her bag out. She only had one, a very small one, lightweight and old-fashioned. It too looked small, just as she did.

“The place is coming down, you know,” he told her.

“I know it is,” she said. “I can read the papers.” But it wasn’t said with asperity.

“They’re putting up a twenty-six-story office building on the site.”

“Twenty-eight,” she corrected him. Then she gave a contemptuous sniff, presumably intended for office buildings in general and not just the difference of two floors.

She left him and went inside, carrying the bag herself. She stopped at the desk. “I have a reservation for Room 923,” she said. “I engaged it several weeks ago.”

He scanned some sort of a chart he had tacked up there off to one side. “I believe that floor’s already been closed off,” he said. “Won’t one of the lower floors do?”

She was firm. “No. I specified that room, and my reservation was accepted. I had it confirmed. I won’t take any other.”

He went off and spoke to somebody about it. Then he came back and said, “You can have that room.” He presented the register to her for her signature. It was open very far to the back, at the last few of its pages. She fingered the thick bulk of its preceding ones.

“How far back does this go?” she asked him.

He had to look at the opening page to find out. “Nineteen forty.”

“And what happened to the old ones? There must have been others before this. What happened to the very first one of all?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” he admitted. “Probably done away with long ago. Thrown out.”

“Thrown out!” she said with severity. “Things like that shouldn’t be thrown out.” She shook her head with disapproval. “Very well, I’ll sign,” she said. She wrote “Mrs. John Compton” in a wavering spidery hand, almost ghostly compared to some of the firm, fullbodied signatures that had gone before it.

He had to keep palming the bell repeatedly before he could attract any attention. The staff had already been skeletonized. Finally a harried bellboy appeared, picked up her bag, and mechanically started toward the street entrance with it. A sharp clang of the bell brought him around in his tracks.

“Show this lady to 923.”

The bellboy showed undisguised astonishment for a minute. “You mean the lady’s coming in? Now?”

“The lady’s checking in, not out.”

The elevator was empty on the up-trip, they and the operator were the only ones in it, though a moment before it had brought down fully twenty people.

He took her to the door of the room, opened it for her, put on the light.

She looked around, first from the threshold, then timorously step by step as she advanced further into it. “They changed it,” she said ruefully.

“No, ma’am,” he said. “It hasn’t been changed in years. It’s been like it is now ever since I can remember it.”

She smiled knowingly, as if to herself, but didn’t contradict him any further. “He said this floor was already shut off. Now see that I have everything.”

“Oh, you’ll be taken care of, ma’am,” he assured her earnestly. “I’ll send the maid from one of the lower floors right up to you. And don’t be nervous, ma’am. You’ll be safe. The building is still fully protected.”

“It never even occurred to me,” she said almost indifferently.

When he’d gone, the chair seemed to cause her some dissatisfaction. She kept giving it small nudges, until the sum total of them had altered its position very considerably, particularly as to the direction in which it faced.

“This was where it was,” she declared contentedly when she’d done. She even gave it a pat of commendation, as if to show how much better pleased with it she now was.

A maid tapped and came into the room. She was elderly, but still held herself straight. Her hair had grayed only to an intermediate salt-and-pepper, and then refused to whiten any further. Her figure was spare, in spite of her age. Or possibly because of it. Her eyes were sprightly, and the blue was very little dulled, behind the old-fashioned metal-rimmed spectacles she wore. Only her fingers, over-large at the joints, spindly between, betrayed the lifetime of hard work.

“Good evening,” she said.

“Good evening,” the other old woman replied.

Then she looked at her and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Ann,” the maid said. “Spelt the short way, without the ‘e.’”

“Well, it’s just as good that way as the other way,” the old lady told her.

“I’ve stayed with it this long, what would be the sense of changing it now?” the maid agreed.

They smiled at each other, the way two affable strangers do, who know they have never met before, and presume they will never meet again, but for the moment take a polite interest in their mutual conversation.

“Ann,” the old lady said. “Could I ask you to do something for me?”

“Sure, if I can.”

“This dresser. I don’t want it over there. I want it over here. This wall.” She went over and showed her.

“Well, it’s just for one night—” the maid said doubtfully.

“Doesn’t matter,” the old lady declared flatly. “Here’s where it belongs. Not there. I can’t do it by myself, or I would.”

“I’ll do it for you,” the maid relented good-naturedly. “All right, I’ll do it.” She trundled it about and over without too much difficulty. “That right?” she asked.

“There. Now. That’s more like it.” Again the old lady gave it a pat, as she had the chair before, as though its misplacement had been due to willfulness on its own part that it now repented of. “Now’d you bring me everything I need?” she asked.

“Everything. Towels, soap. I even brought you an extra blanket, although I don’t suppose at this time of year—”

“At my age,” said the old lady almost vaingloriously, “you feel chilly at any time of the year.”

“That’s right too,” said the maid reflectively. “I’ve noticed that myself for some time now.” She backed toward the door. “I’ll look in on you in the morning, just before we’re all dismissed for the last time. The few of us there’s left.”

The old lady eyed her piercingly. “You’re not crying, are you?”

The maid gave a shamefaced little smile. “Well, after all, it’s like losing an old friend. So many years of my life—”

“You mustn’t cry in here,” the old lady reprimanded her quite severely. “This is a room of happiness. No tears in here.” And she even shook her finger at her to add emphasis.

“I won’t,” the maid promised. “Good night. Sleep well.”

“I intend to. I know that I will,” declared the old lady staunchly. “I’m sure of it.”

And as she closed the door and turned away from it, she repeated what she had just said. “This is a room of happiness. This is a room of reunion.”

She began to unpack her bag now. From it she took a wafer-flat oblong white cardboard box, fastened with white paper tape.

“He didn’t even want to put it in a box for me. I *told* him it was for a gift,” she complained aloud, as if at the memory of some recent disputation. “Nowadays everything’s too much for them.”

She removed the bow-tied tape and the lid, peeled open the two interlocking leaves of crisp tissue paper, and took out a necktie, bright and new. She went to the dresser top with it and laid it down there, painstakingly choosing a certain exact spot to place it in, measuring it off almost, moving it a little, smoothing it a little, until she had attained the desired accuracy of position.

“Johnny, this is for you. For you to wear tomorrow. They lost your other one, that night. And I don’t want my Johnny to be without a necktie.”

Then she lowered her face, touched her lips to it, and said with old-fashioned formality, “Wear it in good health, dear.”

She returned to the bag, and as she took from it still something else, turned her head once more toward the dresser, as if addressing an after-remark to someone standing there unseen. “Luckily I didn’t have to buy you one of these. I don’t know much about picking them out.” She opened a packet of yellowed tissue and from it took a wallet, worn with much handling and giving at the seams. “I’ve kept it for you all these years. Just the way it was. Thirty-nine dollars and eighty-five cents. Perhaps the money will come in handy to you. You might want us to go sightseeing tomorrow, on our first day together.”

She placed it close to the tie, in just a certain place upon the dresser, and adjusted it too as she had the tie, as if fitting it to some invisible guide lines.

Returning to the opened bag a third and final time, she took out a neatly folded nightgown, and holding it up at shoulder-height, allowed it to fall open of its own weight. It was old-fashioned yet not old-fashioned, for fashion had come full circle again and its voluminous width and full-length sleeves were newer than the scantiness of intervening decades. It was old rather than old-fashioned, of finest batiste, with eyelet embroidery and a bertha, all handwork, the way a bridal gown should be, but citron-color with long existence. And the ghosts of hundreds of successive little bags of sachet still clung to it, even though they were gone now.

She disrobed now and put it on. It took on bluish hollows where it fell away from her body, yellow opacity where it clung close. It detracted from her age. She did not look like a young girl in it. Not even like a young woman. She looked like a wizened child, parading around in one of its elder's garments.

She loosened and brushed her hair now, with a brush that came from the bag. And that done, she went to the light switch and darkened the room. Then she went to the bed and got into it, but not with a complete absence of any effort. Lying there, she stirred awhile until she had attained the desired comfort, and then lay there awhile longer after that, in repose, murmuring to herself. Aloud but softly. Just over her breath, as when one says a prayer.

"Good night, my Johnny. Good night, my love. We'll see each other tomorrow. And tomorrow will come. Oh, I know it will. I've never doubted that it will for a single moment.

"And thank you for so many things. So many, many things. As I've thanked you for them so many times before. Thank you for a perfect marriage. The most perfect a marriage could be. Never an angry word, never a sullen silence; never a quarrel, never a jealous stab, never a drunken stumble. Never the fright of illness, nor the ignominy of nursing and watching some of its more ignoble symptoms.

Never the strife of lack of earning power, nor the bitter recriminations of failure and mistake and final ill-fortune. And above all, for not slowly aging before my eyes, as I would have slowly aged before yours, until finally neither of us was what the other had married, but somebody else entirely. Some unknown old man. Some unknown old woman. Thank you for staying young. And for letting me stay young along with you. A lifetime of youth. Eternal spring. Thank you for always being the bridegroom of our first night, romance blazing in your eyes. Thank you for all this. For all this, thank you forevermore. Good night, my beloved, my only, only love, my lifetime's love. Good night—the word I like to call you best of all: my husband. Your wife is wishing you good night."

In the morning, after her first discovery, the maid came back in a few minutes bringing the manager with her this time. They both looked at her, first, from where they stood. Then the manager went over closer to her and gently touched her forehead.

He turned around and said, "She's gone."

"I knew she was," the maid whispered. "I could tell even from the doorway."

He came back to where the maid was standing, and they both continued to look at her from there, the serene figure in the bed.

"That smile," he said under his breath. "Did you ever see anyone look so perfectly at rest, with such a peaceful, contented smile on their face?"

"She looks so happy," the maid concurred. "More like a—like a new bride than an old lady whose time has come to die."

"I guess she was one once," he mused. "Just like this room was brand-new once. And then they both got older—

the two of them—slowly, slowly, over the years. A little bit at a time, and then they got—like they both are now. Done with. People are a lot like hotel rooms, when you come to think of it."

"And hotel rooms," amended the maid, "are a lot like people."

THE PENNY A-WONDER

The desk clerk received a call early that afternoon, asking if there was a “nice, quiet” room available for about six o’clock that evening. The call was evidently from a business office, for the caller was a young woman who, it developed, wished the intended reservation made in a man’s name, whether her employer or one of the firm’s clients she did not specify. Told there was a room available, she requested, “Well, will you please hold it for Mr. Edgar Danville Moody, for about six o’clock?” And twice more she reiterated her emphasis on the noiselessness. “It’s got to be quiet, though. Make sure it’s quiet. He mustn’t be disturbed while he’s in it.”

The desk man assured her with a touch of dryness, “We run a quiet hotel altogether.”

“Good,” she said warmly. “Because we don’t want him to be distracted. It’s important that he have complete privacy.”

“We can promise that,” said the desk clerk.

“Thank you,” said the young woman briskly.

“Thank you,” answered the desk man.

The designated registrant arrived considerably after six, but not late enough for the reservation to have been voided. He was young—if not under thirty in actuality, still well under it in appearance. He had tried to camouflage his youthful appearance by coaxing a very slim, sandy mustache out along his upper lip. It failed completely in its

desired effect. It was like a makebelieve mustache ochred on a child's face.

He was a tall lean young man. His attire was eye-catching—it stopped just short of being theatrically flamboyant. Or, depending on the viewer's own taste, just crossed the line. The night being chilly for this early in the season, he was enveloped in a coat of fuzzy sand-colored texture, known generically as camel's-hair, with a belt gathered whiplash-tight around its middle. On the other hand, chilly or not, he had no hat whatever.

His necktie was patterned in regimental stripes, but they were perhaps the wrong regiments, selected from opposing armies. He carried a pipe clenched between his teeth, but with the bowl empty and turned down. A wide band of silver encircled the stem. His shoes were piebald affairs, with saddles of mahogany hue and the remainder almost yellow. They had no eyelets or laces, but were made like moccasins, to be thrust on the foot whole; a fringed leather tongue hung down on the outer side of each vamp.

He was liberally burdened with belongings, but none of these was a conventional, clothes-carrying piece of luggage. Under one arm he held tucked a large flat square, wrapped in brown paper, string-tied, and suggesting a picture-canvas. In that same hand he carried a large wrapped parcel, also brown-paperbound; in the other a cased portable typewriter. From one pocket of the coat protruded rakishly a long oblong, once again brown-paper-wrapped.

Although he was alone, and not unduly noisy either in his movements or his speech, his arrival had about it an aura of flurry and to-do, as if something of vast consequence were taking place. This, of course, might have derived from the unsubdued nature of his clothing. In later life he was not going to be the kind of man who is ever retiring or inconspicuous.

He disencumbered himself of all his paraphernalia by dropping some onto the floor and some onto the desk top,

and inquired, “Is there a room waiting for Edgar Danville Moody?”

“Yes, sir, there certainly is,” said the clerk cordially.

“Good and quiet, now?” he warned intently.

“You won’t hear a pin drop,” promised the clerk.

The guest signed the registration card with a flourish.

“Are you going to be with us long, Mr. Moody?” the clerk asked.

“It better not be too long,” was the enigmatic answer, “or I’m in trouble.”

“Take the gentleman up, Joe,” hosted the clerk, motioning to a bellboy.

Joe began collecting the articles one by one.

“Wait a minute, not Gertie!” he was suddenly instructed.

Joe looked around, first on one side, then on the other. There was no one else standing there. “Gertie?” he said blankly.

Young Mr. Moody picked up the portable typewriter, patted the lid affectionately. “This is Gertie,” he enlightened him. “I’m superstitious. I don’t let anyone but me carry her when we’re out on a job together.”

They entered the elevator together, Moody carrying Gertie.

Joe held his peace for the first two floors, but beyond that he was incapable of remaining silent. “I never heard of a typewriter called Gertie,” he remarked mildly, turning his head from the controls. “I’ve worn out six,” Moody proclaimed proudly. “Gertie’s my seventh.” He gave the lid a little love-pat. “I call them alphabetically. My first was Alice.”

Joe was vastly interested. “How could you wear out six, like that? Mr. Elliot’s had the same one in his office for years now, ever since I first came to work here, and he hasn’t wore his out yet.”

“Who’s he?” said Moody.

“The hotel accountant.”

“Aw-w-w,” said Moody with vast disdain. “No wonder. He just writes figures. I’m a *writer*.”

Joe was all but mesmerized. He’d liked the young fellow at sight, but now he was hypnotically fascinated. “Gee, are you a writer?” he said, almost breathlessly. “I always wanted to be a writer myself.”

Moody was too interested in his own being a writer to acknowledge the other’s wish to be one too.

“You write under your own name?” hinted Joe, unable to take his eyes off the new guest.

“Pretty much so.” He enlarged on the reply. “Dan Moody. Ever read me?”

Joe was too innately naive to prevaricate plausibly. He scratched the back of his head. “Let me see now,” he said. “I’m trying to think.”

Moody’s face dropped, almost into a sulk. However in a moment it had cleared again. “I guess you don’t get much time to read, anyway, on ajob like this,” he explained to the satisfaction of the two of them.

“No, I don’t, but I’d sure like to read something of yours,” said Joe fervently. “Especially now that I know you.” He wrenched at the lever, and the car began to reverse. It had gone up three floors too high, so intense had been his absorption.

Joe showed him into Room 923 and disposed of his encumbrances. Then he lingered there, unable to tear himself away. Nor did this have anything to do with the delay in his receiving a tip; for once, and in complete sincerity, Joe had forgotten all about there being such a thing.

Moody shed his tent-like topcoat, cast it onto a chair with a billowing overhead fling like a person about to immerse in a bath. Then he began to burst open brown paper with explosive sounds all over the room.

From the flat square came an equally flat, equally square cardboard mat, blank on the reverse side, protected by

tissues on the front. Moody peeled these off to reveal a startling composition in vivid oil-paints. Its main factors were a plump-breasted girl in a disheveled, lavender-colored dress desperately fleeing from a pursuer, the look on whose face promised her additional dishevelment.

Joe became goggle-eyed, and remained so. Presently he took a step nearer, remaining transfixed. Moody stood the cardboard mat on the floor, against a chair.

"You do that?" Joe breathed in awe.

"No, the artist. It's next month's cover. I have to do a story to match up with it."

Joe said, puzzled, "I thought they did it the other way around. Wrote the story first, and then illustrated it."

"That's the usual procedure," Moody said, professionally glib. "They pick a feature story each month, and put that one on the cover. This time they had a little trouble. The fellow that was supposed to do the feature didn't come through on time, got sick or something. So the artist had to start off first, without waiting for him. Now there's no time left, so I have to rustle up a story to fit the cover."

"Gee," said Joe. "Going to be hard, isn't it?"

"Once you get started, it goes by itself. It's just getting started that's hard."

From the bulkier parcel had come, in the interim, two sizable slabs wrapped alike in dark-blue paper. He tore one open to extract a ream of white first-sheets, the other to extract a ream of manila second-sheets.

"I'm going to use this table here," he decided, and planted one stack on one corner of it, the second stack on the opposite corner. Between the two he placed Gertie the typewriter, in a sort of position of honor.

Also from the same parcel had come a pair of soft houseslippers, crushed together toe-to-heel and heel-to-toe. He dropped them under the table. "I can't write with my shoes on," he explained to his new disciple. "Nor with the

neck of my shirt buttoned," he added, parting that and flinging his tie onto a chair.

From the slender pocket-slanted oblong, last of the wrapped shapes, came a carton of cigarettes. The pipe, evidently reserved for non-occupational hours, he promptly discarded.

"Now, is there an ashtray?" he queried, like a commander surveying an intended field of action.

Joe darted in and out of several corners of the room. "Gee, no, the last people must have swiped it," he said. "Wait a minute, I'll go get—"

"Never mind, I'll use this instead," decided Moody, bringing over a metal wastebasket. "The amount of ashes I make when I'm working, a tray wouldn't be big enough to hold it all anyway."

The phone gave a very short ring, querulously interrogative. Moody picked it up, then relayed to Joe, "The man downstairs wants to know what's holding you, why you don't come down."

Joe gave a start, then came down to his everyday employment level from the rarefied heights of artistic creation he had been floating about in. He couldn't bear to turn his back, he started going backward to the door instead. "Is there anything else—?" he asked regretfully.

Moody passed a crumpled bill over to him. "Bring me back a—let's see, this is a cover story—you better make it an even dozen bottles of beer. It relaxes me when I'm working. Light, not dark."

"Right away, Mr. Moody," said Joe eagerly, beating a hasty retreat.

While he was gone, Moody made his penultimate preparations: sitting down to remove his shoes and put on the slippers, bringing within range and adjusting the focus of a shaded floor lamp, shifting the horrendous work of art back against the baseboard of the opposite wall so that it faced him squarely just over the table.

Then he went and asked for a number on the phone, without having to look it up.

A young woman answered, “Peerless, good evening.”

He said, “Mr. Tartell please.”

Another young woman said, “Mr. Tartell’s office.”

He said, “Hello, Cora. This is Dan Moody. I’m up here and I’m all set. Did Mr. Tartell go home yet?”

“He left half an hour ago,” she said. “He left his home number with me, told me to give it to you; he wants you to call him in case you run into any difficulties, have any problems with it. But not later than eleven—they go to bed early out there in East Orange.”

“I won’t have any trouble,” he said self-assuredly. “How long have I been doing this?”

“But this is a cover story. He’s very worried. We have to go to the printer by nine tomorrow—we can’t hold him up any longer.”

“I’ll make it, I’ll make it,” he said. “It’ll be on his desk waiting for him at eight thirty on the dot.”

“Oh, and I have good news for you. He’s not only giving you Bill Hammond’s rate on this one—two cents a word—but he told me to tell you that if you do a good job, he’ll see to it that you get that extra additional bonus over and above the word count itself that you were hinting about when he first called you today.”

“Swell!” he exclaimed gratefully.

A note of maternal instruction crept into her voice. “Now get down to work and show him what you can do. He really thinks a lot of you, Dan. I’m not supposed to say this. And try to have it down here before he comes in tomorrow. I hate to see him worry so. When he worries, I’m miserable along with him. Good luck.” And she hung up.

Joe came back with the beer, six bottles in each of two paper sacks.

“Put them on the floor alongside the table, where I can just reach down,” instructed Moody.

“He bawled the heck out of me downstairs, but I don’t care, it was worth it. Here’s a bottle opener the delicatessen people gave me.”

“That about kills what I gave you.” Moody calculated, fishing into his pocket. “Here’s—”

“No,” protested Joe sincerely, with a dissuading gesture. “I don’t want to take any tip from *you*, Mr. Moody. You’re different from other people that come in here. You’re a Writer, and I always wanted to be a writer myself. But if I could ever get to read a story of yours—” he added wistfully.

Moody promptly rummaged in the remnants of the brown paper, came up with a magazine which had been entombed there. “Here—here’s last month’s,” he said. “I was taking it home with me, but I can get another at the office.”

Its title was *Startling Stories!*—complete with exclamation point. Joe wiped his fingertips reverently against his uniform before touching it, as though afraid of defiling it.

Moody opened it for him, offered it to him that way. “Here I am, here,” he said. “Second story. Next month I’m going to be the lead story, going to open the book on account of doing the cover story.” He harked back to his humble beginnings for an indulgent moment. “When I first began, I used to be all the way in the back of the book. You know, where the muscle-building ads are.”

“ ‘Killing Time, by Dan Moody,’ ” Joe mouthed softly, like someone pronouncing a litany.

“They always change your titles on them, I don’t know why,” Moody complained fretfully. “My own title for that one was ‘Out of the Mouths of Guns.’ Don’t you think that’s better?”

“Wouldje—?” Joe was fumbling with a pencil, half afraid to offer it.

Moody took the pencil from Joe’s fingers, wrote on the margin alongside the story title: “The best of luck to you, Joe—Dan Moody,” Joe the while supporting the magazine

from underneath with the flaps of both hands, like an acolyte making an offering at some altar.

"Gee," Joe breathed, "I'm going to keep this forever. I'm going to paste transparent paper over it, so it won't get rubbed off, where you wrote."

"I would have done it in ink for you," Moody said benevolently, "only the pulp paper won't take it—it soaks it up like a blotter."

The phone gave another of its irritable, foreshortened blats.

Joe jumped guiltily, hastily backed toward the door. "I better get back on duty, or he'll be raising cain down there." He half closed the door, reopened it to add, "If there's anything you want, Mr. Moody, just call down for me. I'll drop anything I'm doing and beat it right up here."

"Thanks, I will, Joe," Moody promised, with the warm, comfortable smile of someone whose ego has just been talcumed and cuddled in cotton-wool.

"And good luck to you on the story. I'll be rooting for you!"

"Thanks again, Joe."

Joe closed the door deferentially, holding the knob to the end, so that it should make a minimum of noise and not disturb the mystic creative process about to begin inside.

Before it did, however, Moody went to the phone and asked for a nearby Long Island number. A soprano that sounded like a schoolgirl's got on.

"It's me, honeybunch," Moody said.

The voice had been breathless already, so it couldn't get any more breathless; what it did do was not get any less breathless. "What happened? Ooh, hurry up, tell me! I can't wait. Did you get the assignment on the cover story?"

"Yes, I got it! I'm in the hotel room right now, and they're paying all the charges. And listen to this: I'm getting double word-rate, two cents—"

A squeal of sheer joy answered him.

“And wait a minute, you didn’t let me finish. If he likes the job, I’m even getting an extra additional bonus on top of all that. Now what do you have to say to that?”

The squeals became multiple this time—a series of them instead of just one. When they subsided, he heard her almost gasp: “Oh, I’m so proud of you!”

“Is Sonny-bun awake yet?”

“Yes. I knew you’d want to say good night to him, so I kept him up. Wait a minute, I’ll go and get him.”

The voice faded, then came back again. However, it seemed to be as unaccompanied as before. “Say something to Daddy. Daddy’s right here. Daddy wants to hear you say something to him.”

Silence.

“Hello, Sonny-bun. How’s my little Snooky?” Moody coaxed.

More silence.

The soprano almost sang, “Daddy’s going to do a big important job. Aren’t you going to wish him luck?”

There was a suspenseful pause, then a startled cluck like that of a little barnyard fowl, “Lock!”

The squeals of delight this time came from both ends of the line, and in both timbres, soprano and tenor. “He wished me luck! Did you hear that? He wished me luck! That’s a good omen. Now it’s bound to be a lulu of a story!”

The soprano voice was too taken up distributing smothered kisses over what seemed to be a considerable surface-area to be able to answer.

“Well,” he said, “guess I better get down to business. I’ll be home before noon—I’ll take the ten forty-five, after I turn the story in at Tartell’s office.”

The parting became breathless, flurried, and tripartite.

“Do a bang-up job now”/“I’ll make it a smasheroo”/“Remember, Sonny-bun and I are rooting for you”/“Miss me”! “And you miss us, too”/”*Smack, smack* “/”*Smack, smack, smack* “/”*Gluck!*

He hung up smiling, sighed deeply to express his utter satisfaction with his domestic lot. Then he turned away, lathered his hands briskly, and rolled up his shirt sleeves.

The preliminaries were out of the way, the creative process was about to begin. The creative process, that mystic life force, that splurge out of which has come the Venus de Milo, the Mona Lisa, the Fantasie Impromptu, the Bayeux tapestries, Romeo and Juliet, the windows of Chartres Cathedral, Paradise Lost—and a pulp murder story by Dan Moody. The process is the same in all; if the results are a little uneven, that doesn't invalidate the basic similarity of origin.

He sat down before Gertie and, noting that the oval of light from the lamp fell on the machine, to the neglect of the polychrome cardboard mat which slanted in comparative shade against the wall, he adjusted the pliable lamp-socket so that the luminous egg was cast almost completely on the drawing instead, with the typewriter now in the shadow. Actually he didn't need the light on his typewriter. He never looked at the keys when he wrote, nor at the sheet of paper in the machine. He was an expert typist, and if in the hectic pace of his fingering he sometimes struck the wrong letter, they took care of that down at the office, Tartell had special proofreaders for that. That wasn't Moody's job—he was the creator, he couldn't be bothered with picayune details like a few typographic errors. By the same token, he never went back over what he had written to reread it; he couldn't afford to, not at one cent a word (his regular rate) and at the pressure under which he worked. Besides, it was his experience that it always came out best the first time; if you went back and reread and fiddled around with it, you only spoiled it.

He palmed a sheet of white paper off the top of the stack and inserted it smoothly into the roller—an automatic movement to him. Ordinarily he made a sandwich of sheets —a white on top, a carbon in the middle, and a yellow at the

bottom; that was in case the story should go astray in the mail, or be mislaid at the magazine office before the cashier had issued a check for it. But it was totally unnecessary in this case; he was delivering the story personally to Tartell's desk, it was a rush order, and it was to be sent to press immediately. Several extra moments would be wasted between manuscript pages if he took the time to make up "sandwiches," and besides, those yellow second-sheets cost forty-five cents a ream at Goldsmith's (fifty-five elsewhere). You had to watch your costs in this line of work.

He lit a cigarette, the first of the many that were inevitably to follow, that always accompanied the writing of every story—the cigarette-to-begin-on. He blew a blue pinwheel of smoke, craned his neck slightly, and stared hard at the master plan before him, standing there against the wall. And now for the first line. That was always the gimmick in every one of his stories. Until he had it, he couldn't get into it; but once he had it, the story started to unravel by itself—it was easy going after that, clear sailing. It was like plucking the edge of the gauze up from an enormous criss-crossed bandage.

The first line, the first line—

He stared intently, almost hypnotically.

Better begin with the girl—she was very prominent on the cover, and then bring the hero in later. Let's see, she was wearing a violet evening dress—

The little lady in the violet evening dress came hurrying terrifiedly down the street, looking back in terror. Behind her—

His hands poised avariciously, then drew back again. No, wait a minute, she wouldn't be wearing an evening dress on the street, violet or any other color. Well, she'd have to change into it later in the story, that was all. In a 20,000-word novelette there would be plenty of room for her to

change into an evening dress. Just a single line would do it, anywhere along.

She went home and changed her dress, and then came back again.

Now, let's try it again—

The beautiful red-head came hurrying down the street, looking back in terror. Behind her—

Again he got stuck. Yes, but who was after her, and what had she done for them to be after her for? That was the problem.

I started in too soon, he decided. I getter go back to where she does something that gets somebody after her. Then the chase can come in after that.

The cigarette was at an end, without having ignited anything other than itself. He started another one.

Now, let's see. What would a beautiful, innocent, good girl do that would be likely to get somebody after her? She had to be good—Tartell was very strict about that. "I don't want any lady-bums in my stories. If you have to introduce a lady-bum into one of my stories, see that you kill her off as soon as you can. And whatever you do, don't let her get next to the hero too much. Keep her away from the hero. If he falls for her, he's a sap. And if he doesn't fall for her, he's too much of a goody-goody. Keep her in the background—just let her open the door in a negligee when the big-shot gangster drops in for a visit. And close the door again—fast!"

He swirled a hand around in his hair, in a massage-like motion, dropped it to the table, pummeled the edge of the table with it twice, the way a person does when he's trying to start a balky drawer open. Let's see, let's see . . . She could find out something that she's not supposed to, and

then they find out that she has found out, and they start after her to shut her up—good enough, that's it! Now how did she find it out? She could go to a beauty parlor, and overhear in the next booth—no, beauty parlors were too feminine; Tartell wouldn't allow one of them in his stories. Besides, Moody had never been in one, wouldn't have known how to describe it on the inside. She could be in a phone booth and through the partition—No, he'd used that gambit in the July issue—in *Death Drops a Slug*.

A little lubrication was indicated here—something to help make the wheels go around, soften up the kinks. Absently, he picked up the bottle opener that Joe had left for him, reached down to the floor, brought up a bottle and uncapped it, still with that same one hand, using the edge of the table for leverage. He poured a very little into the tumbler, and did no more than chastely moisten his lips with it.

Now. She could get a package at her house, and it was meant for someone else, and—

He had that peculiar instinctive feeling that comes when someone is looking at you intently, steadfastly. He shook it off with a slight quirk of his head. It remained in abeyance for a moment or two, then slowly settled on him again.

The story thread suddenly dropped in a hopeless snarl, just as he was about to get it through the needle's eye of the first line.

He turned his head, to dissipate the feeling by glancing in the direction from which it seemed to assail him. And then he saw it. A pigeon was standing utterly motionless on the ledge just outside the pane of the window. Its head was cocked inquiringly, it was turned profileward toward him, and it was staring in at him with just the one eye. But the eye was almost leaning over toward the glass, it was so intent—less than an inch or two away from it.

As he stared back, the eye solemnly blinked. Just once, otherwise giving no indication of life.

He ignored it and turned back to his task.

There's a ring at the bell, she goes to the door, and a man hands her a package—

His eyes crept uncontrollably over to their extreme outer corners, as if trying to take a peek without his knowledge. He brought them back with a reprimanding knitting of the brows. But almost at once they started over that way again. Just knowing the pigeon was standing out there seemed to attract his eyes almost magnetically.

He turned his head toward it again. This time he gave it a heavy baleful scowl. "Get of~ of there," he mouthed at it. "Go somewhere else." He spoke by lip motion alone, because the glass between prevented hearing.

It blinked. More slowly than the first time, if a pigeon's blink can be measured. Scorn, contempt seemed to be expressed by the deliberateness of its blink.

Never slow to be affronted, he kindled at once. He swung his arm violently around toward it, in a complete half circle of riddance. Its wing feathers erupted a little, subsided again, as if the faintest of breezes had caressed them. Then with stately pomp it waddled around in a half circle, brought the other side of its head around toward the glass, and stared at him with the eye on that side.

Heatedly, he jumped from his chair, strode to the window, and flung it up. "I told you to get off of there!" he said threateningly. He gave the air immediately over the surface of the ledge a thrashing swipe with his arm.

It eluded the gesture with no more difficulty than a child jumping rope. Only, instead of coming down again as the rope passed underneath, it stayed up! It made a little looping journey with scarcely stirring wings, and as soon as his arm was drawn in again, it descended almost to the precise spot where it had stood before.

Once more they repeated this passage between them, with identical results. The pigeon expended far less energy coasting around at a safe height than he did flinging his

arm hectically about, and he realized that a law of diminishing returns would soon set in on this point. Moreover, he over-aimed the second time and crashed the back of his hand into the stone coping alongside the window, so that he had to suck at his knuckles and breathe on them to alleviate the sting.

He had never hated a bird so before. In fact, he had never hated a bird before.

He slammed the window down furiously. Thereupon, as though it realized it had that much more advance warning against possible armstrikes, the pigeon began to strut from one side to the other of the window ledge. Like a picket, enjoining him from working. Each time he made a turn, it cocked that beady eye at him.

He picked up the metal wastebasket and tested it in his hand for solidity. Then he put it down again, regretfully. He'd need it during the course of the story; he couldn't just drop the cigarette butts on the floor, he'd be kept too busy stamping them out to avoid starting a fire. And even if the basket knocked the damned bird off the ledge, it would probably go over with it.

He picked up the phone, demanded the desk clerk so that he could vent his indignation on something human.

"Do I have to have pigeons on my window sill?" he shouted accusingly. "Why didn't you tell me there were going to be pigeons on my window sill?"

The clerk was more than taken aback; he was stunned by the onslaught. "I—ah—ah—never had a complaint like this before," he finally managed to stammer.

"Well, you've got one now!" Moody let him know with firm disapproval.

"Yes, sir, but—but what's it doing?" the clerk floundered. "Is it making any noise?"

"It doesn't have to," Moody flared. "I just don't want it there!"

There was a momentary pause, during which it was to be surmised the clerk was baffled, scrubbing the side of his jaw, or perhaps his temple or forehead. Then he came back again, completely at a loss. “I’m sorry, sir—but I don’t see what you expect me to do about it. You’re up there with it, and I’m down here. Haven’t—haven’t you tried chasing it?”

“Haven’t I tried?” choked Moody exasperatedly. “That’s all I’ve been doing! It free-wheels out and around and comes right back again!”

“Well, about the only thing I can suggest,” the clerk said helplessly, “is to send up a boy with a mop or broom, and have him stand there by the window and—”

“I can’t work with a bellboy in here doing sentinel duty with a mop or broom slung over his shoulder!” Moody exploded. “That’d be worse than the pigeon!”

The clerk breathed deeply, with bottomless patience. “Well, I’m sorry, sir, but—”

Moody got it out first. “ ‘I don’t see what I can do about it.’ ‘I don’t see what I can do about it’ !” he mimicked ferociously. “Thanks! You’ve been a big help,” he said with ponderous sarcasm. “I don’t know what I would have done without you!”—and hung up.

He looked around at it, a resigned expression in his eyes that those energetic, enthusiastic irises seldom showed.

The pigeon had its neck craned at an acute angle, almost down to the stone sill, but still looking in at him from that oblique perspective, as if to say, “Was that about me? Did it have to do with me?”

He went over and jerked the window up. That didn’t even make it stir any more.

He turned and went back to his writing chair. He addressed the pigeon coldly from there. Aloud, but coldly, and with the condescension of the superior forms of life toward the inferior ones. “Look. You want to come in? Is that what it’s all about? You’re dying to come in? You won’t be happy till you do come in? Then for the love of Mike

come in and get it over with, and let me get back to work! There's a nice comfortable chair, there's a nice plumpy sofa, there's a nice wide bed-rail for a perch. The whole room is yours. Come in and have yourself a ball!"

Its head came up, from that sneaky way of regarding him under-wing. It contemplated the invitation. Then its twig-like little vermilion legs dipped and it threw him a derogatory chuck of the head, as if to say "That for you and your room!"—and unexpectedly took off, this time in a straight, unerring line of final departure.

His feet detonated in such a burst of choleric anger that the chair went over. He snatched up the wastebasket, rushed to the window, and swung it violently—without any hope, of course, of overtaking his already vanished target.

"Dirty damn squab!" he railed bitterly. "Come back here and I'll—! Doing that to me, after I'm just about to get rolling! I hope you run into a high-tension wire headfirst. I hope you run into a hawk—"

His anger, however, settled as rapidly as a spent Seidlitz powder. He closed the window without violence. A smothered chuckle had already begun to sound in him on his way back to the chair, and he was grinning sheepishly as he reached it.

"Feuding with a pigeon yet," he murmured deprecatingly to himself. "I'd better get a grip on myself."

Another cigarette, two good hearty gulps of beer, and now, let's see—where was I? The opening line. He stared up at the ceiling.

His fingers spread, poised, and then suddenly began to splatter all over the dark keyboard like heavy drops of rain."

For me?" the young woman said, staring unbelievably at the shifty-eyed man holding the package."

You're One hand paused, then two of its fingers snapped, demanding inspiration. "Got to get a name for her," he

muttered. He stared fruitlessly at the ceiling for a moment, then glanced over at the window. The hand resumed."

You're Pearl Dove, ain't ya?"

"Why, yes, but I wasn't expecting anything."

("Not too much dialogue," Tartell always cautioned. "Get them moving, get them doing something. Dialogue leaves big blanks on the pages, and the reader doesn't get as much reading for his money.")

He thrust it at her, turned and disappeared as suddenly as he appeared.

Two "appeareds" in one line—too many. He triphammered the x-key eight times.

and disappeared as suddenly as he had showed up. She tried to call him back but he was no longer in sight. Somewhere out in the night the whine of an expensive car taking off came to her ears.

He frowned, closed his eyes briefly, then began typing automatically again.

She looked at the package she had been left holding.

He never bothered to consult what he had written so far—such fussy niceties were for smooth-paper writers and poets. In stories like the one he was writing, it was almost impossible to break the thread of the action, anyway. Just so long as he kept going, that was all that mattered. If there was an occasional gap, Tartell's proofreaders would knit it together with a couple of words.

He drained the beer in the glass, refilled it, gazed dreamily at the ceiling. The wide, blank expanse of the

ceiling gave his characters more room to move around in as his mind's eye conjured them up.

"She has a boy friend who's on the Homicide Squad," he murmured confidentially. "Not really a boy friend, just sort of a brotherly protector." ("Don't give 'em sweethearts," was Tartell's constant admonishment, "just give 'em pals. You might want to kill the girl off, and if she's already his sweetheart you can't very well do that, or he loses face with the readers.")

"She calls him up to tell him she has received a mysterious package. He tells her not to open it, he'll be right over—" The rest was mechanical fingerwork. Fast and furious. The keys dipped and rose like a canopy of leaves shot through by an autumn wind.

The page jumped up out of the roller by itself, and he knew he'd struck off the last line there was room for. He pitched it aside to the floor without even glancing at it, slipped in a new sheet, all in one accustomed, fluid motion. Then, with the same almost unconscious ease, he reached down for a new bottle, uncapped it, and poured until a cream puff of a head burgeoned at the top of it.

They were at the business of opening the package now. He stalled for two lines, to give himself time to improvise what was going to be inside the package, which he hadn't had an opportunity to do until now—

He stared down at it. Then his eyes narrowed and he nodded grimly.

"What do you make of it?" she breathed, clutching her throat.

Then he was smack up against it, and the improvisation had to be here and now. The keys coasted to a reluctant but full stop. There was almost smoke coming from them by now, or else it was from his ever-present cigarette riding

the edge of the table, drifting the long way around by way of the machine.

There were always certain staples that were good for the contents of mysterious packages. Opium pellets—but that meant bringing in a Chinese villain, and the menace on the cover drawing certainly wasn't Chinese—

He got up abruptly, swung his chair out away from the table, and shifted it farther over, directly under the phantom tableau on the ceiling that had come to a halt simultaneously with the keys—the way the figures on a motion picture screen freeze into immobility when something goes wrong with the projector.

He got up on the chair seat with both feet, craned his neck, peered intently and with complete sincerity. He was only about two feet away from the visualization on the ceiling. His little bit of fetishism, or idiosyncrasy, had worked for him before in similar stoppages, and it did now. He could see the inside of the package, he could see—

He jumped lithely down again, looped the chair back into place, speared avidly at the keys.

Uncut diamonds!

"Aren't they beautiful?" she said, clutching her pulsing throat.

(Well, if there were too many clutches in there, Tartell's hirelings could take one or two of them out. It was always hard to know what to have your female characters do with their hands. Clutching the throat and holding the heart were his own favorite standbys. The male characters could always be fingering a gun or swinging a punch at someone, but it wasn't refined for women to do that in *Startling Stories!*)

"Beautiful but hot," he growled.

Her eyes widened. "How do you know?"

“They’re the Espinoza consignment, they’ve been missing for a week. “He unlimbered his gun. “This spells trouble for someone.”

That was enough dialogue for a few pages—he had to get into some fast, red-hot action.

There weren’t any more hitches now. The story flowed like a torrent. The margin bell chimed almost staccato, the roller turned with almost piston-like continuity, the pages sprang up almost like blobs of batter from a pancake skillet. The beer kept rising in the glass and, contradictorily, steadily falling lower. The cigarettes gave up their ghosts, long thin gray ghosts, in a good cause; the mortality rate was terrible.

His train of thought, the story’s lifeline, beer-lubricated but no whit impeded, flashed and sputtered and coursed ahead like lightning in a topaz mist, and the loose fingers and hiccuping keys followed as fast as they could. Only once more, just before the end, was there a near hitch, and that wasn’t in the sense of a stoppage of thought, but rather of an error in memory—what he mistakenly took to be a duplication. The line: *Hands clutching her throat, Pearl tore down the street in her violet evening dress* streamed off the keys, and he came to a lumbering, uneasy halt.

Wait a minute, I had that in in the beginning. She can’t keep running down the street all the time in a violet evening dress; the readers’ll get fed up. How’d she get into a violet evening dress anyway? A minute ago the guy *tore her white blouse and revealed her quivering white shoulder*.

He half turned in the chair (and none too steadily), about to essay the almost hopeless task of winnowing through the blanket of white pages that lay all around him on the floor, and then recollection came to his aid in the nick of time.

I remember now! I moved the beginning around to the middle, and began with the package at the door instead. (It

seemed like a long, long time ago, even to him, that the package had arrived at the door; weeks and weeks ago; another story ago.) This is the first time she's run down the street in a violet evening dress, she hasn't done it before. Okay, let her run.

However, logically enough, in order to get her into it in the first place, he x-ed out the line anyway, and put in for groundwork:

"If it hadn't been for your quick thinking, that guy would have got me sure. I'm taking you to dinner tonight, and that's an order."

"I'll run home and change. I've got a new dress I'm dying to break in."

And that took care of that.

Ten minutes later (according to story time, not his), due to the unfortunate contretemps of having arrived at the wrong café at the wrong time, the line reappeared, now legitimatized, and she was duly *tearing down the street, screaming, clutching her throat with her violet evening dress*. (The "with" he had intended for an "in.") The line had even gained something by waiting. This time she was screaming as well, which she hadn't been doing the first time.

And then finally, somewhere in the malt-drenched mists ahead, maybe an hour or maybe two hours, maybe a dozen cigarettes or maybe a pack and a half, maybe two bottles of beer or maybe four, a page popped up out of the roller onto which he had just ground the words *The End*, and the story was done.

He blew out a deep breath, a vacuum-cleaner-deep breath. He let his head go over and rest for a few moments against the edge of the table. Then he got up from the chair, very unsteadily, and wavered over toward the bed, treading

on the litter of fallen pages. But he had his shoes off, so that didn't hurt them much.

He didn't hear the springs creak as he flattened out. His ears were already asleep . . .

* * * *

Sometime in the early morning, the very early early-morning (just like at home), that six-year-old of the neighbors started with that velocipede of his, racing it up and down in front of the house and trilling the bell incessantly. He stirred and mumbled disconsolately to his wife, "Can't you call out the window and make that brat stay in front of his own house with that damn contraption?"

Moody struggled up tormentedly on one elbow, and at that point the kid characteristically went back into the house for good, and the ringing stopped. But when Moody opened his blurred eyes, he wasn't sitting up at home at all; he was in a hotel room.

"Take your time," a voice said sarcastically. "I've got all day."

Moody swiveled his head, stunned, and Joe was holding the room door open to permit Tartell, his magazine editor, to glare in at him. Tartell was short, but impressive. He was of a great age, as Moody's measurements of time went, a redwood-tree age, around forty-five or forty-eight or somewhere up there. And right now Tartell wasn't in good humor.

"Twice the printers have called," he barked, "asking if they get that story today or not!"

Moody's body gave a convulsive jerk and his heels braked against the floor. "Gee, is it that late—?"

"No, not at all!" Tartell shouted. "The magazine can come out anytime! Don't let a little thing like that worry you! If Cora hadn't had the presence of mind to call me at my house before I left for the office, I wouldn't have stopped by here like this, and we'd all be waiting around another hour

down at the office. Now where is it? Let me have it. I'll take it down with me."

Moody gestured helplessly toward the floor, which looked as though a political rally, with pamphlets, had taken place on it the night before.

"Very systematic," Tartell commented acridly. He surged forward into the room, doubling over into a sort of cushiony right-angle as he did so, and began to zigzag, picking up papers without let-up, like a diligent, near-sighted park attendant spearing leaves at close range. "This is fine right after a heavy breakfast," he added. "The best thing I could do!"

Joe looked pained, but on Moody's behalf, not Tartell's. "I'll help you, sir," he offered placatingly, and started bobbing in turn.

Tartell stopped suddenly, and without rising, seemed to be trying to read, from the unconventional position of looking straight down from up above. "They're blank," he accused. "Where does it begin?"

"Turn them over," Moody said, wearied with so much fussiness. "They must have fallen on their faces."

"They're that way on both sides, Mr. Moody," Joe faltered.

"What've you been doing?" Tartell demanded wrathfully. "Wait a minute—!" His head came up to full height, he swerved, went over to Gertie, and examined the unlidded machine closely.

Then he brought both fists up in the air, each still clutching pinwheels of the sterile pages, and pounded them down with maniacal fury on both ends of the writing table. The noise of the concussion was only less than the noise of his unbridled voice.

"You damn-fool idiot!" he roared insanely, looking up at the ceiling as if in quest of aid with which to curb his assault-tempted emotions. "You've been pounding thin air all night! You've been beating the hell out of blank paper! *You forgot to put a ribbon in your typewriter!"*

Joe, looking beyond Tartell, took a quick step forward, arms raised in support of somebody or something.

Tartell slashed his hand at him forbiddingly, keeping him where he was. “Don’t catch him, let him land,” he ordered, wormwood-bitter. “Maybe a good clunk against the floor will knock some sense into his stupid—talented—head.”

SOMEBODY'S CLOTHES, SOMEBODY'S LIFE

Scene One

(In the gambling room at the Casino in Biarritz, seven or eight backs stand shoulder to shoulder, so that they conceal the roulette table they are lined against. The middle one is unclothed, that of a woman in a backless white evening gown. Immediately behind her a maid is seated on a straight-backed gilt chair. She is plainly dressed, wears a pair of old-fashioned rimless glasses and is crocheting a strip of lace. On her lap in addition is a taffeta draw-bag. She pays no attention to the proceedings. A clicking sound is heard, as the little ball spins around and around. It stops with a little snap, like a wooden match-stick being broken, as the ball drops into the slot.)

Croupier: Seventeen, black!

(There is a low murmur of mingled voices like the humming of a swarm of bees, combining resignation, disappointment, annoyance, surprise, and satisfaction.)

Croupier: Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.

(The woman in the backless white gown suddenly thrusts her arm behind her, toward the maid, with three fingers held out to show how much she requires. The maid

immediately interrupts her crocheting, pries into the draw-bag, counts out three bank notes, and places them in the waiting hand. The arm returns to the table again.)

Croupier: Nothing more goes. Nothing more.

(Again the clicking sound, again the little snap.)

Croupier: Eleven, red!

(Again the low murmur of mingled voices.)

Croupier: Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.

(Again the arm is thrust out toward the maid. This time all five fingers are extended. They close, then open again, in a grasping motion, to show their owner is impatient. The maid shakes her head to herself. She opens the draw-bag, takes out five banknotes, places them in the waiting hand. The arm twists back to the table again.)

Croupier: Nothing more goes. Nothing more.

(Again the clicking sound.)

Croupier: Sixteen, black!

(Again the murmuring voices.)

Croupier: Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.

(Again the insatiable arm extends itself, all fingers out, fluttering. The maid inserts her whole hand into the draw-bag this time, as one would try on a glove. She turns the bag inside-out. It is empty.)

Maid: It’s all gone, madame. There’s no more left.

(The arm slowly wilts, drops down to its owner s side like a withered vine. Then the woman slowly turns and forces her way out from between the other players. She is a handsome woman, in her forties or early fifties, but now her face is haggard, drawn. A lock of her silvery hair has fallen down over one eye. She staggers, almost as if she were drunk. The maid quickly rises, puts aside her crocheting, and puts an arm around her waist to support her.)

Maid: Lean on me, madame. The fresh air will help you pull yourself together.

Countess: Haven’t you any money of your own you could let me have? I could give it back to you tomorrow.

Maid (wryly): I never carry money of my own with me when I go out with madame in the evening. I learned not to long ago.

Countess (dazed): What'll I do?

Maid: Come away now, madame. Come back to your hotel. You've been in here since it first opened, hours ago.

Countess (lifts her arm, looks at a diamond bracelet she is wearing as though having forgotten she had it on): Oh—This—

Maid (quickly stops her by putting her hand over it): You know they won't accept jewelry at the table, madame. You've tried before.

Countess: Maybe I could sell it to someone in the room here.

Maid (pleading): Madame.

Madame: It's the last of all the beautiful pieces you once had.

(She picks up her crocheting from the chair-seat, stuffs it into the draw-bag.)

Maid (in a choked voice): I can't bear to watch much more of this. I just can't stand it. It does something to me. I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you, madame, at the end of the week.

(Countess doesn't answer, as though she hasn't heard her. Stands there looking around avidly, licking her lips, as if in search of a possible source of money.)

Maid: This is a fever.

Countess (indifferently): And there is no quinine for it.

Maid (coaxing her gently, as if she were a child): Come, madame. Come away now.

(They walk slowly across the large room, the countess leaning exhaustedly against the maid. The Casino doorman, standing motionless to one side of the glass doors leading out, stiffens to attention, pulls one of the two glass doors open, holds it that way in readiness, touches two fingers to the visor of his uniform cap.)

Doorman (respectfully, ducking his head): Goodnight, madame. Goodnight, mademoiselle.

(As though this has suddenly attracted her attention to him, the countess raises her head, stops, looks at him, frees herself from the maid, takes a step over toward him.)

Countess: Young man—my friend—I wonder if by any chance you could lend me—

Maid (horrified): Madame!

(She quickly places herself between the two of them, tactfully turns the countess away, guides her to the door, which he has continued to hold open for them, and out through it.)

Maid: Madame, consider what you are doing.

(The maid looks around over her shoulder at the doorman. She shakes her head to him, pityingly. He nods his head in agreement with her, also pityingly. He lets the door ease closed again, holding it so that it doesn’t swing . . .)

Scene Two

(Living room of a villa. It is furnished in rather old-fashioned, mediocre, overcrowded taste. In the center of the room there is a round table and two chairs. The doorbell rings. The woman who goes to the door is past middle-age but still lithe. Her hair is worn in the Slavic fashion, in a braid wound circularly around her head like a coronet, and she wears a Russian peasant blouse, white-bordered with colored embroidery. She opens the door. The countess is standing before it.)

Roulette-player: You are the clairvoyant?

Clairvoyant: I prefer to call myself a consultant. I am not a fortune-teller, whatever you may think. I give advice, but I

do not make predictions.

Roulette-player: Forgive me.

Clairvoyant: You are the lady who telephoned for a private appointment? Countess—?

Countess (stopping her with a slight gesture of her hand): I am. No names are necessary.

Clairvoyant: I understand. Come in, won't you please? *(Closes the door)* Sit down, madame. May I offer you some tea?

Countess: It may make me less nervous.

Clairvoyant (pausing on her way out): You are nervous of me?

Countess: Just nervous altogether.

(Clairvoyant raises her brows, then goes out. Countess, waiting, is extremely restless. Drums her fingers on tabletop. Takes out a cigarette, lights it with noticeably shaky hands, takes only a puff or two, then gets rid of it again. Clairvoyant reenters left, carrying a samovar.)

Countess: You are Russian, aren't you?

(Clairvoyant places samovar on table. While the next few remarks are being exchanged, she pours tea, each of them takes a swallow or two, then pushes it aside. The clairvoyant takes up a deck of cards, shuffles them, and begins to deal them out before her, very slowly, as if engaged in playing solitaire. Their conversation meanwhile has continued without a break.

Clairvoyant: I was, when there was still a Russia. Now I am a person without a country. They used to call us White Russians. Today even that name is forgotten.

Countess: I have a pressing need of guidance, of advice.

Clairvoyant: I know.

Countess: Then you know also the subject on which I need it?

Clairvoyant: The casino.

Countess (nodding): The casino. How did you know?

Clairvoyant: Your nervous gestures. The way in which your eyes almost seem to bum.

Countess (somberly): It is that easy to tell. I didn't realize . . .

Clairvoyant: I have lived many years in this world, my friend. *(Staring at her intently)* You *must* play?

Countess: While I live, I must play. If I were to lock myself in my room and throw the key out of the window, still somehow I would find myself beside that table that very same night.

Clairvoyant (almost contemptuously, with the contempt that a non-drinker has for an alcoholic): I have heard it is this way.

Countess (wearily): Then you've heard right.

Clairvoyant: And you want my advice. And yet I know and you know, we both know, that you won't take it. Still, here it is.

I give it anyway. (*Slowly, with heavy emphasis) Do not play*.

Countess: As well ask me to stop breathing. *(Leaning toward her, in desperation)* You must help me. You must I don't want to be lectured, I want to be helped.

Clairvoyant: Let us go back, then, before we go forward. Have you ever won, at any time? Think, now.

Countess: Many times. Oh, many times. But I didn't stop soon enough, that was the only trouble. I went on playing too long, after I should have stopped, and—

Clairvoyant: There is no 'too soon' there is no 'too long'. There is only one terminal point in this, and that is the point at which you *did* stop. Now let me repeat: when you stopped, had you won?

Countess (In a low, hopeless voice): Never.

Clairvoyant: Judge by that then. The past is the future that lies behind us. The future is the past that lies before us. They are one and the same. Only fools think they can divide them down the middle. You have never won. You never *will*

win. Not tonight, not a week from now, not a year from now. There is something about your personality, your being, let us call it your aura, that attracts only bad luck at the gambling-table. I have seen it in these cards here. The money cards, the diamond suite, have all consistently avoided your own card, which is this one here.

Countess (skeptically): Are they infallible?

Clairvoyant: Ask yourself that, not me. Have you ever won? Then they *are* infallible. It is something about you, it is inexplicable, but there it is.

Countess: But what am I to do? I know that I'll go back there again. I can't stay away.

Clairvoyant: Have somebody else place your bets for you. But remember one thing, the selection must be theirs, not yours. It won't help any if you tell them which plays to make. That is still you playing, then.

Countess: I couldn't! I couldn't do it! Not play myself? Just watch while somebody else plays for me? It's the excitement, the urge, to play myself that drives me on. If I am thirsty, and you give the water to someone else, will that quench *my* thirst?

Clairvoyant (spreading her hands resignedly): Well, there you have it. That's all I can tell you.

Countess: You say it's my aura, my personality. Couldn't I alter it in some way, hide it, disguise it, and so change my luck?

Clairvoyant: You mean tamper with your own destiny? For that is actually what you would be doing. That can be dangerous, madame.

Countess: Let it be. Anything at all would be better than this.

Clairvoyant: You could try. But I guarantee nothing.

Countess: I ask no guarantee. I wouldn't bet on a sure thing even if I could, for then it would have no attraction for me. It's the risk I like. All I ask is the outside chance.

Clairvoyant (laughing ruefully): Even in this you bet. You not only bet on the game itself, but you bet on the betting on the game.

Countess: And is this all you can do for me?

Clairvoyant: No. Since the consultation is not gratis, I can amplify it, I can dress it up. All you wish. Very well, let's garnish it, then. *Everything about you must be different.* That goes much deeper than just the clothes you wear, the way you wear your hair, or the perfume you use. Inside yourself is where the real change must be. And can you do that, madame?

Countess: I can try.

Clairvoyant: Your thoughts must be the thoughts of someone else. The way you move, the very way you breathe, must be the way of somebody else. In your own mind you must *be* somebody else, you must believe you *are* somebody else. You must not even think of your own name or tell yourself what it is. It is no longer your name, it is the name of a stranger, who has nothing to do with you. Those whom the old-you knew, no matter how closely, the new-you no longer knows. Those whom the new-you knows, if any, will be those whom the old-you did not know. And—all this is impossible to accomplish. Humanly impossible. No, it cannot be done. And if it could, it might be better not to. You might damage yourself, destroy yourself in some way.

Countess (growing more excited): I can try! I can try!

Clairvoyant (drily): Let me wish you luck, madame. *Bonne chance*.

Countess (fervently): I *will* do it! I will! I don't know how, yet, but I will accomplish it.

Clairvoyant (dubiously): Let us hope.

(She rises to her feet. The countess follows suit. The latter opens her handbag, brings out a handful of currency, places it on the table.)

Countess: With your permission.

Clairvoyant (shrugging matter-of-factly, as she ushers her visitor to the door, opens it for her): One's time was given up, granted.

Countess (suddenly seizing the other's hand and kissing it with gratitude): You don't know how you've helped me! You don't know how!

Clairvoyant (inscrutably): Have I . . .?

Scene Three

(The base of the Rochier de la Vierge, a rocky promontory jutting out high over the ocean at Biarritz. Around the base runs an iron guard-rail, and flanking this a paved walk. Along this walk slowly moves the countess. Her aspect is that of a woman in despair, who does not notice where she is going and does not care. She has evidently been gambling again, and with the usual result. The direction she comes from is that of the casino, and she is again wearing the spreading white dress. She stops and rests her back against the waist-high rail, one arm akimbo against it. She remains motionless thus for some time . . .)

(Suddenly some sort of a cloth, a garment, light-colored, drifts down from above, dangles over the rail for a moment, finally settles down to the ground near her. She notices it, stares. She steps over to it, picks it up, holds it extended at arms' width. It is a woman's cheap dress, plain, ordinary. Another garment floats down. Something in the nature of an undergarment, this time. Still holding the first one, she goes toward this, then stops and looks upward, to the top of the rock. On it, pale against the dark night-sky, is the undraped figure of a woman, hair streaming in the wind,

who is about to throw herself into the churning, rock-spraying water far below.

(Horror and incredulity are stamped on the upturned face of the countess. A scream is heard, long-drawn and gradually fading away, as when someone falls from a great height. The top of the rock is empty now . . . The countess, still holding the original garment she picked up, finally lowers her head and folds her arm in front of it, as if to wipe out what she has just seen.)

Countess (to herself): That is what I should do, but I haven't her courage.

(She removes her arm from before her face at last, goes to the remaining garments which have fallen and picks them up, one at a time.)

Countess: Be someone else, she said to me. *(Looks at the garments)* What better way?

(She follows the path around the turn of the rock, and off camera. When she returns, she is in the clothing of the unknown woman who has just taken her life. She stops against the rail a moment, face to camera.)

Countess: I can go back there now. I can go back and win. Win back everything I lost earlier tonight. That, and perhaps more. *(Passes her hands slowly down her sides)* Now I'm someone else. In clothes still warm from someone else s body. Still reeking with her thoughts, her hopes, her fears.

Almost, I can still feel her blood coursing within these clothes, her heart beating. *(Shields her eyes a moment)* I must not think who I am, what my name is. Was. (*Uncovers them again)* I must keep thinking, I am she. (*Slowly*) I am she. (*More slowly still)* I am she. (*Moves away from railing*) I must go back there now. I must go back—Where? I've forgotten. There was somewhere I wanted to go. But I've forgotten—where.

(Her head droops, as if she were dozing on her feet. Suddenly she lifts it, as if recalling.)

Countess: Oh, yes, I must go—Home. Home to him. He's waiting. Waiting for me to come home.

(Opens the other woman's shabby handbag, takes out a lipstick, passes it across her mouth just once, puts it back again.)

Countess: Just one more touch. Just one more try. Just one more, before I quit. And then I'm going home. Home to him.

Scene Four

Night. The promenade des Tamaris, overlooking the shore. A paved walk, and a stone balustrade or parapet, no more than waist-high. A pool of light from a street lamp falls on the center of the walk and of the balustrade. On the ballustrate, picked out by the light, the remains of a tattered movie-poster. Only the title still visible on it the rest a blur. "Jeux Interdits." The black silhouettes of tamarick leaves, dangling from the branches lost in the dark above.

(She enters, perches slantwise atop balustrade, one leg touching ground, one dangling clear. The position of her body effectively covers up the movie-poster, or at least the title on it . . . "Forbidden Games." She takes a cigarette from her bag, lights it, takes a single puff, then frugally stamps it out against the stone surface she is sitting on, and carefully retains it for further use.

(She glances down the walk, sees a man approaching, and immediately relights the cigarette, her manner expectant. The man comes nearer, his head slightly lowered, hands in his pockets, not too well-dressed. He walks tiredly. He doesn't raise his head to look at her from first to last, as he passes her.)

Girl (in a peculiar, almost infantile sing-song, more like the squeak of a mechanical doll than the voice of a living person, as though she has made this salutation countless numbers of times, and it has long ago lost all meaning to her): Evening, dear.

Man (surlily, and without breaking pace): Get out of here. Don't bother me.

(He goes on. She puts out the cigarette again, carefully retains it for further use. A moment later she sees someone else coming, from the same direction as the last time. She relights the cigarette, again staring expectantly while doing so. Another man enters, this time better dressed, almost dapper, more alert to his surroundings.)

Girl (in same sing-song): Evening, dear.

Man (pauses, turns his head, and looks at her): Oh, it's you again. We've met before, haven't we?

Girl (noncommitally): I know.

Man (patronizingly): Well, I can spend a moments time—if you can.

(She slips down from the parapet with alacrity, and links her arm in his. With the arm away from her, he surreptitiously removes a billfold from his rear pocket and transfers it to the inside pocket of his coat, where it will be more inaccessible. They walk off together. The poster, restored to view now that she has stood up, remains conspicuously visible for a moment in the center of the low stone wall. "Jeux Interditcs.")

Scene Five

(A strip of sidewalk along one of the main shopping-streets of the town. At this hour however it is deserted. Standing before a corrugated iron shutter drawn down

over some anonymous shop-window, is a solitary gendarme. The girl approaches him, passes by quickly, her head held down as though he inspires her with a guilty, or at least timorous feeling. As she goes by, he turns his head slowly, following her with his eyes. He stands there like that for several moments, as if watching to see what she will do or where she will go.)

Gendarme (finally, raising his voice with curt authority): Hey, you! Come back here a minute. *(Pause)* Come back here, I said! I want to talk to you.

(She reenters scene at right, goes up close to him, stands there obviously frightened, her head still hanging.)

Girl (meekly): Yes, Captain?

Gendarme (rocking back and forth on his heels, for emphasis): I thought I told you girls to stay off the main streets, like this one, here in this town.

Girl: Yes, Captain.

Gendarme: Then what are you doing on it?

Girl (submissively): I'm sorry, Captain.

Gendarme: I have my orders from the higher-ups, just like I give mine to you. And don't try to win me over by calling me Captain every other moment, it won't get you anywhere. Now, I don't care if you want to hang around down by the seafront-walks, where you aren't likely to attract attention, but don't let me catch you again on one of these brightly-lighted streets in this part of town.

It gives the town a very bad name. Respectable people don't like it, they complain. This is the last time I'm going to warn you. If I come across you again, I'm going to run you in.

Gnu-: I was just on my way home, that was all. I live just down there, lower end of the Rue Mazagran. The only way I can get to it is by crossing through here.

Gendarme (gruffly): That's what you told me last night too. What's your name? *(As she takes a moment to answer)* What's the matter, don't you know your own name?

Girl (vaguely): I do, but just for a moment I couldn't think. I'm tired. Paule's my name. Paule.

Gendarme: Paule what?

Girl (backs her hand across her eyes for a moment, dazedly): Paule Moret.

Gendarme (nodding approval): All right. That's what you told me last night too. All right, Paule, now you listen to me if you want to stay out of trouble—*(Stares at her more closely)* What did you do to your face? You don't look quite the same to me, somehow.

Girl (meekly): Nothing, *patron.*

Gendarme: Something different about you, I could swear. I don't know exactly what

Girl (placatingly): I'm just like always.

Gendarme (shrugging): Well, that's your own affair, I suppose. *(More severely)* Anyway, don't make me talk to you again, understand?

Girl (docilely): I won't. I promise.

Gendarme: All right, go ahead.

Girl (obsequiously): Thank you, *patron*.

(She hurries off, the sound of her hasty footsteps dying away down the street. He stands looking after her, fingering his mustache in perplexity.)

Gendarme: I suppose that's all they have, those poor devils, their faces. That's why they're always fiddling around with them, trying to change them and improve them. I can't tell what it was, but there was something different about her.

(Turns, finally, and strolls off, left.)

Scene Six

(The scene is dark, as an unlighted room would be. Footsteps climbing stairs are heard under. One flight, then a pause at the landing. Then the next flight. Growing louder as they come higher and nearer. Then a pause as if before a door and the sound of a key being put into it. Then the door opens. A sweep of light from the stairs outside passes swiftly across a wall as it does so. The door closes again and the sweep of light goes out.)

Man (in a sigh of inexpressible content, as when one has waited for hours): At last.

Girl (sighing too.): Back again.

Man: You stood there outside it a minute or two, before you came in. I could tell. What was it?

Girl: Nothing. The stairs. My breath.

Man: The beat of my heart told me it was you.

Girl: Shall I put up the light?

Man: You'd better have it, for yourself. You'll need it.

(Sound of a switch clicking. The scene becomes a room. A man is sitting there on a straight-backed chair placed flat against the wall. He is crouched over his own lap, as if he had been sitting there like that for a long time. His hands dangle limply down, inside his thighs. His head is raised, though, and he is staring straight before him. Eyes that are open, but do not move. The kind of eyes that do not see.

(At his elbow, also flat against the wall, is a small, narrow wooden table with a cheap clock on it. A diagonal crack runs down the plaster of the wall, from upper-right to lower-left.

(She does not enter the scene at once, but her shadow passes back and forth a number of times across the wall before which he sits.)

Man (wistfully): It's late—again.

Girl: Later than it should be. Every night the same story. They keep me working on overtime.

(He picks up the little clock, which has no glass over its face. Does not look at it but explores the hands delicately with his fingertips, holding it down flat over his lap instead of upright as others would.)

Man: We talk to each other, this little clock and I. all through the lonely hours of waiting. Its conversation is limited. But then—*(smiles across the room at her)*—so is my vision. We come out about equal. I say to it, 'Will she be here soon?' and it answers me, 'Tikk'. That stands for yes. I say to it, 'Is that her step out there now, far off down the quiet street?' and it answers me, 'Tokk.' That stands for maybe. That's all it ever says, yes and maybe, never no. But that's something, don't you think?

(Her outline on the wall stands still for a moment, lowers its face, covers it with both hands.)

Man: I put my fingers to it, and I can hear its little heart going inside, beating for someone like mine does.

(She enters the scene, back to camera, going toward him. And then she turns. Her clothes are the clothes of the woman who leaped from the rock, whose life this is. Her face is the face of the woman who stood at the roulette-table, of the woman who consulted the clairvoyant. She takes down a small cannister from the shelf. She takes something from out of the top of her stocking and puts it into the cannister, giving him a quick look as she does so.)

He: They paid you tonight at the factory?

Girl (softly, and with a shudder): Yes.

He: It was getting very empty in there, wasn't it?

Girl (with despair): Very. Did you . . .?

He: Yes, I shook it once, when you were out. I knew you were worried. I'd heard you pick it up and put it down again, twice, before you left, but without opening it.

(Her hand goes into the cannister. It brings out several metal bolts and washers, holds them up in its palm. Drops

them in again. They clink like coins would.)

Girl: But now it isn't empty any more. It's all right now. Bread. Those little sausages. The wine for the meals. Maybe even a package of Caporals for you—

(Her voice trails off disconsolately.)

He (leaning forward expectantly, face held up, trying to find her): Aren't you going to kiss me? You haven't yet.

Girl (wincing, backing her hand to her mouth as though to keep it from him, looking away from him as she does so): This minute. This very minute. First, just let me—

(Goes off. Sound of a little water being poured into a washbasin. Then sound of it trickling off someone's fingers. She enters again, drawing a cloth across her lips. Back and forth, over and over again, as though she could never get them clean enough. Throws it away behind her, goes to him, drops to her knees, tilts her face up toward his, and their lips meet in a long, desperate kiss, like two lost souls.)

He (slowly, as their lips finally part): My darling. My sweetheart. My wife.

Girl (slowly): My love. My husband. My life.

He: Why are there drops on your cheeks like that?

Girl: It's the water from the basin. My face gets grubby from—the factory.

He: But we only have cold water—and these are warm.

Girl: Is the loneliness over now? That's all that matters.

He: I can't remember it. What was it like?

Girl: Shall I fix you something?

He: I don't want food. I don't need food—now. Just stay here close. Close to me. Close. The time we have is so little. The terrible loneliness of love. *(His fingers lightly trace and stroke her hair.)* Love *is* loneliness. Even if I had eyes, it would still be loneliness.

Girl: A cigarette?

He: You're here with me. I need no third thing to intrude upon us.

Girl: Did the little boy from downstairs come and take you out as usual?

He: He found a nice bench for me, around where the fishing boats lie. I sat there in the sun. Then he came back for me and brought me home again when it got dark.

Girl: He's a good little boy. He's kind.

He: He told me his older sister works there at the same factory you do. She hasn't seen you there in over a month.

(She closes her eyes. Keeps them closed for a moment. Finally opens them again)

Girl (quietly): She works days, I work nights, that's why. You know that. They transferred me to the night-shift about a month ago. I told you at the time. Some they let out altogether, but me—I work nights now. (*Her voice trails off)* I work nights now. (*She drops her head suddenly, as if overcome, then raises it again*) Don't talk to the neighbors in the house too much. They mean no harm, but—People are people. Sometimes people say things that might hurt you. I don't want anyone to hurt you.

He: They're just voices I pass on the stairs. Voices without faces.

No one exists for me, only you. *(His fingers explore her face, lightly passing over her forehead, her cheeks, the turn of her chin*) You haven't changed. You're still the same. Still the same as that last time I ever saw you, before the light went out.

Girl: Everything changes. Everything has to. Only one thing never does. Never does. Love. But even the very one who loves, even she changes too.

He: Not you. You'll always be as you were in the beginning. When love was new, and I was a brand-new husband, and you were my brand-new wife. And we had the brand-new little house, remember? I'd come back at the end of the day, and you'd meet me out in the garden,

holding newly cut flowers in your arms. Something so clean and fresh about the way you looked, always. So unspoiled.

Girl (pleading): Not those words. Some others. Any others. Gay. Youthful. Even beautiful, if you want. Not those.

He: But it was that about you, always that, more than anything else. You were not the most beautiful girl in the world. Anyone can be that. A red crayon at the mouth, a black one at the eyes, can make that. You were the freshest-looking—what other word can I use?—the cleanest-looking vision that ever appeared before the eyes of a man in love—

Girl (moans): Don't. Not that word.

He: Clean as sunlight on dew. Clean as a crystal waterfall cascading into a rock-pool. Clean as little puff-ball clouds after a summer shower has washed the sky. When you came into a room, the April breeze came in with you. Clover came in with you. That was the girl my love was, that was the girl my love is.

(A long pause follows)

He: What is it? You're so still. You almost don't seem to breathe—There's distress, pulsing at me, beating at me. I can feel it.

(She crumples, slides gradually downward to the floor, crouches there on hands and knees, her head hanging over. His hand that had been caressing her hair remains extended, empty. As if so stricken she cannot rise, she begins to pull herself away from him, still along the floor on hands and knees. She reaches the door and pulls herself upright against it by grasping the knob with trembling hands. First her back is to the room, to him. Then with great effort, still holding onto the door, she turns to face him.

(His face gives a half-turn to this side, a half-tum to that, trying to locate her.)

He (bewildered): What have I said? Only tell me, tell me, and I'll unsay it, I'll take it back!

Girl: It’s too late. You’ve pulled me apart with just one word, just one. Now nothing can ever put me together again.

He (with mounting alarm): You’re standing by the door now. I can hear your voice sound against the wooden panel. What are you thinking of, where are you going?

Girl (softly): Goodbye, my love.

He (fully frightened now, terrified): Paule, the door is open now! I hear the emptiness of the stairs in back of your voice!

Girl (more softly than before): Goodbye, love.

He (shouting): Paule, the light’s going out again! Don’t take my light away, the only light I have! *(Crying out wildly) Paule, don’t leave me in the dark!*

Girl (in a whisper): Goodbye.

(The doorway is standing empty. The sound of her footsteps running down the stairs comes from the other side of it, gradually diminishing in the distance.)

He (screaming in despair): Paule, don’t go! The little clock and I, we want you here! Paule, come back! Come back! The dark! The dark! *The terrible dark!*

(A closed door on a lower landing of the stair suddenly opens and a woman sticks her head out. Just as she does so, the girl reaches the landing, slows momentarily to make the turn, but without stopping altogether.)

Woman (severely): Will you kindly be more quiet! All that shouting up there! And running down the stairs like that at this hour! People are trying to sleep, you know.

Girl (turning her head for just an instant as she goes by): Be patient, madame. Just a moment or two, and I won’t make another sound. I’ll be still forever after.

(She continues running on down the next flight. Woman stares after her, mouth open, as if not knowing whether she understood rightly what she just heard.)

(At the parapet along the Promenade des Tamaris, the movie poster is still in its center, *“Jeux Interdits.”* The girl runs by it She is tottering now from exhaustion. As she passes, she is struggling with her dress, trying to get out of it)

The dress flutters down from the tops of the Rocher de la Vierge, flutters down among the rocks, catches there, flickering in the wind. Then another garment. Then finally another. A flash of lightning bleaches the scene for a moment

Girl: I *will* be clean! I *will* be clean once more, just as I was before, just as he thinks of me still!

(Her head is upraised toward the night sky, her hair streaming in the wind. Another flash of lightning reveals her features even more clearly. Her face is definitely the face of the woman who stood at the roulette-table, who earlier stood at the foot of this same rock in a white dress, looking up.)

Girl (eyes turned upward, in prayer): Forgive me, Holy Mother. For myself, nothing. I have no claim, I make none. But for him—be merciful, have pity. Don’t let him hurt too much. Don’t let him call my name too much. Don’t let him linger alone in the dark too long.

(As she finishes praying, she lowers her head and turns it to give one last look below and behind her, from where she climbed.)

(At the base of the rock, the discarded garments are still lying there where they fell. But now a woman in a spreading white gown is standing there, looking upward toward the top of the rock. Her face expresses horror. A flash of lightning reveals it even more vividly. *Her* face is just as definitely the face of the woman who stood by the roulette-table, and at the foot of this rock the time before . .

. As she looks, she hears a long-drawn scream, dwindling into the silence, as when someone is falling from a great height. A flash of lightning illuminates the top of the rock once more. It is empty. The woman in white, looking upward, transfixed.)

Woman (in a trance-like voice): Which is you? Which is I?

THE NUMBER’S UP

It was a sort of car that seemed to have a faculty for motion with an absolute lack of any accompanying sound whatsoever. This was probably illusory; it must have been, internal combustion engines being what they are, tires being what they are, brakes and gears being what they are, even raspy street-surfacing being what it is. Yet the illusion outside the hotel entrance was a complete one. Just as there are silencers that, when affixed to automatic hand-weapons, deaden their reports, so it was as if this whole massive car body were encased in something of that sort. For, first, there was nothing out there, nothing in sight there. Then, as though the street-bed were water and this bulky black shape were a grotesque gondola, it came floating up out of the darkness from nowhere. And then suddenly, still with no sound whatsoever, there it was at a halt, in position.

It was like a ghost-car in every attribute but the visual one. In its trancelike approach and halt, in its lightlessness, in its enshrouded interior, which made it impossible to determine (at least without lowering one’s head directly outside the windows and peering in at nose-tip range) if it were even occupied at all, and if so by whom and by how many.

You could visualize it scuttling fleetly along some overshadowed country lane at dead of night, lightless, inscrutable, unidentifiable, to halt perhaps beside some

inky grove of trees, linger there awhile undetected, then glide on again, its unaccountable errand accomplished without witness, without aftermath. A goblin-car that in an earlier age would have fed folklore and rural legend. Or, in the city, you could visualize it sliding stealthily along some warehouse-blacked back alley, curving and squirming in its terrible silence, then, as it neared the mouth and would have emerged, creeping to a stop and lying there in wait, unguessed in the gloom. Lying there in wait for long hours, like some huge metal-cased predatory animal, waiting to pounce on its prey.

Sudden, sharp yellow spurts of fangs, and then to whirl and slink back into anonymity the way it came, leaving the carcass of its prey huddled there and dead.

Who was there to know? Who was there to tell?

And even now, before this particular hotel entrance. It was already in position, it had already stopped.

Then nothing happened.

Ordinarily, when cars stop someone gets out. That is what they have stopped for. In this case it just stood there, as though there were no one in it and had been no one in it all along.

Then the pale, blurry shape of a human hand, as when seen through thick dark glass, appeared inside the window and descended slowly to the bottom, like a pale-colored mussel foundering in a murky tank of water. And with it went the invisible line of a shade. The hand stopped a little above the lower rim and faded from sight again. The shade-line remained where it had been left.

* * * *

In a little while a young man came walking along the street, untroubled of gait, unaware of it. The particular hotel that the ghost-car had made its rendezvous had a seamy glass canopy jutting out over the sidewalk with open bulbs set around the inside of it. But they only shone inward because

its outer rim was opaque. Thus, as the young man stepped from the darkness of the street's back reaches under this pane of light it was as though a curtain had been jerked up in front of his face, and he was suddenly revealed from head to foot as in a spotlight.

In the car the darkness found breath and whispered, "That him?"

And the darkness whispered back to the darkness, "Yeah, same type build. Same light hair. Wears gray a lot. And this is the hotel that was fingered."

Then the darkness quickly stirred, but the other darkness quelled it, hissing: "Wait, he wants the girl too. The girl too, he said. Let him get up there to her first."

The young man had turned off and gone inside. The four glass leaves of the revolving door blurred and made him disappear.

For a moment more the evil darkness held its collective breath. Then, no longer in a whisper but sharp as the edge of a stiletto, "Now. Go in and get the number of the room. Do it smart."

The man behind the desk looked up from his racing form, and there was a jaunty young man wearing a snap-brim felt hat leaning there on one elbow. How long he'd been there it was impossible to determine. He might have just come. He might have been there three or four minutes already. Ghost-cars, ghost-arrivals, ghost-departures.

"Do something for you?" said the man behind the desk.

The leaner on his elbow nodded his head languidly, but didn't say.

"What?"

The leaner considered his bent-back fingernails, blew on them and rubbed them against his coat-lapel a little. "Guy that just came in. Got any idea what his room number would be?"

"Is he expecting—"

“No.” He opened his hand and a compressed five-dollar bill dribbled out onto the desk and slowly began to expand. “He dropped this in front of the door just now. I seen him do it. Thought he might want it back.”

“You taking it up to him?”

“No. You take care of it for me. I ain’t particular.” The elbowleaner was fiddling with one of his cuff links now.

A conniving look appeared on the clerk’s yeast-pasty face. He said, through immobile lips that made the words sound furtive, “I’ll take it up to One-one-six for you in a little while.”

“Try Streakaway in the third race tomorrow.”

The five-dollar bill was gone now.

So was the jaunty young man in the snap-brim felt hat.

* * * *

He knocked because they only had one key between them. The tarnished numerals ii6 slanted inward as she opened the door for him. They kissed first, and then she said, “Oh God, I’ve been so frightened, waiting all alone here like this. I thought you’d never come back!”

She had sleek bobbed hair with a part on the side, and was wearing a waistless dress that came to her knees. The waist was down at the bottom.

“Everything’s taken care of,” he said soothingly. “The reservation’s made—”

“You don’t think anything will happen tonight, do you?” she faltered. “You don’t think anything will happen tonight?”

“Nothing will happen. Don’t be afraid. I’m right here with you.”

“We should have gone home to my mother. I would have felt safer there. When something like this comes along, a woman wants another woman to cling to, one of her own kind. A man can’t understand that.”

“Don’t be afraid,” was all he kept saying. “Don’t be afraid.”

The knock on the door was craftily casual. It wasn’t too loud, it wasn’t too long, it wasn’t too rapid. It was just like any knock on the door should be.

Their embrace split open down the middle, and they both turned their heads to look that way.

“Wonder who that is,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I can’t imagine,” she said placidly.

He went over to the door and opened it, and suddenly two men were in the room and the door was closed again. All without noise.

“Come on, Jack,” one said. “Nice and easy now.”

“Nice and easy now,” the other said.

“You must have the wrong party.”

“No, we haven’t got the wrong party. We made sure of that.”

“Made sure of that,” the other one said.

“Well I don’t know you. I never saw you before in my life.”

“Same goes for us. We never saw you before neither. But we know someone that *does* know you.”

“Who?”

“We’ll tell you downstairs. Come on now. Take your hat. Looks better that way.”

The girl’s head kept turning from one to the other, like a frightened spectator watching a ball pass to and fro at a deadly tennis match that is not being played for sport.

“You’re frightening my wife. Won’t you tell us what you—”

“His wife. Did you get that? ‘The-lay-of-the-land,’ they used to call her, and now this guy claims she’s his wife. As that Guinan dame is always saying, ‘Hello, sucker!’ ”

The girl quickly held the man back, her man. “Don’t. I don’t like their looks. Please, for my sake, don’t.”

“You got good sense, wife,” one of them told her.

“Look, if it’s money you want—we don’t have much, but—here. Now please go and leave us alone.”

One of them chopped the extended hand down viciously, and the bills sprayed like an exploded bouquet. His voice thickened to a muddy growl. “Come a-a-an,” he said threateningly. “Outside.” He backed a forearm up over his own shoulder in menace. “Walk,” he said. “Don’tcha hear good?”

“Hear good?” said the other.

“This says you do.” And there was a gun. Not much of it showing, just a sliver of the harmless end, peering above the lip of his pocket. But with one finger hooked down below in position.

“Don’t scream,” the other one warned the girl tonelessly. “Don’t scream, or you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

She shuddered like someone dancing. “I won’t.”

“Now come on,” the first one said to the man. “You’re going to walk with me, like this. Up against me, real close and chummy. Buddy-buddies.”

They went out two by two. Slopping fondly against each other, from shoulder down to hip, like a quartet of drunks coming out of a speak at seven in the morning.

“Where you taking us?” he said in the elevator, going down.

“Just for a little ride.” The expression had no sinister meaning yet in 1929. It meant only what it seemed to say.

“But why at this hour?”

“Don’t talk.”

As they made the brief passage from elevator to street, with a minimum of conspicuousness, the desk man carefully avoided looking up. He was busy, extremely busy, looking down into his racing form at that moment.

They walked her around to the outside of the car and put her in from there, next to a man who was already at the wheel. Him they put in from the near side, and then each one got in on opposite sides of him and pinned him down between them on the back seat. It was all done with almost

fluid-drive sleekness, not a hitch, not a catch, not a break in its flow.

And suddenly, like in a dream, the street outside that particular hotel entrance was empty again, as empty as it had been earlier that night. The car was gone. It had departed as soundlessly, as ghostlike, as it had first appeared. A true phantom of the night.

But it had been there. It had brought three people and taken five away. That much was no illusion.

The ride had begun.

The theatre and club spectaculars seemed to stick up into the sky at all sorts of crazy angles, probably because most of them were planted diagonally on rooftops. *Follow Thru, Whoopee, Show Boat, El Fay Club, Club Richman, Texas Guinan's. It gave the town the appearance of standing on its ear.*

The car slid through rows of brownstones (each one housing a speakeasy on its lower floors) over as far as Eleventh, which had no traffic lights yet. Its only traffic was an occasional milk or railroad-yards freight truck, since no highway connected with it, and it came to a dead end at Seventy-second without even a ramp to its name. They ran down it the other way, to Canal Street and the two-year-old Holland Tunnel, engineering marvel of the decade.

The girl spoke suddenly, as they glided past endless strings of stalled New York Central freight cars. "Don't. Please don't. Please leave me alone."

"What's he doing to you?" came quickly from the back seat.

The man at the wheel answered for her. "Just straightening her skirt a little."

The other two laughed. But it wasn't even bawdy laughter. It was too cold and cruel for that.

When they reached the tunnel-mouth, the driver slowed. As he rolled the window down to pay the toll, she suddenly

stripped off her wrist watch and flung it so that it struck the tunnel cop flat on the chest.

He caught it easily with one hand, so that it didn't even have a chance to fall. "Hey, what's that for?" he asked, but laughing good-naturedly.

"My girl friend here just now said she don't want to know the time any more from now on, and I guess that's her way of proving it."

The girl writhed a little, as though her arm were caught in a vise behind her back, but said nothing.

The cop pitched the watch lightly back into the car. "Just coming home from a party, folks?"

"No, we're going to one."

"Have fun."

"That's what we intend."

As they picked up speed, and the white tiles flashed blindingly by, the driver gave her a savage backhand swipe with his knuckles across her mouth.

She cried out piercingly, but it was lost in the roar of the onrushing tunnel. The man who called himself her husband made some sort of spasmodic move on the back seat, but the two guns pressing into his intestines from opposite sides almost met inside him, they dug in so far.

They came out into the open, and it was the grimy backwaters of Jersey City now. Tall factory stacks, and fires burning, and spreads of stagnant stinking water.

On and on the ride went. On and on and on.

They turned north soon and left the big city and all its little satellites behind them, and after a while even the rusty glow on the horizon died down and was gone. Then trees began, and little lumpy hills, and there was nothing but the darkness and the night and the fear.

"Don," she shuddered, and suddenly flung one hand up over her shoulder and back, trying to find his.

"Please let me hold her hand," he begged. "She's frightened."

“Let ‘em hold hands,” one of them snickered.

They held onto each other like that, in a hand-link of fear, two against the night.

“Don, she called me,” he said. “Didn’t you hear her? Don, that’s my name. Don Ackerman.”

“Yeah, and I’m Ricardo Cortez,” countered one of them, with the flipness so characteristic of the period that it even came into play on a death ride.

On went the ride.

At one point his control slipped away from him for a minute. “God,” he burst out, “how far are you taking us?”

“Don’t be in a hurry to get there,” the one on his left advised him dryly. “I wouldn’t, if I was you.”

And then again, a little later, “Won’t you tell me the name of the fellow you think I am? Can’t I convince you—”

“What’s the matter, you don’t know your own name?”

“Well, what’ve I done?”

“We don’t know from nothing. You were just marked lousy, that’s all. We only carry out the orders.”

“Yes, but what orders?” he exclaimed in his innocence.

And the answer, grim, foreboding, was: “Oh, broth-urr!”

Then without any warning the car stopped. They were there.

“The ride’s over,” someone said. “End of the ride.”

For a moment nobody got out. They just sat there. The driver cut the ignition, and after that there was silence. Complete, uncanny silence, more frightening than the most threatening noise or violence could have been. Night silence. A silence that had death in it.

Then one of them opened the door, got out and started to walk slowly away from the car, through ankle-high grass that hissed and spit as he toiled through it. The others just stayed where they were.

There was some sort of an old dilapidated farm building with a slanted roof in the middle distance. It was obviously abandoned, because its windows were black glassless gaps.

Behind it was a smaller shanty looking like a tool shed or lean-to, so close to collapse it was almost down flat. He didn't approach either one of them, he went around to the rear in a big wide circle.

They sat in silence, the four of them that were left. One of them was smoking a cigarette. But that didn't make any noise, just a red blink whenever he drew on it.

Finally the driver reached out and tapped the button. A single, lonely, guttural horn-blat sounded. Briefer than a question mark in the air, staccato as the span of a second split in two, yet unfolding into a streamer of meaning through the night air: Come on, what's taking you so long, we're getting tired of waiting.

The walker-in-the-grass came back to the car again.

"Yeah, it's there," he said briefly.

"He told us it would be," was the sardonic answer. "Didn't you believe him?"

There was a general stir of activity as the other two got out, each with a prisoner.

"All right, you and me go this way," the one with the girl said.

"No! Don!" she started to scream harrowingly. "Don-n-n-n!"

His smile was thin as a knife-cut across his face. "Don'll be taken care. Don't worry about Don."

He grasped her brutally by the upper arms, tightened his hold to a crushing vise and drew his lips back whitely, as though the constrictive force came from them and not his hands. He thrust her drunkenly lurching form from side to side before him. Her hair swayed and danced with the struggle, as though it were something alive in its own right. The darkness swallowed them soon enough, but not the sounds they made.

Now Don began to shout himself, frightened, crazed, straining forward like a thing possessed. "Let her go! Let her go! Oh, if there's a God above, why doesn't He look

down and stop this!” His voice was willowy with too much vibrancy. The movements of weeping appeared upon his face, the distortion without the delivery. Skin-weeping, without tears.

When the man who had been with her came back he was brushing twigs and leaves off his clothing, almost casually.

“Where is she?” they asked him.

“Where I left her.” Then he added, “Wanna take a look?”

“I think I will take a look,” the other assented, grinning with suggestive meaning.

But he turned up again almost at once, and his manner had changed. He acted disgruntled, like someone who’s been given a false scent and gone on a fool’s errand.

“Where is she now?”

“Still there.”

“What’s up?”

He said something low-voiced that the man she’d called Don wasn’t able to catch. His fright-soaked senses let it float past on the tide of terror submerging him.

“A kid!” the other one brayed outright in his surprise. His face flicked around for an instant toward the prisoner, then back again. “Say, maybe he was telling the truth. Maybe she was his—”

“Couldn’t you tell?” the third man demanded of the girl’s original escort, a trace of contempt in his voice.

“Whaddya expect me to do, feel her pulse in the dark?”

“She gone or ain’t she?” he wanted to know bluntly, unmoved by any thought of sparing the prisoner’s sensibilities.

“Sure. What do I know about those things? I only know her eyes are wide open and she ain’t looking.”

The man who was being held thrashed rabidly until he almost seemed to oscillate like the bent wing of an electric fan when its spin is dwindling. “Let me go to her! Let me go to her!”

“Pipe down, Jack,” one of them admonished, giving him a perfunctory slantwise clip along the jawline, but without any real heave behind it. “Nothing there to go to any more.”

He threw his head back, stared unseeingly straight up overhead, and from the furrowed scalp, the ridged pate that his face had thus become, emitted a full-fledged scream, high-pitched as a woman’s, unreasoning as a crushed animal’s.

Then his hands rose, fingers hooked wide, and scissored in from opposite sides, clawing at his own cheeks, digging into them, as if trying to tear them off, pull them out by their very ligaments.

“No!” he shrieked, then “No!” he cried, then “No!” he moaned, on a descending tonal scale.

They had taken their hands off him, knowing he was no longer capable of much movement.

His head fell forward again, like something trying to loosen itself from his shoulders, and now he blindly, snufflingly faced the ground as if he were looking closely for something he’d dropped there. His feet carried him around in an intoxicated, reeling little half-circle, and he collapsed breast-first against the fender of the car, head burrowed down against its hood, clasped hands clamped tight across the back of it as if to keep his skull from exploding. His legs, stretched inertly outward along the ground behind him, twitched spasmodically now and then, as if trying to draw themselves in after the rest of him, and always slipped back again each time.

In his travail, words of pain filtered through, suffocated by the pressure of the car-hood against his nose and mouth.

“Mine! She was mine! Mine! Mine!” Over and endlessly over again. “My girl. She was my girl. It was going to be my little baby. I was waiting for it to be my little baby. All my hopes and dreams are gone . . . Oh, I want to leave this rotten world! I want to get out of this rotten world!”

“You will. You’re gonna.” The eyes that looked down upon him held no pity, no softness, no feeling at all. They were eyes of stone.

“I don’t care what you do to me now,” he said. “I want to die.”

“That’s good,” they told him. “We’ll oblige.”

“Kill me quick,” he said. “The quicker the better.”

“You’re going to get it how we want it, not how you want it.”

He wouldn’t walk, or couldn’t. Probably couldn’t—emotional shock. Each took him by a shoulder, and his legs dragged along behind him out at full length, giving little jerks and bumps when they hit stones and other obstacles.

They brought him to the edge of a squared-off pit in the ground and let him fall flat on his face and lie there a minute. A dried-out-well shaft.

“You start the digging, Playback.” It was the first time a name had been exchanged between any of them.

“Yeah, I always get the hard work.”

Playback brought a shovel from the toppled-down tool shed, marked off an oblong of surface soil and started to break it up into clods ready for throwing down into the well-shaft.

The other man was saying to the third one: “These pocketflashes ain’t going to be enough to see all the way down there. How about one of the heads from the car?”

“Whaddya have to have light for, anyway?”

“You want to see him die, doncha? That’s half the kick. Another thing, there might be space left between those chunks the air could get to him through.”

“I have some extension wiring I can rig it up on.”

“I don’t care what you do now,” the man on the ground droned. “I want to die.”

“Always get the hard work,” said Playback.

The detached headlight was set up on the lip of the well-shaft. The man who had brought it returned to the car to

control it from the dashboard.

"Why don't you hurry?" said the man on the ground. "For God's sake, why don't you hurry? Why can't I die, when I want to so badly?"

The one nearest aimed a kick at him along the ground. "You will," he promised.

The headlight was deflected downward into the aperture.

"Give her the juice," the one beside it called back guardedly in the direction of the car.

A ghostly pallor came up from below, making the darkness aboveground seem even more impenetrable. Their faces, however, were now bathed in the reflection, like hideous devilmasks with slits for eyes and mouths.

The other one came back from the car.

"There's got to be a lot more fill than that," the one standing beside Playback criticized dissatisfiedly, measuring the results of his efforts.

"I always get the hard work."

The other one grabbed the shovel from him and went at it in his place. "If there's one thing that gets my goat," he muttered disgustedly, "it's to have a guy along on a thing like this that's always bellyaching, the way you do. Just one guy like that is enough to spoil everyone else's good time."

The man on the ground had grasped hold of a small rock lying near him. He closed his hand around it, swung his arm up and tried to smash it into his own skull.

The nearest one of the three saw it just in time and aimed a swift kick that averted it. The rock bounced out and the hand fell down limp. It lay there, oddly twisted inside out, as though the wrist had been broken.

After that there was silence for a while, only the sound of the shovel biting into the earth and the hissing splatter of the loose dirt.

They stood him up, his back to the well.

In the dark, desperate sky, just above the scalloped line the treetops made, three stars formed a pleading little

constellation. No one looked at them, no one cared. This was the time for death, not the time for mercy.

The last thing he said was, “Helen, sweetheart. Wait for me. I’m coming to you.” The last thing in the whole world.

Then they pushed him down. Took their hands off him, rather, and he went down by himself, for he couldn’t stand up any more.

He went over backward, and in, and down. The sound of the hit was’t too much. It was soggy at the bottom yet, from the long-ago water. Probably he didn’t feel it too much. He was all limp from lack of wanting to live, anyway.

He lay there nestled up, like in a foursquare clayey coffin.

He stirred a little, sighed a little, like someone trying to get comfortable in bed.

Playback tipped the shovel over, and a drench of earthgranules spewed down on top of him.

One bent leg got covered up. But his face still breasted the terrestrial wave, like a motionless swimmer caught in the upturn stroke of the Australian crawl and held fast that way, face over shoulder.

Playback brought another shovelful, and the face was gone.

One hand crept through, tentatively, like something feeling its way in the dark.

Playback brought another shovelful and erased the hand.

Three fingers wormed through this time, like a staggered insect that has been stepped on. They only made it as far as the second joint.

“If he said he wants to die, then why does he keep trying to break through to the surface and breathe for?” Playback asked, engrossed.

“That’s nature,” the one beside him answered learnedly. “His mind wants to die, but his body don’t know any better, it wants to live no matter what he says to it.”

The stirring fill had fallen motionless at last.

“It’s got him, he’s quit now,” he decided after a further moment or two of judicious observation. “Throw her in on top of him, fill it up the rest of the way, and let’s get out of here. I haven’t had so much fresh air since—”

* * * *

A girl opened the door first, looked cautiously up and down the deserted hotel corridor. Then she hitched her head at someone behind her, picked up a small valise from the floor and came on outside.

She was a blonde, good-looking and mean-looking, both at the same time.

“C’mon,” she said huskily. “Let’s go while the going’s good.”

A man came out after her. His eyes were the eyes of a poker player. A poker player in a game where the pot is life and death. He had a certain build, a certain way of walking. He was in gray.

He closed the door after him with practiced stealth. Then he stopped and raised his hand to the outside of it.

The girl looked around at him impatiently. “Can that, will you?” she snapped. “This is no time to play games. Every time you go in or out you take time off and fool with that.”

“I’m a gambler, remember?”

“You’re a gambler is right,” she agreed tartly. “That’s why the heat’s on you right now. You should pay up your losses —”

“I’m superstitious. This little number’s been awful good to me. All my big wins come from something with a six in it.”

On the 9 at the end of 119 the bottom rivet was gone; only the top one remained. He swung it around loosely upward, made it into a 6 and patted it affectionately. “Keep on bringing me good luck like you always have,” he told it softly.

“Didn’t you hear me ask for 116 when we first holed up here?” he added. “Only somebody else was already in it.

BLONDE BEAUTY SLAIN

The delivery truck drove up and parked alongside the newsstand at exactly 9:29 P.M. This was very good time, since its contents were what was loosely called the “Nine O’Clock Edition.” This in itself was wholly inaccurate since the edition itself bore tomorrow’s dateline. To simplify, it was the next day’s paper going on sale the day before. Tomorrow’s paper in turn would *really* be the day after’s, with a new headline and make-up. But no one was the slightest bit confused—least of all, the reading public.

The newsstand was out at the curb, but it faced inward, toward the subway entrance. This was highly advantageous and Mrs. Maloney, the lessee, had to pay considerable for the concession. However, she made considerable, so the arrangement was to no one’s disadvantage. Mrs. Maloney was a woman of remarkable hardihood and, considering her occupation, surprising years. She habitually wore a coat-sweater in the colder seasons, and drank hot coffee from a container, but never stayed away from her stand. She must by all appearances have already been at the very top of her sixties. She had, however, a nephew—himself far from a youth—who spelled her at mealtimes and performed the harder details for her, such as lifting the papers from the ground to counter. She was, incidentally, called simply “Mom” by all and sundry. Very few actually knew her name.

The driver called out, “Hello, Mom,” jumped down, ran around to the open back of his truck, and hoisted a towering bale of *9* o’clocks, bound around with hairy hempen cord. He staggered a few bow-legged steps, then dropped the newspapers on the sidewalk with a detonating and dust-producing thud.

He said, “Any returns?”

Mom said, “Twanny-four.”

He scowled—he didn’t like returns—but picked them up from her counter and went back to his truck with them. He had to—that was the arrangement.

This completed their dealings until tomorrow night. The truck speeded off to feed the next stand along its delivery route.

Mom’s aforementioned nephew ran out with a short sharp-edged implement and flicked the hempen binding apart. Then he hoisted the massive bale—but by segments, not all at one time—to the counter. Mom in turn disposed a portion of them underneath the counter to wait their turn, placed the rest on top of the counter for immediate sale. The topmost paper invariably—and tonight was no exception—had to be discarded as unsalable. Either the rope had cut it into tatters at the edges, or the pitch to the pavement had smudged obliterating dust into it.

Mom glanced, but with only perfunctory interest, at the undamaged one right below as she threw away the top copy. The covering leaf which folded and went around to the back, was a peculiar pale-green color. The fill, however, was white. On the pale-green outer page, in lettering the size of the top line of an optician’s chart, blazed the words: *BLONDE BEAUTY SLAIN.* In the space left was a photograph. The two, however, had nothing to do with one another; for in minuscule print, almost invisible compared to its titanic reference, was the footnote: *story on page* 2. This was called a teaser or hook, the idea being first to catch the reader on the outside and then draw him into the

inside. Its psychology was, to say the least, illogical—for it could have been assumed that the reader had already purchased the paper by that time anyway.

Mom sat back, propped her elbows up, and waited. From that point on it was up to the customers.

A man came along, peeled the top newspaper off the pile, threw a dime onto the one below. Quick as a flash, Mom threw down a nickel, and the dime was gone.

The man—

The man put his key in the door and went in, and he was finally home. It always surprised him that so small a flat could produce so much noise. Not that he minded it; he would have missed it—it wouldn't have been home without it. He wouldn't have wanted to come in here and find it deathly quiet; it would have frightened him.

She had just spanked Terry and he was howling in the corner. The little girl, who made much less direct noise, but far more indirect, than her brother, was squatting on the floor in front of the blaring television. Even the meat balls were contributing to the din, hissing and sputtering away.

The little girl ran to him and kissed him. Then the little boy. Then he went to *her* and kissed her. She was harassed, he could tell. He didn't blame her.

"What kind of day did you have?" he said. It was the wrong thing to have said—he could tell right away.

"What kind of a day did I have?" she declaimed. "You can well ask that! You can well *ask!*"

She interrupted the recital that he knew was about to come by turning her head sharply. "Milly, turn off that thing! You've had enough now! It's giving me a headache."

Then back to him again. "I had my usual glamorous day. What else? You didn't expect it to be any different, did you? I know I don't—not any more."

He turned away from her, sought out his usual chair, and sank into it, weary, the paper he had just bought unopened on his lap. This had to be got through, he knew. More and more frequently lately, this had to be got through.

“It’s housework, housework, all day long!” she went on gratingly.

She was coming and going, putting plates on the table now. “Doing the dishes, making the beds, cleaning, cleaning! And when it comes to washing clothes, I *never* get through. I no sooner turn around, and they’ve gotten themselves all dirty again.”

“Kid are kids,” he said leniently. ‘You were that way when you were a kid. I was too. You can’t keep them locked up in a glass case. It isn’t right.”

“That’s easy for *you* to say, you don’t have to wash their things.” The meat balls had finally appeared. They all gathered around the table, which was in the one main room. She resumed: “Then when I do get to go out, in the afternoons, where do I go? The A. and P. or Safeway, Safeway or the A. and P. That’s my outing. That’s my recreation. I have to push a cart through the street both ways, coming and going. I’m so *sick* of standing on check-out lines and having arguments with people in back of me, people in front of me. I’m so sick of looking cans of corned beef in the face. Today they short-changed me a dollar, a whole dollar.”

“Don’t they give out those little paper tapes with the items listed on them?”

“It wasn’t on there. It was in the change he handed back to me; I had a terrible time about it. They had to empty out the whole cash register. Then coming back, a taxi made a right turn into Amsterdam Avenue and tipped over my shopping cart, and I had to pick up everything all over the street.”

“Were you crossing against the light?” he said uneasily. “Don’t ever—”

“No, but they changed too quick for me.”

“My day wasn’t good either,” he said. But he said it uncomplainingly, as if to show her what to do with a day that wasn’t so good.

“Yes, but with a man it’s different,” she caught him up immediately. “You get out of the house at least, the first thing in the morning, and don’t come back to it again until the evening. You don’t have the kids in your hair the whole livelong day—”

She had stopped eating now, overcome by her frustration.

“Eat,” he urged gently. “Don’t let it get you.”

“I can’t *help* it. I should never have—”

He seemed to know what she’d been about to say. “Should never have married me?” He finished it for her ruefully.

“No, not you. I should never have married at all. I should have been like my sister. I should have listened to her—”

Here comes her sister again, he thought, but forbearingly.

“She has a maid, she has a gorgeous apartment, she dresses like a queen—”

“I know, I know,” he said patiently. “You told me many times.” She put the kids in the bedroom. When she came back he laid down the paper and looked at her, with a sort of understanding pity, a sort of pitying understanding. “Let the dishes go,” he said. “For once. Come on, I’ll take you to the movies. Get your hat. It’ll take your mind off things.”

“The kids?” Her smile was bleak. “You forget.”

“They’re old enough now, they’ll be all right. It’s only for a couple of hours. Mrs. Silvano next door can look in on them now and then.”

“The movies,” she said. Suddenly she laughed. It wasn’t a good sound. “Oh, you’re too good to me. You’re spoiling me!”

“Don’t,” he said.

The days and weeks of pent-up discontent, the years of it, seemed to brim over all at once. She sat down heavily at the cleared table, began to pound it at spaced intervals with her clenched fist, to underscore the torrent of words that suddenly poured from her.

“She gets night clubs, I get the movies. She gets lobster Newburg, I get meat balls. She gets champagne, I get Seven Up. She has charge accounts in all the swellest stores in town, I go to Woolworth’s. She was up here a couple weeks ago—you should have seen how she was dressed. A mink. A diamond on her finger as big as—pearls around her neck.”

“You told me, you told me,” he mumbled wearily. “How often.”

“She felt sorry for me. I could tell it, she didn’t have to say so. When she left, I found a hundred dollars hiding under the coffee pot She didn’t want to hurt my pride.” And then in tragic summation: “Oh, why did I throw away my life this way!”

“Here,” he said. “Here.” He handed the paper to her.

“What’s this for, something to keep me quiet?” She stared at him as if she couldn’t make up her mind for a moment whether he was making fun of her or was serious. “Now it’s the paper I get for my evening’s recreation. A big five-cent tabloid to keep me amused.”

“Open it,” he said quietly. “Read the second page.”

Her face was suddenly one big scar of shock, and just as white as such a scar is. A great gust of breath was drawn from her.

“Beatrice Barrett,” she gasped, almost voiceless. “That’s Bessie, that’s the name she used in her career.”

For a long time there was silence in the room. He just sat there holding his head, like the failures in life who’ve tried to do their best but are failures just the same. Then after a while she moved over toward him, softly, quietly. Almost like a kiss.

She sank to her knees beside him. “What’re you doing?” he asked her. But not abruptly, in that same quiet way he always had with her.

“Thanking God.” And he saw that her eyes were moist.

When she’d finished weeping, she raised her head and smiled at him.

“Does that offer to go to the movies still hold?”

He smiled back, nodding his head.

“Just one more thing,” she said, like a little girl coaxing.

“Anything.”

“No, not anything. Just one more thing. Just a bag of popcorn. That’ll make my evening.”

And as they went out together, arm in arm, like the sweethearts they’d been ten years before, they passed the fallen newspaper.

She looked up at him, not down at it.

“I’ll settle for this,” she said. “The two kids, and a guy like you; and if I have to spend all the rest of my life cleaning and shopping for groceries and fixing meals and washing clothes, I won’t complain—not any more.”

The delivery truck drove up and parked at exactly 9:29 P.M.

The driver said, “Any returns?”

Mom said, “Twanny-four.”

The headline said *BLONDE BEAUTY SLAIN.*

Mom sat back, propped her elbows up, and waited.

A woman came along walking quickly. She had red hair, and mistrustful hazel eyes that darted wary little glances to the left and right.

Many people look both ways in crossing through traffic, but she was already on the sidewalk, had finished crossing. She stepped up to the stand, snapped open her handbag, and fumbled in it for change. But while she fumbled she still found time to look to the right, look to the left. She came up

with a quarter, put it down, and took the uppermost paper from the pile.

Long before she had finished folding it and wedging it under her arm, Mom had two dimes waiting for her on the next one under.

The woman scooped them up, and one dime escaped her, fell to the sidewalk with a little *tink*.

She glanced down just once, but didn't bend over and look for it. She snapped her handbag shut on the rest of the change.

"I see it," Mom said, trying to be helpful. "There it is, over there."

"Never mind, let it go," the woman answered in a muffled voice, and walked away at the same quick gait with which she had approached, looking to the right, looking to the left.

Mom gazed after her and shrugged. If it had been a penny, maybe; but a dime? Then she darted out to pick up the coin.

The woman—

The woman, still wary-eyed, went chip-chopping up a violet-black side street studded with glaring white disks like outsize polka dots. They came at wide-spaced intervals though—the ground-pools of brightness from the street lights. She went around the outside of each, instead of cutting straight through as ordinary walkers would have. The whole block was one long row of brownstone, compartmented into furnished rooms. She either missed the one she wanted, or else knew it only too well when she saw it. She strolled past it, four or five houses past it, then turned unhesitatingly and came back. The way she turned unhesitatingly, you knew she'd seen it the first time.

She hurried up the stoop and darted in, looking to the right, looking to the left. She keyed the inner door, then ran

up the inside stairs which were linoleum-matted. She stopped in front of the door she wanted, and the way she knocked you could tell it was a signal. Two taps, then one, then two again. Very quietly, almost impossible to hear—unless it was being waited for.

A bolt slid back, a chain went off, and the door opened. A man was standing there. He didn't look at her—he looked past her to where she'd just come from. She didn't look at him either—she too looked back to where she'd just come from. They didn't say hello.

She squeezed past him, and he rebolted and rechained the door.

He was unkempt. He hadn't shaved, and his hair was on end from being ground into a pillow. His shirt was off; he just had trousers and undershirt on him. He would have been handsome—apparently he once had been—if he hadn't been so incredibly vicious-looking. Everything about him bespoke viciousness—the eyes, the mouth, down to a vicious scar like a Band-Aid, diagonally across one cheek. Some women like their men vicious.

He followed her into the depths of the room, to get as far away from the door as possible, before cither said a word.

There was a bottle of whiskey on a table and two glasses, one empty, one with about an inch of tan in it. Riffed about on the floor, as though it had been feverishly searched through, was an ancestor of the tabloid she had just brought in—a much earlier edition, almost a full day earlier, and with a different headline.

"Get it?" he said. His lips scarcely moved when he spoke. They say that men learn that in jail.

"It's in," she said. Her own voice was shaky. And now that she was indoors under light, it could be seen how white she was, almost gloweringly white with fright. "This time it hit. It hit finally. I knew it wouldn't stay out much longer."

He took it from her, looked. "Hoddaya know that's it? Je stop and look at it on the street?"

“No, I didn’t dare stop. I didn’t have to. It hit me in the eye right as I picked it off the stand.” She was beginning to shake noticeably now.

He seemed to see her do it, even though his eyes were riveted on the paper. “Cut that out,” he said.

“I can’t help it, Al,” she said. “I can’t help it.”

“Take a drink.”

“This is one time I’m too scared even for that,” she quaked. “I’m afraid what it might do to me.”

He put both glasses and the bottle on the floor, to gain enough room on the table top for his reading. He spread the paper open on it. There was a chair there, but he read standing up, just bending forward, with his hands flat on the table.

She put the back of her hand to her forehead several times, as if distracted. She came up next to him finally, tried to read from over his shoulder.

“Quit shaking the table,” he said.

She took her hand off it. “I’m getting better,” she said. She tried to light a cigarette, but it shook too much in her mouth, and the match flame couldn’t pin it down.

“I never saw you like this,” he said.

“I never was this way before, like I am now.”

“Beatrice Barrett,” he said, from the paper.

“Was that her name?” she asked him.

“I never knew her name,” he said. “We only met about an hour before.”

Her own feminine eye now selected a detail. “Twenty-eight,” she said. Her throat gave a hiccup of derision. “Wanna bet? Sure, I’m twenty-eight too.”

“Shut up,” he said, but without animosity. He wanted to concentrate *on* what he was reading. “Anything about—?”

He seemed to know what, rather whom, she meant.

“Not yet. They wouldn’t put it in even if there was. They jump first.”

“Oh, God,” she whimpered. “You’re going to fix us good,” he said. “I can’t take you down to the street, that way.”

“I’ll try,” she said. “I’ll try.”

“Is it the first time it ever happened to anyone?” he wanted to know disparagingly.

“For me it is,” she said.

He swore scalclingly. Not at her, but at the contents of the newspaper. He pasted his open hand down on it with vicious impact. “Damn them! They can’t wait till they break out with it.”

“You didn’t figure they were going to hold it back, did you?”

He didn’t answer.

“What do we do?”

He turned on her then—almost spun around he turned so swiftly. “We get the hell out of here but fast, while we can still make it I” he said intensely.

As if it were a signal, the two of them broke into a flurry of fast, frenzied action. He flung himself down into a chair, began shoveling his feet into his shoes, which he had discarded while she was out. She hauled a small valise out from under the bed and flung things into it.

She moaned, at one point, “Just when I thought we could sit tight for a day or two.”

“You don’t sit tight when you’ve got a rap like this coming at you.”

“Where do we go?”

“Where doesn’t matter. Just go and keep on going.”

“We’ll never make it.”

“Sometimes when you don’t think that, is just when you do.” He pulled a hat down low over his face, shading it.

“You carry the bag,” he said. “I may need both arms free.”

She whitened even more.

“Don’t leave anything behind, now,” he cautioned. “That’s just what they’re looking for.”

He went up close to the door and pressed his head sideward to it. He held still. Then the bolt slipped, die chain dropped.

He opened it and went out first, making a furtive gesture at her, with his hand held down low, to follow.

She looked around to make sure nothing had been forgotten—nothing that might betray them.

She saw the paper, left wide open at that particular story, lying conspicuously on the table under the light. She took it by both outer edges at once and closed it.

Then she stopped a minute, her arms wide, the paper between.

He went “Sssst” warningly through the open door, to hurry her up.

She turned and ran out after him, as if she had just been reminded that he was waiting for her. But she left the valise standing in the room.

He was at the end of the stairs, waiting to go down. He gave her a black look.

“Wait minute, Al!” she whispered urgently, running all the way over to him so that she could keep her voice low. “Wait a minute. Not the same one.”

“Whaddaya mean not the same one?”

“East, not West.” She was hissing like a tea kettle with her strenuous sibilancy. “The same street—but *East,* not West.”

“That’s a misprint,” he whispered back to her. “Can’t take a chance—papers are full of ’em.”

“No, it isn’t. Come back in, I’ll show you.”

He followed her back. They reclosed the door, then bent over the paper again, her finger guiding him.

“There it is. East. And there it is down there again.”

“It’s a misprint,” he said. “It’s got to be. They came out with it in a hurry.”

Then suddenly he stopped and fixed his eyes.

“No,” he agreed slowly. “You’re right. It isn’t the same one. ‘The victim’s apartment was located upstairs over a fashionable restaurant, Luigi and Manfredo’s.’ And—” He turned and looked at her. They stared at each other eye to eye. “And—where I was—there was a dry cleaning establishment down below.”

She finished putting back the bolt and chain. “Pour me one too,” she said, luxuriating. “All the way to the top.”

When it was halfway down to the bottom again, she held it up and gazed at the light through it, musingly.

“You know, that’s something that could never happen in a story. Two blondes, both the same night, both the same street. Only, one east, one west. Could happen only in real life.”

The truck drove up at 9:29 P.M.

The batch hit the ground.

“Twanny-four returns,” Mom said to the driver.

Her nephew ran out from in back and sheared the twine binding. He hoisted the free bale in sections to the top of the counter. Mom stowed some of them below the shelf, left the rest on view for immediate sale. She adjusted the wick of the oil lantern, which had begun to flicker a little. She propped up her elbows. The rest was up to the buying public.

A boy and a girl came along, thin as clothespins—

The place was empty and unlighted until the boy and the girl came into it together. She looked around after he’d turned on the light.

“Hey, how’d you find this place?”

Her voice was shrill, splitting. Not naturally so, purposely so, as if she were calling to him across the width of a street.

“Dusty told me about it. He came here with Marge the other night.”

“Ho, what I know about Marge!” she chortled brassily. Every remark was pitched in a raucous key. She couldn’t seem to keep her voice moderate. Or even try to.

They were both approximately the same age, perhaps a year or two in his favor—that evanescent slot just in between the end of adolescence and the onset of maturity. Childhood’s final sunset.

They were dressed alike too. He wore a coat-shirt of vivid scarlet, hers was electric blue. His trousers were legging-tight, hers were too. Her hair was long, his was too. The only difference was that hers was bound into a mane and lifted away from the back of the head; his mane clung to the back of his neck and went down inside his collar. And they were both thin as inverted exclamation-points.

“What’s wrong with Marge?” he answered her last remark. “Think she’s a square?”

“I know she isn’t,” his companion agreed with ready gang-loyalty.

He began to dump cans of beer out of a brown-paper bag they’d brought in with them.

“*You’re* the square,” he told her.

“I’m here, ennl?” she squalled protestingly. “So what more do you want?”

He chopped at the top of one of the beer cans with an opener, and it overbalanced, rolled off the table, and clouted to the floor. He used a filthy expletive, but she was neither surprised nor offended.

From a second paper bag he pawed out a number of soft, rounded buns, split through the middle and spread with hamburger.

“What’d you do, buy out the whole store?” she shrieked in an appalling cat-call.

“We’re gunna be here for a while, ain’t we?”

Her lack of comment indicated complete acquiescence.

“Wuddle your old lady say?” he jeered. The jeer was meant for the old lady, not for her.

A dripping beer can in one hand, crumbling hamburger in the other, he flung himself full-length on the white-enamel bedstead, crossed his heels and elevated them to the foot-rail.

“Ah, she’s a pain in the neck,” the girl screeched impatiently.

“They all are. Mine was too, until I got too big for her. Now she don’t make a peep. She better not, boy.”

She was still intent on her own maternal difficulties, not his previous ones. “She already thinks I’ve done this.”

“How diya know?” he shot at her.

“She’s all the time warning me about it.” She performed a savage parody, clasping her hands before her face, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling, and dragging down the corners of her mouth dolorously. ‘Oh, I only hope I’m not too late,’ she keeps moaning, ‘I only hope I’m not too late.’ ”

“Y’ better go around wearing a sign after tonight. ‘You’re too late.’ So she don’t have to worry about you any more.”

They both went into thunderclaps of laughter, as shattering as the dropping of ashcan lids on a cement pavement.

When the guffaws had stilled finally, he up-ended the beer can so that the last remaining drops would fall through the puncture into his open mouth, then cast it away from him with a clatter.

By now she was seated on the edge of the bed, with her back to him, head bent to the newspaper he had brought in.

“Whattiya gunna do, sit there all night reading the paper?” He pawed clumsily at her shoulder from behind, so that momentarily she half toppled over, then immediately righted herself again like a rubber plaything. She slashed her arm backwards at him, to ward him off. It was more a reflex than an intended blow. “Come on, babe,” he whispered.

“Lemme finish reading about this blonde first.”

“Why? Whadda you care? She’s dead, ain’t she? So what’s to read?” Absorbed, she didn’t answer. “Ah, she was just a high-class tramp,” he said airily.

“But she wasn’t until she started,” she pointed out. “She wasn’t before. Everyone, even one of them, s’got to start sometime.”

She read a little further.

“I wonder what she was like. Then, I mean. At the start.”

“Like you are now,” he shrugged. She got up from the bed abruptly, went over to the tarnished mirror, peered into it, still holding the paper.

“Whattiya looking at?” he said idly, without watching her, blowing smoke toward the ceiling.

“Me, like I am now,” the girl said, bending forward even closer. Then she moved her head aside and down, and stared with equal intentness at the photo in the paper.

“Matter, you don’t know what you look like?” he mocked, but still without watching her.

“I know what I look like now,” she replied thoughtfully, “but I wonder what I’ll look like—” She didn’t finish it and her eyes went back to the paper once more.

She came away at last, still staring at the picture in the paper.

All of a sudden the paper rippled to the floor, its pages molting.

“I’m going home, Frankie.” She didn’t squall it. For the first time all evening—maybe all year and the year before—she spoke quietly.

“You—*what?*” He sat bolt upright on the bed.

“I don’t want to do this,” she said, almost inaudibly. “I’m—I’m afraid.”

“Whatsa matter with you anyway,” he yelled. “I lived on the same street with you all my life.”

Her thoughts now seemed to be elsewhere.

“They always do. They always do. The first one of them all. And then after a while, they don’t live on the same street with you. And then after a while, they find you dead. Like her.”

Then, without saying anything more, she flung the door open and ran out.

He leaped from the bed and started after her. His foot stepped squarely on the face of the woman in the discarded paper as he flew through the open door after her.

The room was high up in the building. He leaned over the stair-rail and looked down. Her feet were pattering below him, around and around.

“Hey, Ginny, come on back!” he shouted down the stairwell. “Come on back, will ya!”

But the way she ran, the terrified way she ran, he knew she wouldn’t return. And he knew something else too. She wasn’t running like that because she was afraid of being pursued—she was running like that because she was afraid of the future.

The delivery truck drove up alongside the stand at exactly 9:29 P.M.

“Twanny-four returns,” Mom said.

The headline said, *BLONDE BEAUTY SLAIN.*

Mom sat back, propped her elbows, and waited.

The expensive black limousine had had to wait there for a traffic light. The man in the back leaned forward and said something to his chauffeur. The young colored driver, spruce in his uniform, immediately got out, crossed over on foot, and came up to the stand.

“Times?” he said.

“Not up yet,” said Mom.

“How about the *Herald-Trib,* then?”

“Not up yet either,” Mom said. “They don’t come up until eleven thirty.”

He looked a little disconcerted. He even glanced over to where he’d left the car, as if weighing the possibility of going back for further instructions.

But the light had changed meanwhile and the impeding limousine was being honked at by several blocked cars in back of it. “All right, I’ll take a tab,” he said quickly.

He snatched one up, turned away, and hustled back to his driver’s seat. He closed the door after him, started the car off then handed the paper over the seat to the man in the back.

The latter put the light on. When he saw the name of the paper he looked up questioningly. “What’s this, Bruce?”

“That’s the best I could do, Mr. Elliott,” the young chauffeur explained. “The *Times* isn’t out yet.”

His employer tucked it away in his coat-pocket sight unseen. “Oh, well,” he drawled good-naturedly. “I’ll just have to do without reading tonight.”

Bruce chuckled a little.

Mr. Elliott lit a cigar and watched the sights go by.

In the morning he found his wife June at the table ahead of him, as he always did. He liked to. Not that she had anything to do with preparing breakfast—that was the cook’s job; but, he always said to himself, she brightened up the table just by being there. With her yellow-jersey jumper and her little-girl hair hanging loose all about her head, she could have passed for a teenager.

He kissed her good morning, then once more for good measure.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she said, indicating what was outside the picture window.

“Each morning gets better than the one before. People who live in the city are such fools.”

His *Times* was there now, waiting for him. It came in every morning, of course. It was just that he had wanted to kill time by having something to read on the drive home last night. He furled it over, all the way back at the financial section. Those pages were the only ones he ever read carefully. However, before he’d quite finished, they had a problem on their hands. Oh, not a very large one, but one concerning Dickie, and any problem concerning Dickie always received full consideration. They were that kind of parents.

Amy brought him in with her. Amy was his governess (Bryn Mawr, post-graduate course in child care and training), and Bruce’s wife.

“This is one I’m afraid I’ll have to pass on to you,” she said, when good mornings had been said, “considering its source. I’m no expert.”

Dickie didn’t wait for any further preamble. “Daddy, do canaries really go ffft? Tommy Holden has one at his house and I never heard it do anything but chirp.”

“Where’d you get that from?” Elliott looked completely blank for a moment. June stifled a burst of laughter.

“The paper says a canary went ffft at someone.”

“This,” said Amy sternly, producing the newspaper. “I always encourage him to read for himself as much as possible, and help him with the hard words. I saw he was having trouble, and it was only after I’d read the line to him that I realized what I was reading it *from.”*

Elliott smote himself on the forehead in dismay, then held a hand to one cheek. “Oh, Lord, a gossip column, no less,” he said in an undertone, giving his wife a plaintive look. “What do I do with that?”

“It’s your job, dear,” said June pertly.

“Buck passer,” he said out of the corner of his mouth.

“Let’s hear how he gets out of this one,” June whispered to Amy. “This is going to be good.”

He glanced upward for a moment, for inspiration.

“Cats really are the only ones that go ffft,” he began.

“You didn’t get the ffft quite right, dear,” said June. She was in one of her mischievous moods. She had her elbows on the table and her chin propped in her cupped hands, trying to throw him off by staring at him earnestly.

“Please,” he said ruefully. “This is tough enough without being heckled.”

He went back to the task in hand. “Now, real canaries don’t go ffft—”

“You got that ffft better,” said June.

He ignored her. “Ladies who sing are sometimes called canaries, because they sing so pretty,” he went on laboredly. “And if they get mad at somebody, sometimes they do go ffft.”

Dickie turned aggrievedly to his mother. “I didn’t understand a word Daddy told me,” he complained.

June turned her head sharply one way, Amy the other. In fact, the only two people in the room who weren’t convulsed with laughter were the two males, king-size and pint-size.

June patted the little boy’s head. “And you weren’t the only one, dear,” she whispered consolingly—a whisper she somehow managed to direct so that it reached Elliott’s ears.

“Let’s see you try it if you’re so good at it,” he whispered her way.

“I know someone who’s going to hear from me about bringing that rag into the house in the first place,” vowed Amy darkly. “That’s one thing I can’t compete with, a tabloid. I don’t know the right slang.”

“Bruce?” said Elliott. “Now don’t blame poor Bruce. He had nothing to do with it. I asked him to hop out a minute and get me the *Times,* and it hadn’t arrived at the stand yet, so he brought this back with him instead.”

“I notice he didn’t bring back *Reader’s Digest* or *Atlantic Monthly*” was Amy’s tart comment as she led Dickie out of the room.

June went to the door to see her husband off, as she did every day. Dickie joined the leave-taking, rushing at his father head-first and whiplashing his little arms about him at mid-thigh, which was as high as he could reach.

“See you tonight, Daddy, hunh?” he chirped. “See you tonight!”

June winked at Elliott over the little boy’s head.

She gave him one of her rare compliments when Dickie had been led away a second time, and he was kissing her goodbye—rare, but from the heart. “You’re a good father, Doug,” she said softly. “The best. Sense of humor and everything.”

“Don’t I get any rating as a husband also?” he wanted to know.

She closed her eyes dreamily, to show him that he did.

He became oddly serious for a moment, almost pensive. “That’s all I have,” he told her thoughtfully. “You and him. My family. That’s all I care about—*really* care about. I wouldn’t let anything—or anyone—stand in their way. I wouldn’t let anything—or anyone—threaten their happiness.” His eyes had a faraway look just then, as if he remembered he’d said that once before—some place, sometime, to someone.

Then he kissed her once more, and hurried down the long sun-dappled walk to where Bruce was waiting for him in the car.

“It’s a shame to go in on a day like this,” he said, taking a panoramic look at the Westchester landscape before getting in and closing the door.

“I can’t tell you how I sympathize with you, sir,” Bruce said, with just a touch of dryness. It was a genial sort of dryness, though, meaning, You don’t have to go in if you

don’t want to, and you know it, but you’d still like me to feel sorry for you.

“As for you, young fellow,” Elliott warned him jocularly, “you’re in hot water with Amy. She thinks you were responsible for that tabloid.”

“Greater love hath no man,” quoted Bruce softly, “than he take a rap for his employer.”

“Who’s taking any rap for who?” Elliott brought him up short. “I squared that. I told her it was my fault.”

“I may as well be skinned for a wolf as for a sheep,” Bruce remarked as they sped along. “Amy’s standards of reading are so high I can’t even get up to them with my chin on the crossbar. Anything less than Proust is trash.”

“What sort of reading do you go in for, Bruce?” Elliott asked. “I’ve been meaning to ask you that.”

“Mostly mysteries, I drive a car, and I like things to move fast. They’ve got to be well-written, though.”

“They can be. I read them myself, quite frequently. If a mystery isn’t well-written, it’s not because it’s a mystery, it’s because the writer is a sloppy worker.”

They spent the rest of the drive into town discussing books in general, both mystery and non-mystery, and life itself, the greatest book of them all. Elliott found that he enjoyed it immensely. His driver was a college graduate, which he had always known of course, but in addition he was keenly intelligent, nimble-minded, and ambitious, which didn’t always necessarily follow. He was bound to get some place as soon as the door opened a little wider. This driving job was just temporary.

Elliott liked to know his fellow-men better, because he liked his fellow-men.

“Thank you, sir,” said Bruce when they’d reached the office. “For what?” asked Elliott.

“At least you didn’t say I’m a credit to my race.”

“What race?” said Elliott blankly. “I don’t know what you mean.” And he actually didn’t.

“Pick you up at the same time, sir,” said Bruce, and drove off Elliott went upstairs to what he liked occasionally to refer to as “the grind.” If it was a “grind” (and it had to have some name, apparently), it was the most velvety, well lubricated, chromium-plated, air-conditioned grind conceivable. He didn’t even have to open his own letters. That was done for him. The one out of five that got through to him he could be sure would be worth his personal attention.

A little dictating—into a machine. A little phoning—here, there, around. From him, and more often, to him. Perhaps involving thousands and thousands of dollars—but you never would have guessed. Money was never even mentioned. The calls seemed to be mostly about golf, and the last country club dance, and the nest country club dance, and how’s Evelyn, ‘and June’s fine. And then an appointment for lunch would be set up, and after the lunch had come and gone, he’d be twenty thousand richer, or forty, or sixty, or more.

Not at anyone’s expense. Certainly not at the client’s. The client went right along with him—twenty, forty, sixty. Not at the market’s, either. Because for everyone who sold, there was someone who bought. Just “the old grind.” Mystique.

By that time it would be 11:00 or 11:30, and he’d have Rico and Dotty up—Rico to trim his hair, Dotty to trim his nails. Not every day of course, about once in a week. Twice, if he and June had some big engagement on. It wouldn’t have occurred to him to go *to* a barber—the barber came to him.

It was done just right—everything just right. Not too much talk—that would have been clownish; but not too little either—that would have been stiff and ungracious. Then they’d both leave, thanking

him, and if he’d given them a little something more than the customary tip, which he did every now and then, he’d repeat his instructions, so they’d be sure to get them right.

“Now remember, buy at twenty, as I told you. Put the order in ! right away, so you’ll catch it on the fly first thing die market opens in the morning. *But don’t hold on.* Put in a ‘sell’ order at twenty-five and you’ll make a nice little profit. And, mind you this is just for you two. If you say a word to anyone, spread it around, it’s the last time I’ll ever—”

“I won’t even tell my own husband,” Dotty would vow.

“Good,” he’d say solemnly. “Because husbands have big mouths. I happen to be one myself, and I know.”

And by then it would be about time for whatever lunch date he had.

Today it was with Don Warren. Don Warren and Doug Elliott had been friends long before they became client and broker. In fact, they had been college classmates

together. Don was waiting for him at their usual table, in their usual restaurant.

After he’d shaken hands with him and sat down, Elliott began to worry one fingernail with the corner of his mouth, moistening it and blowing his breath on it. “Dotty’s a very good manicurist, but this split goes down just below the cuticle. Even she couldn’t do anything with it Except smooth it out a little.”

“How’d you come to do it?” Elliott looked up at him disarmingly. “Strangling blondes,” he said with winning frankness.

Warren uttered the polite chuckle that friendship called for—but no more—then gave him a rueful look. “You’ve always had the weirdest sense of humor,” he complained.

Elliott strugged meekly. “I wasn’t trying to be funny,” he murmured, then opened up the large menu-folder with the concentration of a man whose efforts to be sprightly have not been an unqualified success, and who therefore turns resignedly to something else . . .

TOKYO 1941

The telephone rang in the Hong Kong hotel room. Lyons had been expecting it to for the better part of an hour, and the delay had started to get on his nerves. He stopped pacing nervously back and forth and went over to it. He was in a man's black silk Japanese kimono, with a single white idiograph embroidered on the back of it. It was too short for him, and his muscular bare legs, quite un-Japanese in their hairiness, stuck out ludicrously from it.

The desk clerk said, "There's a gentleman down here to see you, sir."

Lyons didn't ask the name. He just said, "Send him up," and put the phone back.

He went over to his valise, which was standing unlocked at the foot of the bed, and upended the lid. He took out a revolver, checked it for load and thrust it into the elastic waistband of his undershorts. Then he closed the kimono over it, but kept his hand near it on the outside.

Someone knocked.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened, and a man holding a briefcase came in. He closed it after him, and then stood there without coming any nearer. He was a Caucasian with tawny-colored hair and hazel eyes.

All Lyons knew was that he had never seen him before. By the same token, neither had the man ever seen Lyons before.

“Good evening,” the man said in slightly accented English. “I’m selling cameras and photographic equipment. Could I interest you?”

“I already have a camera, thank you. It’s a Nikko, a Japanese make.”

Both of them spoke in a rather stilted, unlifelike way, as though they were repeating a lesson they had memorized. Or like actors running through their lines at a first reading of a play.

“Are you satisfied with it?” the man asked.

“I get very good results,” said Lyons. “Would you like me to show you some of them?”

He went to the valise again and took out a pair of socks. They had been rolled into a ball, toe-to-heel, and the tops turned back over them. From within them he took out a small plastic vial, of the sort that usually contains pills or tablets.

The man was opening his briefcase. He took out a long Manila envelope, sealed but unaddressed, and put it on the table near him.

He took the vial and uncapped it. Lyons took the envelope and opened that.

The man unwound the first few frames of a tightly rolled strip of microfilm, held them against the light and scanned them. Lyons counted over American currency, in denominations of fifty and a hundred.

“You do get very good results with it,” the man agreed.

As though this were some sort of mutually understood signal, the man put the vial away in his briefcase and Lyons put the Manila envelope away in his valise.

The man went to the door, opened it and looked out into the hall to see if anyone was in sight.

Then he said, “Good evening,” once more with a foreigner’s typical unfamiliarity with English usage, evidently meaning it for good night.

“So long,” Lyons answered.

The door closed, and the man was gone.

Lyons picked up the phone and asked the clerk: “What time does the ship for Nagasaki sail, did you say?”

“Not until nine in the morning, sir.”

Lyons hung up. He had to kill the night here.

He put the gun back in the valise first of all. Then he counted several hundred dollars out of the Manila envelope and stacked the bills into his wallet. He started to get dressed, to go out and have a night on the town.

The Chinese girl in the ricksha said, in an astonishingly genuine Cockney accent that must have rubbed off on her from long association with merchant-mariners and limey tars, “Don’t tyke too long, byeby. We imes to get there before the plyce closes down, doncher knaow.”

“I’ll be right with you, China-doll,” Lyons tossed at her, hopping out and following the elderly Chinese gentleman into an unlighted shop entrance. “Wait outside here for me, till I see what this old gazabo has up his sleeve.”

The old man was unlocking a padlock that secured the door. Then he went inside a short distance, lighted up a pumpkin-shaped, pumpkin colored paper lantern and let it ride up toward the ceiling again. Then he went a little deeper in, repeating the process with a yellow-green one. He let down a bamboo roller shade that blanked out the shop window from the street outside.

“So what is this big deal?” Lyons asked him impatiently. “You’ve been pestering me for the past hour in the last bar we were in, until you got my sales resistance worn down to nothing. And my curiosity up to boiling point.”

The old merchant giggled. “I show. I show.” But first he transferred the padlock around to the inside of the door and refastened it.

“What’s the idea of that?” Lyons asked, lidding his eyes at him with sleepy wariness but without showing any actual alarm. “Don’t try to get funny with me, because I can handle myself, and the girl’s right outside there, anyway.”

“No, no, I am gentleman, not holdup bandit,” protested the Chinese gravely. “Is just so no one can disturb while I am showing you this.”

“That valuable, huh?” said Lyons ironically.

“Oh, very. Very.” He went into the back and was gone a long time Finally Lyons began to fidget. He called out, “Hey! you in there, how about it? Wha’d you do, go to sleep on me?”

The Chinese reappeared, holding something in his hand.

“I have to keep it in very exclusive safe place, you know.”

It was a very small lacquered box. He opened it first, then removed a false bottom from it.

Lyons’ face dropped for a minute. He thought it was just some sort of knickknack or curio.

“Come over here, by light.” He placed a little mat of cotton batting on the counter. And on it throbbed a diamond, the biggest one that Lyons had ever seen.

Lyons’ face was a study in impassivity. “Haven’t you got any electricity in this place?” he grumbled. “I can’t see a damn thing.”

“No ’lectric.” But he brought out a coal miner’s lamp with a bright tin reflector. It cast a pool of bleach on the counter, as white as spilled borax. In it the diamond seemed to turn blue. Rays came from it like silver quills shooting from a porcupine.

Lyons took a long time before saying anything.

“What am I supposed to do, buy it?”

The Chinese merely dropped his eyes in complacent assent.

Lyons waited another long time. “Why me?”

“You have plenty money; I see you in bar. You American, you pay good. Also, you pay in American money, best money there is in world.”

“How do I even know it’s real?” parried Lyons.

“It has to be. Is too big not to be. If was going to be imitation, false, would be smaller, maybe only medium-size,

to fool somebody easier, sell easier. Is so big, nobody want to believe it real. So what good is it? That show it must be real."

He had a point there, in a roundabout way.

Lyons had another question. "Suppose it is real. Still and all, what makes you think I want it?"

"I study you good, in bar. You the kind of man buy this, no other kind but you. It go with your character, your personality. You reckless, you take chance, you live dangerous. You not think you going live too long, and you not care. You live wild and fast while you can. I see how you act with money, with drink, with girl, even when music play for dancing. You the kind of a man to buy a diamond, sudden, from a stranger, in the middle of the night, even when you don't need. Live for the moment—because tomorrow maybe never come."

Lyons didn't answer, but his slow smile did. "How'd you happen to come across it?" he asked curiously.

The Chinese sighed. He sat down alongside of him and lit a cigarette reflectively. He left the cotton-bedded jewel exposed there on the counter, but took the precaution of moving it a good deal nearer to himself, and out of easy reach of Lyons. The Strand-accented night-flower outside was allowed to cool her heels and wait.

"Is a long chain of circonstances. Was in our own country for a while. They say two men fight a duel, and one kill the other with it. Maybe not so, maybe only story, I don't know. Then, they say, partner of man killed steal it from coffin his friend body lie in, run away, take it with him to where he go, big city, New York. Big high-up man there, boss whole city, buy it from him. How you say—like mandarin?"

"Boss?" repeated Lyons, trying to help him out. "Political boss, you mean?" Association of words brought back the only name he could readily recall in that bracket. "Someone like Boss Tweed?"

“Him,” said the Chinese with instant certainty. “Same name.”

“Quite a history,” admitted Lyons, absorbed in spite of himself. “So then?”

“He gave it to actress, him sweetheart. He thrown out, lose job, because he too crooked.”

“I’ve heard,” said Lyons drily.

“She not have good luck anymore, either. All plays bad; one time police close for indecent, one time fire in theater, many people die. One night in play she fall downstairs on stage, break leg, have to wear thing like stone—”

“Cast.”

“—for six month. When she walk, never can walk again without cane. No more good for acting. She retire, go to Europe, every night play gambling table at Monte Carlo—” He made a circle with his hand.

“Roulette?” suggested Lyons.

He nodded. “Wheel spin. Ball fall in hole. Every night she lose, every night more and more. Never win. Until everything gone. Everything she have from that man you say name of. She come out with diamond one night, only thing she got left. Casino won’t accept, only can play with money. But Russian grand duke standing next to her at same table, he see it. He buy it from her.”

“So after that she won, I suppose.”

“She lose even what he give her. She go outside casino, take little lady gun—you know, pearl handle, only so big—”

“Killed herself.”

“No. Only make herself blind in both eyes, from way bullet push in brain. She live very old, never see again.”

“Very spooky,” grimaced Lyons. “Only I don’t believe a word of it.’’

“I only know what I hear from last man had it. He say all this. I no can tell is true or isn’t.”

“Go on,” Lyons said. “How’d it get to you?”

“Grand Duke go back to Russia with it. This before revolution. People not like Czar or czar-government or czar official. Somebody put bomb underneath seat of his carriage. When he get in with family to go to church Sunday, all blown up. Him, wife, son and daughter. Even little pet dog on lap. Only one son escaped because sick in bed with mump, can’t go to church.”

“And what happened to him?”

“Came bad things afterward. He marry Russian princess, they have son. Little boy fall down, scratch knee, one day. All little boy do is fall down, scratch knee. But they find out he have sickness where once blood start, never can stop again.”

“I’ve heard of that.”

“Twenty-four hour after, he dead. From little bit of scratch on knee. When revolution come, revolution army burn down house while he not home. They take his wife, put her in a little room in military headquarter. All night long soldiers wait in line, go in there. Next morning they forget to watch her little bit. She take two silk stocking, hang herself from window bar.”

“And him?”

“He hide in freight car, go across Siberia, many many days, finally get out of country. So cold he have to cut off own hand with hatchet.”

“Frostbite?”

“I see it, my own eyes. Arm end at wrist. I meet him in Harbin, up north, Manchuria. He have nothing left, only the diamond. He eat from garbage cans, sleep under newspapers on doorsteps of houses. He stop me and beg one day. I take him to restaurant, buy him meal. Then he take it out from between toes and show it to me. He have only rags on feet, no shoes. I give him money, buy it. He kneel down, kiss my feet, cry.”

“A grand duke’s son,” mused Lyons.

“I have to run away myself pretty soon after,” the Chinese went on. “I make enemy of warlords in Manchuria, they take my business, all my property. Send soldiers after me. If I stay, they shoot me. I come down here to Hong Kong, where man I used to know up there have this little store. He let me sleep in back, give me rice and tea.

“Once I rich businessman myself. Now—” He looked at the diamond sadly.

Lyons looked at it, too.

He reached over, picked it up and held it in his open hand. It was like holding a ball of white fire, only without burning yourself.

The Chinese kept watching his expression closely, but Lyons wouldn’t say the first word. He knew good psychology from bad.

His silence broke the Chinese down finally.

“You can have for five thousand American dollar.”

“You’ve been smoking opium,” Lyons told him tersely.

“Two thousand.”

“You’re not in a position to bargain. You’re strapped. You talked so much you’ve boxed yourself in.”

“One.”

“Never mind the count-down. I’ll name it, not you. Now look, I’ve had a lot to drink so I’m an easy mark, a pushover, a sucker. Give you five hundred for it, and I’ll hate myself in the morning.”

“Oh, no can do, no can do!” cried the Chinese, agonized, pounding a fist against each side of his head.

“Sure can do,” Lyons said, mimicking his way of speech. “In fact, better can-do while the can-doing’s good or can-do the hell without anything at all.”

The Chinese clasped his hands prayerfully before his face and rolled his eyes up to the ceiling.

“Make up your mind,” Lyons said remorselessly. “I’ve got to get back to my pussy cat outside.”

The Chinese submitted, spreading his hands out in mute helplessness and letting his head droop forward forlornly.

But, as though the transaction weren't already one-sided enough, a tricky afterthought had occurred to Lyons by this time. "I only have two-fifty on me," he said glibly. "The rest is in my room in the hotel."

"All right, I hold for you, you come back with rest tomorrow," suggested the Chinese, but only halfheartedly.

"Hold, nothing!" flared Lyons, raising his voice in pretended anger at the reflection on his integrity. "I either take it with me now or not at all. Don't crowd your luck. I change very quickly. I may not be in the mood to buy it anymore by tomorrow. I'm at the Victoria, the best hotel in town." He took out his room key and showed it to him, tag first. "There's my room number on it, see, right there." His hand pistoned in and out a number of times in quick succession. "Here's your two-fifty. You come round tomorrow and pick up the rest."

"What time?" said the Chinese, who was an outsmarted man and knew it.

"Not too early. I'm expecting to do quite some howling tonight," Lyons told him. His ship for Nagasaki sailed at nine, he knew. "Make it about eleven. Just come up and knock at the door."

"Oh, and by the way," he added, bringing out an additional five-dollar bill. "Got a bottle of perfume or some such around? My little lady friend outside doesn't need to know what I've just bought in here. First thing you know she'll expect me to give it to her. Or maybe even try to help herself while I'm dozing between tackles."

When he brought the neatly packaged perfume bottle out and handed it to her, she exclaimed: "Aow, I sye, is that for me? Haow nice. What's it caahled?"

"Spanish Fly," he said irreverently.

John Lyons' little house in Azabu-ku was a Western-type job. Which didn't mean it wasn't flimsy, only that it was less flimsy than its native counterparts. It was mainly of wood, white-painted, with a very small amount of stonework around the base and a slanting red-tile roof. It had its own garden at the back and sides, and he rented the whole thing for thirty-seven-fifty American a month. Which was good value for preoccupation Tokyo. It was even furnished, although, in truth, somewhat scantily, with the Japanese idea of Western furniture. Chairs and tables all with legs too short for the average lanky Occidental build. And in addition, they had a girl come in who worked from seven to seven, for only seven a week more. Finally, he even had a beat-up '34 Chevy to go around in. He'd bought it second-hand and it was only held together with spittle and a hairpin, but he was a good mechanic, and it got him where he wanted to go.

The whole thing fitted nicely into the framework of the hundred and fifty a month he got from the Acme Travel Agency, Fifth Avenue and Forty-eighth, New York. Also Market Street, San Fran, but no Tokyo office. His check came in regularly on about the 15th of each month, and made a lot of yen when it was converted.

Where else, he used to tell Ruth when she got her periodic homesick—blues—about every second week, it seemed—could they live as well as this for the same amount of money?

"This is living?" she'd answered once.

She didn't like it here, he knew. They had no children. When they'd first married, it was the Depression that kept them from having any. They couldn't afford them. Now he found he didn't want them anymore, anyway. He liked it better this way. His tendencies had become completely wolflike, and it was too late to change. In fact, he didn't want to change, wasn't going to. He liked running around to bars and clubs every night, meeting his men friends. He

never took her with him, so time hung heavy on her hands. She didn't know what to do with herself.

And it was worse when he made those quick flying trips in and out, to Manila, Hong Kong, places like that, which he did regularly every two or three months. No wonder she was lonely here, didn't like the place.

The taxi that had brought him home from the railroad station let him out in front of the house. Before that there'd been the train from Nagasaki, before that the ship, before that the Hong Kong hotel room. He'd been away a total of five days this time. Just there, turn around, and back.

He was tall and lean, lanky would almost be the word. He had a thatch of dingy-colored hair, actually a lifeless light-brown shade, with scarcely any recession along the hairline. His eyes had a piercing quality to them, and were spaciously shadowed underneath from too many drinks and too many girls. His cheeks were on the gaunt side, probably for the same reason. He was not at all a bad-looking man, but the first telltale traces of fast living were beginning to leave their marks on his face. He looked about forty; actually he was thirty-five.

He had a herringbone topcoat slung over one arm—it was warm in Tokyo for October—and was carrying a small overnight case with the other.

Ruth must have seen him drive up before the house. She had the door open and ready for him before he could get at it with his key.

She was just as tall as he was. Red of hair, blue of eye and with a nice, frank American-girl face. A few freckles on it instead of face powder.

"How's the girl?" he said offhandedly.

She put her arms to his shoulders and held up her face. He touched his mouth to hers.

"Hello, Johnnie," she said then.

He squeezed his eyes shut in distaste. "There goes that name again."

“Is that going to start again?” she said. “Something new.”

“No, it isn’t. I never could stand it, even as a kid. Little girls in pigtails—” He mimicked ferociously. “John-eee! John-eee!” After a moment he added, “It makes me feel like I’ve never grown up at all.”

“Have you?” she countered.

“Thanks,” he said.

“I’ve always called you that, all our married life.”

“And I still don’t like it.”

“Is it the name itself you don’t like to be called,” she said with momentary insight, “or is it me you don’t like to have say it?”

“Let’s drop it, shall we?”

“All right, John,” she agreed with a slight cutting edge to her voice. “How was the trip?”

“Same as usual,” he answered carelessly.

She gave him an unfathomable look. Then they went inside together and closed the door.

Once he’d nearly sent her in his place. “Do you want to go instead of me?” he’d asked, giving her a keen appraising look. As though thinking it was about time she’d started to make herself useful, instead of moping around all day.

“Why can’t we both go?”

“That’s out,” he told her flatly. “Somebody has to stay and watch the store.”

“What’s there to watch? You don’t even have an office.”

“We both can’t go at once, and that’s all there is to it. Do you want to go or don’t you?”

All right,” she said finally. “I’ll go. What do I have to do?”

But he wasn’t satisfied yet. “Do you promise to do exactly as I tell you?” he asked her. “And not ask any questions?”

“Yes, of course, if that’s what you want.”

The night before she was to have gone, as she was undressing for bed, he came into the room and handed her a tiny tight-packed roll of something wrapped in waterproof material, either oil-silk or plastic, she could not be sure

which. It was about the diameter of a cigarette, but not nearly as long as one.

“Slip this inside your garter belt when you get dressed in the morning,” he told her. “I’ll have another one for the other side by then.”

She must have lain and thought about it all night. In the morning she said quite abruptly, “Johnnie, I don’t think I want to go on this business trip for you after all. Something about it—scares me. Something about it—isn’t on the up-and-up.”

He gave her a long hard look, then banged out of the house and went on the trip himself.

He was gone two weeks that time, and she knew he must have been with some woman at least part of that time. But she also knew it probably wasn’t the first time.

Now, returning from this latest trip, he asked her, “Anything new around here?”

“Harry Matsuko called.”

“I told him I’d be away—didn’t he know that?”

“He said you’d told him. He was just checking to see if you were back yet.”

They seemed to have difficulty talking to one another. It was not that they were strained or ill at ease; it was more as though they’d run out of things to say. Not just now, but some time ago.

“Anything else?”

“Oh, and some roofing contractor came around. I had the hardest time making him understand—”

“I didn’t send for anyone like that,” he said, narrowing his eyes at her.

“I told him I was sure you hadn’t, or you would have told me about it. I tried to explain there was nothing wrong with our roof whatever. But he spoke of some city ordinance about making sure loose tiles didn’t slide off and hurt somebody below. And they went ahead and put a ladder against the house and climbed up on the outside.”

“How many were there?”

“Two. The contractor and his assistant. They poked around up there an hour. I even saw them lift up some of the tiles and look underneath.” She stopped. “Why’d you do that?” she asked him curiously.

“Do what?”

“Stroke both sides of your face with one hand like that?”

“I was feeling to see if I needed a shave.”

“No,” she said tonelessly. “You did it when I spoke of that roofing contractor having been here.”

They were in the bedroom by this time. He shrugged off his coat and flung it across the back of a chair. “Guess I’ll shower up,” he said, untying his necktie. “That train coming up from saki was pretty sooty.”

She was standing there looking at him, but her thoughts seemed to be in another world.

He was down to his shorts and undershirt now. Suddenly he stopped and said, “Why do you have to stand there like that? Didn’t you ever see me getting undressed before? I don’t need help.”

She came back to herself with a start. “I’ll see how Micky’s getting along with the dinner,” she said and went out. Mikki was their maid of all work; her name was too long for them to handle, so they called her by just the first two syllables of it. Mikki, or, more often than not, Micky.

But she was back in the room again when he came out of the shower, toweling himself vigorously. He stopped for a moment, narrowly scanned the expression on her face, and then nodded. “So you wouldn’t be happy until you nosed, would you?”

“No,” she said wearily. “I only came back to see if you needed an extra towel.” She pointed to the chair seat. There was a fresh one lying folded on it.

He turned his back and began putting on his clothes again.

“But when a husband tells his wife not to stand watching him undress,” she went on, “it’s not modesty, it can’t be. It’s because he has something to hide.”

He didn’t answer.

“I found the money belt, with five thousand dollars United States currency in it.”

“You took the trouble to count it, too, I notice,” he said over his shoulder.

“You don’t trust me anyway,” she pointed out. “So I may as well have the game as long as I’ve got the name.”

“Go ahead, ask me,” he defied her. “Ask me where I got it and what I got it for!”

“Would you tell me the truth?”

“No!” he said sharply.

She shrugged her shoulders to show she knew the futility of it. “And the unset diamond, where did that come from?”

“Oh, you saw that, too.” He went over to her and held it out on the flat of his hand. “That’s something I don’t mind you asking about,” he told her unhesitatingly. “Although you probably won’t believe me about that, either. A Chinaman came up to me in Hong Kong and asked if I wanted to buy it. He was a refugee or something, needed money. I bought it off him for peanuts.”

“You don’t buy a diamond that size for peanuts,” she said skeptically.

“It’s probably hot.”

She didn’t seem too interested in the diamond bit. “I hope it brings you good luck,” she said indifferently. And then, as though turning to something of more consequence, “I also found a woman’s Chinese silk handkerchief stuffed in your breast pocket, reeking of some God-awful cheap perfume.”

“That’s something I picked up on the street.”

“The handkerchief or the woman?” she asked sweetly.

“Gee, you’ve been a busy little bitch in the half-hour since I came home!” he yelled. And he gave the door a slam that shook the whole house.

The girl in the taxi was extremely frightened as it drew up before Secret Service Headquarters. It was written all over her face, and every move she made indicated it plainly. She lowered her head first and peered worriedly under and out at the ugly, blocklike concrete building. Her hands were too rapid and agitated as she opened her purse and fumbled for money to pay the driver. Then, when he returned change, she fumbled again and spilled some to the floor. Finally, when she opened the door and got out, she left her gloves lying on the seat. He had to call her attention to them.

She was extremely beautiful, tall and straight for a Japanese girl, and with particularly lovely, long, well-proportioned legs, again an exception. She wore a tailored suit of tan pongee silk, with a turned-down white collar and a flowing black satin bow tie, such as artists are sometimes pictured wearing.

But she was still very frightened as she went up the steps and inside. The apprehensive way she looked all about her seemed to say, Why have I been sent for like this? What have I done? Will I ever come out of here again?

She noticed a building attendant and approached him. “The office of Colonel Setsu, please. Which way?”

He pointed. “Right at the end there, facing you.”

She went over to the door and stood there looking at it. Finally she went in.

The outer office was nothing to be frightened of. There were desks with typists seated at them, a receptionist, all the usual business office personnel. But they were all men; there wasn’t a woman in sight.

She was directed into an inner office and told to wait there. She sat down on a straight-backed chair placed against the wall and began to slap her loose gloves nervously with one hand against the other. Suddenly a door opened, and a young man in army uniform stood there,

rigid and impersonal as an automaton. “In here, please,” he ordered her.

She got up and went in. The young man, closing the door behind her, remained outside.

The man at the desk in the center of the room was also in uniform. He was in his sixties, bald of crown and with a wizened but cracklingly intelligent face. A cigarette burned away in a little lacquered tray to one side of him, untouched.

He let her stand there for several minutes out in the center of the room before him, while he looked over papers. Then he said, as though reading from the papers, without looking up at her, “You are Tomiko.”

She inclined her head. “Yes, Colonel.”

“You are paid to dance each night at the Yeddo entertainment place.”

She inclined her head again. “Yes, Colonel.”

His voice became a droning mumble while he continued to read from the papers, as though he did not need any further confirmation from her. “Twenty-four years old. Born here in Tokyo. Grandfather gave his life in the glorious victory at Tsushima Straits. Older brother died in Service in the China incident.”

He became less formal, discarded the papers and clasped his hands comfortably on the desk before him, although he still allowed her to stand there, almost at attention.

“An honorable family.”

She bowed her gratitude.

“Would you too like to serve your divine Emperor?”

This time she bowed deeply, reverently, arms held stiffly close to her sides. “I would give my unworthy life itself.”

The colonel gravely nodded his approval. “Spoken like a true daughter of Yamato.”

“But who am I to dare offer this, a mere woman?”

The colonel was more and more pleased with her. His first instinctive antipathy to her Western apparel and her un-

Japanese mode of earning a living began to wear off. Underneath that she was all Japanese, he could see. She had the white flame of patriotism in its holiest form.

"Men must give their lives on the field of battle, true. But there are other ways in which men cannot serve, and a woman may. These can be just as important for the good of our country. In the eyes of the gods, these smaller ways can be just as worthy."

Her eyes were smoldering now. "Command me."

He thawed completely, captivated by her—not personally, but patriotically. "Sit down, *san*." He took out a fresh cigarette for himself and offered her one.

"This is not our way," she said quietly. "This is the way of the Others. Smoking is for men."

"For over a year now," he began without further preamble, "there has been, somewhere in this city, a secret radio transmitter, sending out coded messages. Our detector units have picked up its call signals over and over. This can only mean one thing. An enemy agent or a group of enemy agents are operating right here in the capital. We have been unable to pinpoint the transmitter closely enough to locate it. Our radio detection equipment is not accurate enough. However, there are other ways of capturing and silencing it. By identifying and arresting the person or persons who are operating it. Starting with a list of almost two hundred possible suspects at the beginning, our investigations have now brought this down to not more than six all told. Five out of the six are being covered by my other operatives.

"In Azabu-ku lives an American—" he grimaced as he pronounced the word—"called Jo-hin Lai-hyon. This is your task. He is a possibility, if only because so many others have already been eliminated. Close watch from the outside has uncovered nothing. His house has been searched a number of times without result. It is only from the inside, where a man has not the same defenses, that success may come. You

must get on the inside of him. Know him inside out. There is your assignment. You may have to lie in his arms, and be the body to his body. Is this too much to ask?”

“No.”

“It will not be too difficult. He has a sort of fever for women on him. All men do, but with him it has already become sickness. There is no let and no stop to it; until finally the door of the mind closes without ever again reopening.”

“Where shall I meet him? How shall I know him?”

“You will be given a photograph we have of him, to study before you leave here. We will arrange the meeting for you also. His house is being watched. When he is seen to leave it, and it is sure he will not answer the call himself, I will have someone ring up on the telephone, give the name of one of the other five I mentioned, a Californian Japanese, and ask to have him meet him at the place you work, the Yeddo. His wife, who is stupid in our ways of speech, will not know one voice from another. She will give him the message. His friend will not be there, of course, when he goes there. Instead, he will see you. The rest will follow. You will know what to do. This is nothing that comes out of books. It was born into you.

“I will arrange with the central telephone exchange to have a closed circuit set up, so that you can reach me direct at any hour of the night or day, either at my home or here at the office, without having to go through the usual switchboards and interception desks. Simply give my name and say your own. Precious moments may be saved that way.”

She dropped down to her knees and inclined her forehead until it touched the floor.

“I serve my divine Emperor.”

The Yeddo Club was just off the Ginza, Tokyo's Broadway-Piccadilly-Champs Elysées. A single ideograph, in coral tube-lighting, announced its name. There was no Western lettering in the accompaniment. And yet the evidences of Westernism on every hand could not be escaped, for a nightclub in itself was a Western product, unlike the native geisha-houses, which were something entirely different.

Everyone in the place, even the Japanese, wore Western clothing. The barmen were busy mixing martinis and daiquiris, not serving sake. And at the moment when Lyons entered, a small Japanese band was sawing away—and with no sense of the beat—at an antique American number called "Button Up Your Overcoat." A few couples were on the floor doing the old-fashioned walkaway fox trot.

He asked for and got a small table for one on the edge of the parquet, rather than one of the banquettes lining the walls. He ordered a Tom Collins and sat out a trio of jugglers and a magician with a kimonoed girl assistant, wondering what was holding Matsuko up, and whether he'd come to the right place.

Then the spotlight, which had been spread out to envelop the whole floor area, contracted to just an aspirin tablet of dazzling white intensity, and a girl came out and began to dance.

Instantaneously, at first glance, she did something to him. A sort of spitting, sizzling electrical charge seemed to come from her and form an arc to him. Simply because he was what he was, and who he was, and ready to be grounded.

At first she was in a rich purple silk kimono, embroidered with gold cranes and chrysanthemums, and obi of pale violet, a gold eye mask on her face. She postured gracefully this way and that for a moment, opened and discarded the kimono—which was whisked from sight by a girl attendant—and then really began to dance.

She was not unclothed in any sense of the word. But a tier of long silken fringe fell from her bosom to her waist,

and a second tier from her waist to her lower thighs. It was the glimpses of her body, as the fringe continually parted and split with her movements, that did the damage. It stirred his senses so that he almost reeled, and had to grab the sides of his chair tight to stay on.

He was hers before she'd even taken her third step. Every nerve in his body wanted her. The rest of the dance passed in a blur; he was hardly able to see it through the spell that enveloped him. His breath kept coming faster than the music.

When it was over and she was gone, the room seemed to cool down considerably, his heartbeats slowed and he could breathe better again.

Taking a long drink and a long shaky pull on a cigarette, he stopped a waiter with a peremptory jerk at his jacket.

"What was her name? Her, just now. You've got to give it to me."

"Tomiko," said the waiter blandly, as though this weren't exactly a new experience.

"Wait," he said, holding onto him. "Tell her she's got to come out here. She's got to come to my table. If she doesn't, I'll go in there myself and bring her out."

"Maybe she no like that," said the waiter, bland as ever.

Lyons crushed a paper tip into his breast pocket and managed to regain control of himself. "Ask her if she'll please join me at my table. Say I'd like to meet her very much."

Now, as he sat waiting, he didn't want Matsuko to show up anymore. But that was all right, because Matsuko didn't, in any case.

She didn't keep him waiting too long, considering that she'd changed from head to foot into street clothes. Western, of course. A plain black wool dress with six strands of white milkbeads tight around her neck. Even her hair had been done over. The bulging Japanese pompadour studded with flowers and pins was gone—he saw now that it

must have been a wig—and she wore it now in a sleek little doll-bob with doll-bangs across her forehead. She smelled faintly of jasmine.

She came to a posed halt just far enough away from the table so that she didn't seem overanxious to get to it, one hip a little out of line, one foot pointed toe-forward, both hands holding the patent-leather envelope bag against the indentation of her waist.

"Good evening," she said in very presentable English.

His chair clicked like a dice roll with the swiftness with which he stood up. "Will you give me the pleasure of your company?"

"If you wish," she said demurely.

He circled the table and held her chair for her, and she eased into it. He was gone. He didn't have a chance, and didn't want one.

The waiter was beside them, solicitously.

"An anisette," she said, but to Lyons, not directly to the waiter. She let him see that he was her host. She was tactful that way, she was knowing.

"An anisette," he repeated to the waiter, although the waiter was standing closer to her than he was to Lyons himself.

"Did you like my dance?" she asked him, to break the ice while they were waiting.

"I didn't see it," he said. She waited for him to finish, and he did. "I only saw you."

She smiled to show that she accepted it as a compliment and not a slur.

"Would you care for a cigarette?"

"I rarely smoke," she said. And then quite unexpectedly added, "I will, though, if you want me to."

There was a good cue there, and he took it. "I don't want you to do anything you don't care to." A moment's meaningful pause.

She didn’t pretend not to understand. “We haven’t come to that yet. That’s far ahead of us.”

The waiter put her glass down to one side of her in order not to block their view of one another.

She raised the glass. “To our friendship,” she said politely.

“No good,” he said.

“Why no good? Why can’t we be friends?”

“Oh hell, you know damn well we can’t,” he groaned, half under his breath.

She made a very slight warding-off motion with one hand, and smiled a little, to take the sting out of it. “I don’t like to disappoint anyone, you in particular, so let’s have things well-regulated in advance. In a little while—not immediately—but in a little while I’m going to get up and go home. It’s late, I’ve danced, I’m tired and I have to get up tomorrow.”

“What makes you think I’m not going right with you? I have a car outside.”

“Very well, then you may take me as far as where I live. It will save me the trouble of having to find a taxi at this hour of the night.”

“What was that ‘as far as’?” he asked suspiciously. “Don’t I get to go inside with you? What is it, off-bounds or something?”

“I happen to live with my family.”

“Oh, come on now,” he groaned. “Don’t pull that old thing.”

“I honestly do,” she insisted. “A complete assortment of them. Father, mother, two younger sisters, one baby brother. You can ask the manager here at the club, if you don’t believe me. He had to interview them before they permitted me to sign the contract with him. They’ve accepted my Western ways, my way of earning a living, but still I can’t bring someone into the house with me. That broad-minded they are not.”

“I’m going to have some night!” he lamented, throwing his face up toward the ceiling.

“What makes you think there won’t be others,” she said chastely, “after this one is over?”

“Whatever became of that little radio you used to keep on in the end room upstairs?” Ruth asked him unexpectedly at breakfast the next morning.

“I sold it.’’

He took another sip of his coffee, then asked “Why do you ask about that now? That’s been gone long ago.”

“Kind of sudden, wasn’t it? You used to spend hours tinkering with it, locked up in there.”

“Locked up? How do you know I was locked up?”

“I tried the door accidentally once or twice.”

“Accidentally, I bet,” was all he said.

“Another thing I keep thinking about,” she went on presently, “is all those people who keep coming to the house by mistake. A roofing contractor, when there was nothing the matter with the roof. An electrical repairman, when there was no power failure. I’ve watched from the window sometimes, when they leave. They never go to any of the other houses. It’s always only to this house they come.”

“So?”

She was silent for a short time. Then she said, “Look, I’m not a fool, John. I went to U.C.L.A., same as you did. In fact that’s where we met, remember? Level with me. What’s up?”

She waited for it to sink in.

“What do you mean, what’s up?” he said finally.

“Just what I said. What’s up? What are you up to? What are you doing? Do I have to draw you a picture?”

He stared at her silently.

“All right, then here it is—listen to it. You make a hundred and fifty a month with the Acme Travel Agency. You don’t even have an office. So where and when do you sell your

tickets? Yet you go away on these little side-trips, come back with five thousand dollars in your money belt. The time before that it was fifteen hundred."

"Maybe I'm a dope smuggler," he jeered. "Have a shot on me."

"That was what first occurred to me," she admitted gravely. "Only the drug traffic flows the other way. *Out* of China, not *into* it. So it wouldn't be that."

"You name it, then."

"It all adds up to only one thing. Why try to deny it? You're engaged in espionage work of some kind or another. You're nothing but a—a common, ordinary spy."

"How revolting!" he said sarcastically.

"There's nothing in it to be proud of that I can see. Maybe I have the wrong slant. A soldier fights openly on the field of battle. That's honest, at least. But this is—is sneaky, behind-the-back, in-the-dark kind of fighting. I never could see where it was romantic or glamorous. Never could see that at all. It's dirty and it's below the belt. It's juvenile, it's adolescent, only an immature mind could think other—"

"Like mine," he supplied for her.

The door opened tentatively, and she said sharply, "Stay in the kitchen, Mikki, until we call you." Mikki did not know enough English to make a very good eavesdropper, even if she'd wanted to.

They were silent for a long while.

Then she said, dully, shaking her head in continued disbelief, "My own husband a spy. After nine years I find it out."

"We're not married that long," he said almost facetiously, as though he enjoyed tormenting her.

"No, but we've known each other that long. I don't know, something about it sticks in my craw. Why didn't you tell me at the start?" she cried out bitterly. "Why didn't you give me a chance to decide at that time whether I wanted to go on

with you or not? Not let me give up six or seven years of my life, and then stumble on it by accident."

"You're sure taking it big."

"Because there's something unclean about it. I can't stomach it."

"Well, if you don't like it, you can damn well lump it!" he burst out. "Because I'm staying with it. It's my life, and it's too late to back out now. I couldn't even if I wanted to, and I don't want to."

She rose from the table, but still stood there by it, half turned away. "I'm glad we haven't any children." Then she went on to the door, turned and asked him, "Is Matsuko in on it, too?"

"Look," he said roughly, "no questions, hear? You've talked just about enough for one day. Now zip up your yap and leave me alone. I want a little peace."

"You answered my question anyway, just then, whether you realized it or not. Sure he is, he must be. All those cryptic phone calls you get from him."

He swung his arm around at her impatiently. "Blow. Beat it. Take an aspirin."

"They'll shoot you one of these days," she said hollowly from outside by the stairs.

"They don't shoot here in Japan, they hang," he called back flippantly.

"How many other places have you done it? Did you do it in Russia, too, that time you went there before we were married? It's a wonder they didn't shoot you there."

He was pouring himself a drink of Japanese whiskey, his own nerves frayed now by the prolonged dispute. "Why would they shoot me in Russia, you jerk?" he exclaimed, caught off guard. "That's where I—"

He stopped. She was coming back toward him now. He shrugged, as though to say, What the hell's the difference anyway? He downed his drink.

He'd never seen her face so white before. He'd never seen any face so white before.

"What did you say just then?"

"Nothing."

"Finish it. Finish what you started to say."

"You heard me the first time, so what do you want me to repeat for?"

"Tell me I didn't hear you right. Tell me. You've got to tell me that." She tried to shake him by the shoulders.

He backed his hand at her. "Knock it off or I'll belt you!"

"It *is* the United States? It *is* the United States?" She was almost incoherent by now, sobbing drily without tears. "That's bad enough, but at least it is the United States?"

"What is the United States?"

"—you're working for."

"Grow up, you fool, he said with lethal slowness, spacing each word. "How dumb can you be? It's Russia."

At the sound she made, Mikki stuck her head in at the door. "Somesing happen, Missy?"

"Yeah, he said, without lifting a finger to help her. "Missy's chicken-hearted. She just fainted dead away on the floor." And he poured himself another drink.

It didn't take her long to get ready. In less than an hour she was tottering clumsily down the stairs, swaying off-balance from the bulky valise she was lugging with both hands.

When he saw her go past toward the front door, he got up and went out into the hall after her.

"Here, you better take this with you," he said briefly.

This wasn't any ordinary husband-and-wife quarrel, and they both knew it. This was terminal.

She looked down at his hand first and then up into his face.

“Money from those people? That kind of money?” she said bitterly. “Thank you, no!”

“All right, Betsy Ross,” he answered grimly. “It’s still a whole lot better shake than I ever got from my own country. You never stopped to think of my side of it, did you? Selling apples and shoelaces on the street corner, unable to finish my schooling, pounding my feet off looking for a job and never finding one. Standing on soup lines like a beggar. Living in tin-can shanties. Fatso Hoover. ‘Prosperity is just around the corner.’ ‘Happy days are here again.’ Even when I finally did marry, I wasn’t allowed the privilege of having children of my own, like a man should. Even that right was taken away from me. That’s what’s turned me into what I am today, lushing and wolfing. My own country couldn’t offer me a living. Why shouldn’t I turn to those people? They offered the only hope there was, for an underdog like me.”

She’d put the valise down, but only momentarily.

“A hundred million other Americans went through that right along with you. How is it all the others didn’t turn their backs on their country, too? Because they had guts, and you and a few like you didn’t. Don’t blame your own weakness on your country’s shortcomings. Every country goes through a tough time at one time or another. To turn your back on it just because of that is like—is like turning down a friend when he needs your help.” Her lip curled disdainfully. “I don’t think the United States wants a man like you. I think she’s better off without a man like you, if you want to know the truth of it.”

“Three cheers for the red, white and blue,” he said sourly.

She hoisted the valise and turned and went out into the street.

He watched her for a moment, his expression changing from anger to relief.

“You better let me call a taxi for you, at least,” he called after her.

“I don’t want a taxi. I’ll walk downtown along the middle of the street, carrying my valise in my hand until I get to the American consulate. They’ll take care of me there, they’ll see that I get back home.”

“Are you going to inform on me?”

“No. I’m more loyal to the man I married, than you are to —the country you were born into. I’ll simply say there was another woman, that’s all.”

She turned a corner and was lost to view.

Suddenly, without any warning, two members of the Kempetai, the terrible, the terrifying “thought-police,” were standing one on each side of her. One riveted his hand upon her shoulder, the other riveted his hand around her arm.

“You come with us,” one said in Japanese.

“What for?” she asked, her eyes widening with unalloyed fright. “Why are you arresting me?”

“Detain for questioning.”

She came hurrying across the room to him at the Yeddo, the smile on her face far brighter than any lipstick could have been.

She was still in the same black dress with the same milk-beads around her throat, but she’d added two new touches tonight. She had on a tricky black satin cocktail-hat, pert as a kitten. And she’d changed her perfume. Tonight she was wearing muguet.

She held out both hands to him as he sprang to his feet, and he took them in both of his. Then they swung them in and out a few times, in affectionate greeting.

“Johnnie!” she piped gleefully, like a small child.

“I love it when you call me that,” he purred.

“ Johnnie. Johnnie,” she said softly.

They became aware that they were still standing and that people were turning around to grin at them. They sat down

with a little mutual laugh.

“Did I keep you waiting long? I never changed so fast in my life. And that girl in there, she’s no help at all, poor thing. She’s not used to Western zippers.”

“I wouldn’t care how long you took.” He leaned across the table and put his hand on top of hers. “Tonight’s an anniversary. You know of what, don’t you?”

She nodded with a sort of conspiratorial animation. “One week ago tonight we first met.”

He became serious. “Let’s do something different tonight. Let’s—A week’s an awful long time for a fellow to wait. And I’ve been awfully good about it, haven’t I? Admit it.’

“Except for begging every other minute,” she said mockingly.

Then she, too, became serious.

“I’m not like all the others, Johnnie. I want to know you inside out. What are you like, really? What do you do, really? What is your life, really?”

“I’ve told you everything, there isn’t anything I’ve left out,” he said earnestly. “I even told you about Ruth, the second night we met.”

“Oh, Ruth,” she said in contemptuous dismissal. “Every married man tells the girl he loves everything about his wife the very first thing. That’s nothing. I want to know you *deeper* than that, *closer* than that.”

“There isn’t any deeper, there isn’t any closer,” he said stubbornly.

“Then there isn’t any use for us to keep on meeting every night,” she said, as stubbornly. “What for, if you’re going to keep part of yourself away from me?”

He was glumly silent, and she saw that this was going to require more than just ordinary persuasion.

“Suppose I were to say yes,” she came out with suddenly. “I’m not saying yes—this is just supposition, remember. But suppose I were to say yes. Then where would we go? My family’s at my own home. I won’t go to your house. And I’m

not the sort of girl, Mr. Johnnie Lyons, would go with you to some disreputable hotel just for the night."

His face lit up like a floodlight. A little pulse in his temple started to jazz. His carburetor was in business again.

"I have a little bungalow, a country place, outside the city, on the Peninsula, overlooking the bay. Would you come there with me? We could make it in a forty-minute drive."

"What would we do there?"

He chuckled outright in her face.

"But I mean—" she went on falteringly, "has it got a radio, anything like that?"

He stopped short, and the air between them was filled with sudden tension.

"What made you ask that?" he said in a cold, wary voice.

"Well," she said plausibly, "we can't make love all the time. We can't drink all the time. We can't eat all the time. I simply wondered if there was something to help pass the time away, if I did decide to stay with you.

He relaxed again. "Oh, I didn't get you for a minute."

She knew enough not to ask the question a second time, and finally he said, of his own accord but a trifle reticently, "Yeah, it's got a radio."

"What are you put out about, Johnnie?"

"Well, y'know, your asking that isn't exactly a compliment to me," he said sulkily. "You worried I won't keep you busy enough? Don't worry, baby, you won't need any music out there with me. We'll make our own."

"Johnnie!" she reproached. "Wait for me here a minute," she said then, smiling shyly. "I'll be right back. I'll have to telephone home and make up some excuse to tell my family."

In the dressing room she motioned the maid out, closed the door and picked up the phone, all in one swift motion.

"Tomiko. Colonel Setsu, official business."

Setsu's voice came on with uncanny quickness, almost as though he'd had his hand ready on the instrument.

They didn’t waste time exchanging names.

“He has a little bungalow on the Peninsula,” she began in a low-voiced rush. “It has a radio. He’s taking me there now. Do I refuse, do I delay, do I go at once—your order?”

“How did he react about the radio?”

“He stopped short. His pride as a man rebelled that I should ask about outside entertainment.”

Colonel Setsu had the sixth sense typical of the good Secret Service man. “He is the right one,” he said instantly. “That was not his pride as a man, that was his caution as a secret agent.”

“Then I go?”

“Absolutely essential. It will have to be in your own hands entirely, at first. It may take all night until I can identify the exact location and have my men reach there. Report back as soon as you safely can. But be very careful. One thing I must warn you about—”

Lyons was standing in the dressing room doorway, looking at her. She had not heard the door open.

“Good-bye, honorable father,” she said, and hung up.

She turned to him with a dazzling smile.

“What’d they say?” he grunted.

“What does any family in any part of the world say when the eldest daughter tells them she is spending the night with a girl friend? They *think* they know, they’re *afraid* they’re right, but they *hope* they are mistaken.”

She shrugged as she turned toward the door. “Well, Johnnie. Here goes nothing.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” he said, tightening his arm possessively around her waist. “I wouldn’t say that at all!”

When she awoke in the morning he wasn’t in the bed with her and wasn’t in the room.

The overturned goblets, the empty champagne bottles in the bucket, floating now in water that had once been chopped ice, told the story of their night. Successful from his point of view, barren from hers. She hadn't learned a thing more than she'd already known in the city.

She put on a man's black silk kimono she saw lying there—his, for she hadn't brought anything of her own with her—and ran to the window.

The view from the little country house was as beautiful as a Japanese print. In the foreground were nothing but dwarf fir trees, glossy and dark green. Beyond and below them the pebbly beach, rosy-beige in color. And then past that the waters of the bay, an incomparable blue. Out from the shore a little fishing smack rode motionless, reflected upside down as on a sheet of glass. There was no sign of life aboard it. All under a porcelain-smooth sky.

No use to search the tiny little two-room place again this morning, even though he wasn't here. She had done that exhaustively during the night, in the intervals between their love-bouts, while pretending to roam aimlessly about.

She went to the telephone and dispiritedly gave Colonel Setsu's name.

"I have failed. I came out here for nothing."

"The radio?"

"It is nothing more than it seems. One of our own inexpensive Japanese makes, table-top, that you can buy in any store."

"You're sure?"

"I have examined it all over. It has no transmitter, messages cannot be sent out over it. The back panel is even broken, which made it easier for me to see inside."

"Stay there until you find it," ordered the Colonel curtly. "It may be right before your eyes and you do not know it."

She hung up disconsolately.

A law of diminishing returns would soon set in, and she knew it. The second night she would already mean less to

him than the first, the third night less than the second. Her cards were down, she had nothing left to play with. And his were still being nursed up close to his face.

She went back to the window. The fishing smack had moved in closer to shore since she had last seen it. And he was standing up on it; she could recognize his tall lanky figure even at that distance. He must have been below somewhere the first time.

It may be right before your eyes and you do not know it.

She made a sudden swift turn, as if to go back to the telephone she had just left and pick it up once more, then thought better of it. He would be back to the house in a matter of minutes.

But she knew where the radio was now. She knew unerringly where he kept it.

She ran out of the house and down the slope to the beach to meet him, naked as she was under the kimono and in bare feet, uttering gleeful little cries of “John-eee! John-eee!”

They were both sitting on the edge of the gunwale now, trailing their bare feet in the water. He’d taken off shoes and socks now, too.

“Why can’t I go down inside the hatch?” she asked for the tenth time.

“You don’t want to go down there. Nothing but a lot of greasy machinery. Get yourself all dirty.”

“I bet you’re hiding a woman down there. That’s why you won’t let me see.”

“I’m a one-woman man. One at a time.”

“Well then, what are we going to do, just sit here like this soaking our feet? This is no fun. Let’s go in for a swim at least.”

“I have no suit.”

“This is the one country in the world where nude bathing isn’t immoral. You ought to know that, foolish one.” Then, to prod him on, she added, “I bet you can’t swim, that’s what it is.’’

“I swim better than you,” he told her.

“Prove it then.” That worked. He jumped to his feet, took off everything but his shorts and went arching in in a very graceful dive.

She promptly flung off the kimono and went in after him.

They horsed around for a while, laughing and splashing, the way people do in the water.

“You’re good, you know it?” he spluttered admiringly.

“At what, this?” she laughed.

“And a couple of other things.”

She pretended to tire first, climbed back onto the boat and sat watching him, huddled under the kimono like a towel. As she had half expected, now that he was in, he was enjoying it too much to come right out again. He was only starting to get warmed up now.

“Swim around the boat,” she suggested, squeezing out her short black hair.

He went under, bobbed up again. “What’s that,” he scoffed. “That’s no distance.”

“Do it underwater then. See if you can stay under all the way around it.’’

He submerged obediently, and the seat of his white shorts went in last, after all the rest of him. Her hand snaked out on the split second almost, and burrowed into the pocket of his trousers, which were spread-eagled within easy reach on the deck. No key in the left one. She tried the right. No key in that one, either. But she came out with a crumpled scrap of paper, which he must have forgotten to throw away. On it, in lead pencil, were two rows of words printed in capital letters. A message that must have gone out over the transmitter.

It was scrambled, didn’t make sense. That didn’t matter, it was the evidence she’d been sent out to get, and Setsu would know how to have it decoded.

She had no place to hide it. The kimono had no pockets, and she was nude under it.

She snatched a cigarette from the pack he’d left lying on the deck, rolled the paper quickly around the outside of it, blank-side out, and stuck it between her lips. Then she deliberately threw the accompanying paper match folder into the water, just as his head broke surface and a thin sheet of water went streaming down in front of his face.

“Didn’t think I could do it, did you?” he panted breathlessly.

“Johnnie, I’m going back now—I’m starting to shiver,” she said. “It’s October, after all. You bring the kimono back with you.”

She knew he’d have to rest on the boat, if only a minute or two, after his underwater exertions.

And, without giving him a chance to object or stop her, she slipped back into the water just as he hauled himself up out of it right alongside of her. But not before she glimpsed the key to the hatch fastened by a safety pin to the waistband of his shorts, around at the side.

Timing is everything, particularly in moments of crisis. Timing is life and death.

She could have made it half a dozen times over if she’d only worked out her time better. He was still on the boat, hadn’t left it, when she looked back from the doorway as she reentered the house.

But she was dripping wet, freezing, and shaking uncontrollably all over. She had to rub herself off first and put on some things, and it was that that undid her. Had she gone straight to the telephone just as she was, she probably

could not have made herself understood through her chattering teeth. Nor, on the other hand, could she have gone directly to the car and driven naked like that all the way in to Tokyo.

A precious minute to rub down. A precious minute to put on clothes. An added precious minute for the shoes and stockings—cigarette slipped inside the top of one of them. And a final precious minute to pour out a finger of Hennessy and down it.

She glanced from the window—and the boat had disappeared. He must have switched on the engine and been bringing it in under its own power. The landing stage was around on the other side and couldn't be seen from where she was.

She fled to the phone, still gambling on her timing —"Tomiko for Colonel Setsu, urgent, urgent!"—and her timing had run out. He was standing there in the outside doorway, looking in at her.

She turned, smiled innocently, and then hung up. He smiled back; he didn't appear to be suspicious or ill-tempered or anything.

"What'd you do, drop my matches in the water, you little devil?" he reproved her.

He lit a cigarette from a lighter first, and then helped himself in turn to the Three-Star Hennessy.

"If I'd known you were going to bring the boat in right after I left, I wouldn't have gotten all wet for nothing, the way I did," she said.

He slung one hip onto the edge of a table and nursed his glass. "I always bring it in. What do you think I do, leave it out there all night with nobody on it?" Then, without any change of voice, he asked her, "Who was that you were talking to?"

"My family, silly. Do you realize this is going to be my second night away from home?"

“How’d they take it?” he asked, grinning at her knowingly.

“Not too badly, all things considered.”

He finished his drink and put down the glass.

“Why didn’t you tell me you couldn’t reach them—”

“But I did,” she quickly interrupted. “I just this minute finished talking to them. You saw me put down the phone.”

“—then I still wouldn’t have been sure about you, one way or the other. At least not sure enough to do anything to you. But you lied to me about it—”

“Lied?” she breathed.

“Because I cut the wires outside the house myself just now as I came in. So you couldn’t have been talking to anybody—that’s a dead phone. And, by lying to me, now you *have* made me sure of you. That makes all the rest of it hang together. The matches thrown in the water, so there’d be no risk of having to smoke away the evidence. Going down into the water with a cigarette held in your mouth. Doing the dog-paddle on the way back instead of your regular stroke, so you could keep it dry. One trouser leg was flipped over when I went to put them back on. I’d left them both pasted down flat on the deck. You’d been in my pockets. Little things. But it’s the little things in my line of work that count.”

She made one last gamble. One final one. She had the long, strong legs of a dancer, good for running. The car was only a few yards down the road, in the open; there was no such thing as a garage out here. He had a habit of leaving the keys sticking in it nine times out of ten—she’d been out in it with him enough to know that. About things that didn’t directly concern his work he was apt to be careless, even slipshod. And finally, last night during her roving she had noticed that the key was standing in the lock on the other side of the door between the two rooms here.

So she threw the dice—winner take all. What else could she do?

“This conversation isn’t helping me get any warmer,” she said, shuddering. “I could use one more drink.”

She went toward the hefty cognac bottle, empty glass in hand.

Still half sitting, he had turned to watch her, so she couldn’t try to hit him over the head; he could catch it in time. Instead she let the glass go, grabbed the bottle by the neck with both hands and rammed it, bottom-first, square into his face with all her might. It was the equivalent of a good man-driven punch in the nose, if nothing else, and it stunned him for a minute and opened his lip.

Then she ran like one possessed, slammed the door, turned the key in it and fled from the house, down the road —and all the gods of old Japan and all the ghosts of ancient warriors must have been rooting for her.

She flung herself in the car, without bothering to shut the door. The keys were in it, and she turned on the ignition and floored the starter . . .

He didn’t bother with the room door. He leaped out the window and cut through the dwarf firs diagonally for the car . . .

The motor turned over once, turned over twice, failed.

He had her.

“C’mon back, baby,” he said, wrapping her in a double-armed bear hug and lifting her bodily out of the car. He dragged her back toward the cabin, breathing heavily. “I don’t know whether to love you or kill you.” He laughed harshly. “Why not both?”

Her timing was what had destroyed her. It had worked out all wrong.

Her eyes remained closed for some time after. She almost seemed to be in a faint, from over-emotion. When she stirred at last and opened her eyes, he was all the way

across the room from her. He had a closet door open and was standing by it, his hand inside the pocket of an old gabardine topcoat that was hanging there.

She tried to sit up, failed, then succeeded.

“Wasn’t it good?” she whispered exhaustedly, as though seeking to determine her own fate by the answer.

“Sure. Out of this world. That’s why I’m sending you there with it.”

She dropped her eyes demurely. “In Japan there are many old arts. Making love is one of them.”

“Ready, baby?” was all he said.

The gun came out.

She looked at him without expression. “Dying is another of our arts,” she said.

Outside the house there was a guttural shout of command. Then running feet started to converge on it from all sides, dozens of them it seemed, pattering over grass, scraping over gravel, slapping over flagstones.

The gun jerked spasmodically.

“I was almost going to let you go there for a minute,” he confided rapidly. “But this does it.”

They weren’t in time. He was too close, and they were too far.

He aimed at her face first, but then changed his mind, as though thinking it was too beautiful to spoil. He lowered it to her heart instead, and the bullet slammed her backward. The blood came out with an effect almost like an iridescent, finespun garden spray revolving on the grass, until she clapped both hands over it to try to hold it in. Then it simply ran down flat against her skin.

She toppled over sideward on the bed, and dropped from there to the floor, limp as a drunk.

Then they were in. They poured in like water through a sieve. They even seemed to come through the walls.

He tried to point it at his own head, but his immunity had run out, and they caught it from him and bore him down.

Then Colonel Setsu strode in, dress-uniform sword at his side. “Help this woman,” he ordered, pointing.

She made a warding-off gesture with one hand, its palm out toward them, shiny orange-red with her own blood but the creases in it still white.

Then she lifted herself—agonizedly, by sheer will power, almost miraculously—grasping the bed until she stood fully erect for a moment, for a moment only.

Not to face them, for her face turned straight upward overhead, to where Ameratsu the sun goddess, ancestress of all Japan, blazed in all her glory.

“For the divine Emperor I die!”

Then she fell and died there.

“Tomiko!” cried Colonel Setsu in a ringing voice, holding his sword upright before his face in salute. “Let every man remember her name and tell it to his sons. Let every man look upon her face and behold true love of country.”

They all bowed their heads mutely for a long moment.

Then Johanie Lyons was hustled violently out, staggering from side to side with the fury of their hatred.

The cell door grated open at the usual time, but instead of the guard with the daily tin breakfast tray, the Commandant of Sugamo Prison himself entered, holding two official-looking documents in his hand.

Lyons’ face whitened—he would have been more than human if it hadn’t—but at least it stayed steady enough. “Is this it?” he asked.

The Commandant didn’t answer. A turnkey brought in a folded campstool and set it up, and the official seated himself on it. The turnkey went out and relocked the cell door.

“You wish to eat breakfast first?”

Lyons sighed listlessly. “No. What is it?”

“Has been discussions going on for some time,” began the Commandant by way of introduction.

“I wondered what was taking it so long,” said Lyons, half to himself.

“Is politics involved. No harm if you know this. Politics can forgive anything, if necessary. Overlook everything, no matter what.”

“Why the briefing? I know I’m going to die,” said Lyons morosely. “This is no fun for me.”

“Finally, agreement has been reached, after long delicate negotiations. Russia have in prison two, three very valuable Japanese secret agents we would like back. Also, Japan for political reasons, have no wish to be bad friends with Russia at this time. Want to conciliate. We already fighting one all-out war. So, in exchange for two, three Japanese agents Russia hand back to us, you be taken out of here some time this week, go under armed escort to Valadivostock, and be turned free on Russian territory.”

It took several moments for it to sink in. Lyons blinked, and then blinked again. “In other words, I’m not going to hang at all. I’m being traded in for some Japanese agents Russia’s holding.”

“Exactly,” said the Commandant. “This is not made known, of course, to public or newspapers. Is bad for morale in wartime. But people soon forget your name, think you already been executed. Is higher politics, that’s all. Happen many times before in this world.”

“I’d be a liar,” Lyons admitted, “if I said I wasn’t glad. Anybody’d rather live than die.”

“Now all you have to do,” said the Commandant, producing a fountain pen and uncapping it, “you sign one of these two paper, and everything taken care of.”

“What is it? Can I read it?”

The Commandant handed it to him. It was short, just a bare couple of lines, and typed in English. He read it half aloud to himself.

“I, John Lyons, do hereby and for all future time to come renounce my citizenship in the United States of America.”

He looked up at the Commandant blankly. “What’s the other one, the one I don’t have to sign?”

“That automatically grant you Soviet citizenship as soon as you sign this first one. But first one must be signed before it can do so.”

“But why?” said Johnnie dazedly. “Why? I don’t get it.”

“Is very simple,” said the Commandant impatiently. “You haven’t heard about it here in prison maybe, but my country has been in state of total war with United States America since eight of December just past.”

“What!” said Johnnie, stunned.

“With Russia we still continue at peace. Is impossible exchange you as American citizen. As American citizen you must pay death penalty, for spying. Only as Soviet citizen can you be exchanged. Is only technicality, anyhow. You been working for Russia all along, for past several years.”

“Yeah,” said Johnnie dimly. “But there was no war then. And I hadn’t seen a girl named Tomiko die.”

He huddled forward and ran his hands through his hair.

“How much time have I got to decide?”

“How much time you need, to know if you want to live or die?” said the Commandant ironically.

“Give me one night’s time.”

The Commandant rose to his feet. “I return at exactly this time tomorrow morning. You let me know then which you decide.”

When the Commandant came in he was again holding the same two papers, but there was no campstool this time.

“Which?” he demanded tersely.

“Death,” Johnnie said simply.

The Commandant looked at him hard, for a long time. Then he said, equally simply, “I think you are right.”

“Can I have one last favor?” asked Johnnie.

“If possible.”

“Can I have that paper? The one renouncing . . .”

The Commandant handed it to him. Johnnie put a match to it. Then he dropped it to the floor and scuffed his foot around on it until it wasn’t there anymore.

The death procession walked slowly toward the execution place, the Commandant at its head, Lyons in the center, flanked by two rows of three guards each, in stiff military formation. They came out into an open yard, with a pastel-blue sky overhead and clouds like gobs of shaving lather. A door in the cement wall facing them, ominous as the lid of a coffin standing upright, opened by itself before they had reached it. They filed in without breaking step. Then it closed after them, shutting out the light of Lyons’s last day.

It was dim inside. Incense sweetened the air, and tapers were burning like shimmering little fireflies along an altar, illumining from below the serene downcast face of Buddha, hope and belief of half the world. A priest stood off to one side.

This was not the death chamber itself, but a temple just outside it, the last way station just before eternity.

They halted briefly, and the Commandant turned to Lyons. “Would you like to pray?” he asked him respectfully.

“I’ll take mine straight,” said Lyons shortly.

“He will say one for you, then,” said the Commandant, indicating the priest.

“Thanks,” said Lyons. “That I won’t object to.” And as they moved on toward the rear, he suddenly added, “And to show my appreciation—” Impulsively he jerked loose the little chamoisskin pouch that he had worn around his neck

ever since his arrest—they had examined it, of course—and placed the huge diamond it contained in a little lacquered dish that stood there on the altar to receive any last gifts the condemned might wish to make as they moved on by toward the death place.

Back to the god it belonged to, at long last.

Behind the temple was the execution place. They led him over where the rope was and turned him around, and he, of his own accord, neatly fitted his feet in between the chalkmarks traced on the floor that showed the place he was to stand.

And as he stood there, he was saying a prayer of a sort after all. His lips moved noticeably, and his eyes had a concentrated—and yet faraway—look. Not a prayer a church would know, not a prayer for himself or for his own soul. Not a prayer at all, maybe.

He was saying the names of the states. Not all in the right order—he'd never been that good in geography. And he couldn't get them all in; the time they gave him was too short. But he did what he could while he stood there.

"Arizona, Alabama, Arkansas . . ."

The ready-made noose was deftly fitted around his neck, and closed until it hugged him tight.

"North Carolina, South Carolina, Delaware . . ."

The executioner tugged at the upright lever with both arms, like a railroad switchman throwing open a section of track. The floor shot open under him, and he was gone, head all the way over to the side.

Ruth Lyons, still wearing the pallor of the four years of imprisonment that only the American Occupation had brought to an end, walked slowly along the gravelly cemetery path to where the grave was.

She crouched beside it when she had reached it, and arranged the flowers she had brought with her around the little upright stone marker, but in such a way as not to obliterate it. Then she stood in silence looking down at it.

It had just four words on it, above his initials. They had told her for what reason he had died. She knew now he would have wanted that to be on there. The words on the marker were:

Here Lies an American
J.L.

MONEY TALKS

The detective caught Al after about a three-block run. That is, it would have been a three-block run if it had been properly sectioned off into blocks. In that case he wouldn't have caught him at all, for the detective was a good deal heavier, had a sizable paunch to push ahead of him, and Al was running for his life. Or at least his freedom, a possible ten-to-twenty years of it, and that can make a man really run.

But there were no separate blocks—it was a straightaway, an ocean pier, as a matter of fact. Al was sealed in, couldn't get off on either side. Along the first stretch, if he jumped over the rail to the sand below he'd stand out like a black dot on a white die-cube—the beach was that bright under a seven-eighths moon. And with Al down there, the detective could have used a gun on him—there were no bathers around any more. Farther out, if he jumped over the rail, he had a choice between getting away dead-drowned or being rescued with a handcuff. He couldn't swim a splash.

It was a cul-de-sac, and a beauty. The detective couldn't have done better if he'd blueprinted the whole thing ahead of time.

So he caught him.

His hand came down on Al like a ton of bricks and they both staggered to a stop. For a minute they were both too winded to say anything. They just stood there breathing a

gale between them. But the detective wasn't too bushed to shift his hold from Al's shoulder, which wasn't too secure a place, to a double lock at the hack of the coat collar and the cuff of one sleeve.

By this time people had formed a ring around them, the two of them posing in a tableau, in what was obviously a still life of a just-enacted arrest. Neither one of them cared about that—the detective because it was part of his profession to make arrests in public, AI because he was caught now, stuck, on the wrong side of the law, and these people couldn't help him. He knew they couldn't, and also he knew they wouldn't even if they could.

Al managed to speak first. "What's it for, copper? I'm not out of bounds down here."

"You're out of bounds any place you lift a bundle of dough."

Al's voice shrilled to a squeak. "For Pete's sake, I didn't do no such thing!"

"Then wha'd you run for?"

"I have a record, and you know it. I don't stand a prayer."

"You gave yourself away by running this time. D'you bust out running every time a patrolman starts over to check on you?"

"Not when I see them just walking towards me. But you were already running after me when I turned and looked. I just lost my head, is all."

"You lost your immunity, is all," the detective told him. "C'mon back and we'll take it up with her."

They started back along the pier, trailing a cloud of buzzing spectators like a wedge-shaped swarm of bees coming to a point behind a pair of leaders. Al was too experienced an arrestee to waste his breath making any further pleas. If they were going to listen at all, they'd listen from the original stopping position. Once they started moving you off with them, the time for listening was over. Al knew that as well as he knew his own name.

The concessionaire was a very large woman. Large-size women seem to make better concessionaires—they stand out more against their usually garish backgrounds. She was blonde to the point of silveriness, shrewdly made up to take a few years off at the top, and tough as a 25-cent steak. Her pitch was a refreshment stand—hamburgers, frozen custard, soft drinks, hot dogs—*So fresh they bite you,* one little sign said.

She scowled angrily at Al as the detective brought him to a halt up against her counter.

"Got him, did you?" she said.

"Got me for what?" Al rasped. "What're you talking about, lady?"

"I'm talking about the day's receipts, wise guy. Is it on him?" she demanded of the detective.

"That's what we're coming to right now. Wait'll I get a little help here."

A boardwalk patrolman joined them and took over Al's bodily custody, freeing the detective for the search. A second policeman came up and moved the close-packed crowd back. It required a stiff-arming of chests and a shoving between shoulder blades to get them to budge at all. It was like kneading dough, because as the policeman pushed them away in one place, they closed in again in another. Many climbed up on the boardwalk railing to get a better look.

The detective went through Al's pockets as though his hands were a pair of miniature vacuum cleaners. He deposited everything on the concession counter. Al's worldly goods did not amount to much. Monetarily they consisted of seven quarters, four dimes, three nickels, four pennies, and two subway tokens, all from the right-hand trouser pocket. He carried no billfold.

The detective then searched Al in places where there were no pockets. He ran probing fingers along the hem of his coat, up and down the linings of his sleeves (from the

outside), felt along his ribs, and across the chest below his undershirt. He even made Al unlace his shoes and step out of them briefly, then get back into them again.

"What 'dje do with it?" he demanded finally.

"I never took it to begin with," Al insisted.

The detective turned to the woman. "Did you *see* him grab it?"

"I didn't really catch him in the act, no—"

"Then wadaya accusing me for?" Al protested hotly before she could even finish.

"Because who else could it have been? You were at my stand just the minute before."

"Any other customers besides him?"

"Only a man and his two kids. But they had already left."

"A man taking his youngsters on an outing doesn't go in for lifting," said the detective with good psychological insight, "if only because he can't make a getaway. How much did it come to?"

"Two seventy-five."

"You mean two hundred and seventy-five dollars?"

"That's what I'm talking about," she said crisply. "Y'don't think I'd blow my stack like this over two bucks, do you?"

One of the boardwalk patrolman whistled. "You make that much in one day? I'd better change jobs with you, lady."

"Don't forget this is a three-day take—it's a holiday weekend."

What I can't figure," said the second beach cop, "is how could he take it out of the till without your spotting him, when the cash registers over there on the opposite side, over by you."

He didn't take it out of the till, I did," said the woman testily, as though angry at her own carelessness. "I've been in this business twenty years and I never pulled a boner like that before in my life. But there's a first time for everything, they say. See, I just finished stacking it to take home. I was due to go off, and my husband was coming on in another

quarter hour or so. I don't like to leave so much money in the drawer until we close down—we stay open until one in the morning, and it gets kind of lonely along here at that hour. So I snapped a rubber band around the bills. I had the drawer out, and I put the dough down for just a second, like this. I had a batch of franks on and they started to smoke up. So I took a step over to flip them, then took a step back. It was gone, and he was gone. Add it up for yourself."

"Well, it's not on him now," the detective had to admit. "I've been all over him with a fine-tooth comb."

"Look," said the woman sharply, giving the cash drawer a quick ride out, then in again. "There's my proof. You never yet saw a cash register drawer with only a few singles and some silver in it, did you? Where's all my fives and tens? You know we break plenty of them during the day."

"I'm not doubting you, lady. I'm only saying—"

"Well, he ditched it on the run, then."

"Did you see him throw anything away?" one of the boardwalk police asked Al's original captor.

"No, I was watching for that. I kept my eyes on his hands the whole time. He never moved them. All he moved was his feet."

The two of them retraced the course of the flight, searching for the bundle every step of the way, while the third one remained at the stand, holding onto Al. They were still empty-handed when they came back.

"Of course it's gone," assented the woman, annoyed. "Somebody picked it up by now. How long do you think it's going to lie there, anyway?"

"Nope, he never threw it," the detective insisted. He gave Al a vicious shaking up. "Wha'd you do with it?"

"To do something with anything, you got to have it first," Al protested, through teeth that would have rattled if they hadn't been his own.

"That's great," said the woman bitterly. "George all the way. So whether you pull him in or not, I'm still out the

dough. I stand here all day on my feet, and all I've got to show for it is a lot of salt air."

"You're covered, ain't you, lady?" said one of the patrolmen knowingly.

"My insurance ain't paying me back dollar for dollar." she snapped at him.

"Well, in *you* come," the detective told Al grimly, "whether we've found it or not."

Al trotted along beside him but with his head slightly bowed, as if to say, *This is my kind of luck*.

Al's wife's sister was married to Joe Timmons, a doctor more or less. Al had never been able to figure out whether this made them brother-in-law or not. But anyway Joe was Rose's brother-in-law. There could be no argument about that, and since the two of them, he and Al, got along fairly well, Al was willing to let it go at that.

Actually, Joe was a genuine enough doctor. He had attended Medical School and received his degree, but too much tinkering with bottles, of the kind that did not contain medicine, had given his status an aspect that was cloudy if not downright shady.

He was the sort of doctor who, at an earlier stage of medical progress, would have had a dingy office two flights up in some old tenement; in today's world Joe had a dingy office just one flight up in a remodeled tenement, and kept three small ads of questionable ethics running in the far-back reaches of a number of spongy-papered magazines.

Joe Timmons came to see Al in his place of detention, and Al was so downcast, so preoccupied with his own troubles, that he didn't even realize the visit was purely voluntary.

"Hullo, Joe, they get you too?" Al said dolefully without even looking up.

"What's the matter with you?" said Joe impatiently.

"What're you crying for?" Al had glanced up and seen Joe's tear-smogged eyes. "I've took it before, I'll have to take it again, that's all."

“Stop it, will you?” said Joe, more irritable than ever. “You know this is the ragweed season for me.”

“Oh,” said Al, remembering.

“Something’s got to be done about you,” Joe pronounced without further ado. “We were talking it over last night around the table, the three of us, over some cans of beer. Now if you go away this time you’re going to be away a long time, and you know it, Al. Rose is going to just naturally pine away—she’s really gone on you and no fooling. If Rose is unhappy, then Flo gets depressed. And if Flo gets depressed, then I have a miserable home life myself. So it’s a losing game all around. Anyway, I promised the two girls I’d see what I could do for you.”

“Since when are you a lawyer?” asked Al dejectedly. “A lawyer ain’t going to do you any good, Al. This is going to be three times and out for you. You’re on parole and it’s mandatory, it’s on the books.”

“But if they never found the money on me to this day, how can they make it stick?”

“That don’t help much, it’s still open and shut. The woman claims the money was taken. It’s her word against yours. You’ve got a record, she hasn’t. You were standing right there a minute before the money disappeared. You ran like hell. It’s all stacked against you, Al. The natural supposition is going to be that you threw it away, even if the copper admits he didn’t see you. They can’t prove that you took it, but that ain’t good enough for you. It’s got to be proved that you *couldn’t* have taken it.”

He thought for a while.

“How much was on you when they nabbed you?”

“About seven or eight quarters, and a few nickels and pennies.”

“How come no paper money?”

“I busted my last couple of bucks just before that at a shooting gallery. Then I remembered it wouldn’t look too good if I was spotted practicing at a place like that, even

though I've never carried a live weapon in my life. So I drifted on my way with all this unused change still in my pocket."

Joe cogitated. "Something could be made out of that. We can't afford to throw anything away, no matter how little it is.

"So what can you make out of it?" said the realistic Al. "Only that I was low in cash. And they'll say that's all the more reason why I took the money."

Joe sneezed stingingly at this point.

"Somebody been sending roses to somebody in here?" he demanded indignantly. He raised his handkerchief toward his nose. "You may go up for ten, twenty years but at least you ain't got my allergy," he remarked wistfully.

"Thanks," said Al morosely.

Joe's handkerchief was still upended, without having reached his nose. It stayed there.

"I've got it!" he said. "I've got your out!"

He never did blow his nose.

"Now we'll make a deal, first of all. How much was it and where'd you put it?"

"Oh, no, you don't!" said Al firmly. "That's what they've been trying to get out of me the whole time. Wouldn't that be great, if I turned around now and—"

"But Al, I'm family," protested Joe, shocked. "I'm not a cop or a stoolie. Look, I'm sticking my neck out for you. You can't expect a favor even from a relative without making it worth his while. That's the way the world is. He waited a moment; while Al remained stubbornly silent. Then Joe said, "All right, then. Let's put it this way. How much do they *claim* you took?"

"The jane tabbed it at two seventy-five. I had no time to count it myself." said Al incautiously.

"Then here's how it goes," expounded Joe, "Two hundred to me, for getting you off, and you keep the seventy-five."

Al gouged the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. “Splitting it right down the middle, is what I call it,” he intoned somberly.

Joe stood up, affronted, and made as if to leave. Then he turned his head and addressed Al over one shoulder. “Which is better,” he said, “to have seventy-five smackers you can call your own, free and clear, out in the fresh air and sunshine, or to *know* where there’s two hundred and seventy-five waiting—with a six-foot-thick concrete wall in between? You figure it out.”

Al did, and finally gave in, with a resigned, upward flip of the hand. “It’s the best I can do.” he admitted glumly. “I haven’t had any other offers today.”

Joe reseated himself and leaned forward confidentially. “All right, where is it?” he said. “And keep it low.”

Al dropped his voice. Now that the deal was made, he seemed relieved to get it off his chest. “It’s still right there on the counter—” he began.

In spite of his recent injunction, Joe’s own voice rose almost to a yelp of outrage. “Come on. who’re you trying to kid?”

“Will you listen to me, or don’t you want to hear?” Joe wanted to hear.

“She has three big glass tanks there. One’s a pale color—that’s the pineapple. One’s medium color—that’s the orange. One is almost black—that’s the grape. It’s in that—the grape. The lids are chromium, but they’re liftable. I tipped it up and shot it in there.” Joe squeezed his eyes tight. “And you expect it to still be in there?” he groaned.

“Sure, it’s still in there. Not only that, I bet it’ll be in there ail the rest of the week. I cased the stand for nearly an hour, from a boardwalk bench opposite. I kept score. For every five customers for orange, there’s only three for pineapple and only one for grape. It moves slow. I don’t know why she stocks the stuff. Those tanks last. The next two days were slow days—Tuesday and Wednesday after

the holiday weekend. And it was raining, to top it off. You know what that does to business on a boardwalk."

"It's paper, it'll be floating at the top."

"So what." She draws the stuff off from a spigot at the bottom. Something makes them bubble, I couldn't figure what. That alone would keep it from settling to the bottom."

Joe digested all this for a while. "I've got it," he said at last, giving a fingersnap. "A fishhook. Or better still, a bent safety pin."

"Sure," said Al. "Make like you're lighting a cigarette, set fire to the whole book of matches at once.

She can't prove it wasn't an accident. Throw it away from you, like anyone would—but so it lands on the floor *inside* the stand, over the other way to distract her attention. She'll be busy bending over and stamping it out. Then just tip the lid like I did."

"As soon as I have it, I'll go to work on you," Joe promised. He got up to leave. "I'll let you know," he said.

He came back to see Al only once more after that.

He didn't stay long and he didn't say much—just three words.

"I got it."

Al saluted with two fingers from the edge of his eyebrow, and Joe gave him a knowing bat of the eyelashes as he turned and went out again.

Al's hearing was held in the judge's chambers. There was no jury trial since Al's previous and uncompleted sentence still hung over him like an axe, ready to fall and hit him in the back of the neck if the judge so decided. If Al was found guilty, X number of years resumed right where they had left off, plus; if found not guilty, Al was out on parole again.

The judge was a benevolent-looking man, the clerk was unbiased, but the arresting officer was neither. Also present were the concessionaires, Al's wife Rose, and a physician who had treated the accused and wished to give expert testimony bearing on the matter at hand.

The concessionaire having restated her complaint, the arresting officer having given an account of the accused's flight from the scene before he even knew what he was charged with, the physician now stepped forward and asked the judge's permission to submit certain medical facts which he felt to be of great importance to the case. The judge granted permission.

The expert witness identified himself as Dr. Joseph Randolph Timmons, and he presented a figure of such impeccable distinction, with his scholarly eyeglasses, dignified bearing, and air of professional erudition, that alongside him both the clerk of the court and the arresting officer appeared shoddy, rundown, and of little account.

Dr. Timmons asked only a single preliminary question of the arresting officer.

"When you caught up with the accused man, did he stand quietly, or did he fidget and wriggle around a good deal while you were holding him?"

"He stood perfectly still, never moved a hair," said the detective after a moment's thought.

Dr. Timmons then proceeded: "I am not here to vouch for my patient's character or honesty. I know nothing whatever about that. If I'd heard he was being accused of taking jewelry, silverware, furs, anything of that sort, I would not have come forward. But hearing what the charge was in this case, I felt it was my duty as a physician to bring certain facts to light.

"The patient first came to me in May of this year, complaining of an intermittent rash and itching. It would come and go, but it was causing him great trouble. At nights, for instance, when he was at home in bed, it never seemed to bother him. It was only at certain times during the day that it would suddenly show up, then gradually die down again. Sometimes it came on three or four times during the course of a single day, then again only once or twice.

“He told me that whenever he left a barber shop he had it, and whenever he went to a motion-picture show. But when he went into a bar to have a glass of beer, he didn’t have it. Yet when he went into the same bar and had a couple of ryes, he did have it.

“He never had it on buses, but once getting out of a taxi he had it. If he bought a single package of cigarettes he didn’t have it, but if he bought a whole carton at a time he did have it, before he even began to smoke them. A mysterious and interesting case, you will admit.

“I have here a record of his visits, taken from my office-appointment book. If your Honor would care to examine it.”

“ ‘A. Bunker, Monday, ten a.m.—’ ” read the judge aloud, rapidly shuffling through a number of loose-leaf pages the doctor had handed him. “ ‘A. Bunker, Friday, three p.m.—’ He seems to have visited you at the rate of twice a week.”

“He did, your Honor, all through June, July, and the greater part of August. He told me right at the start he couldn’t afford to come to see me that often, but since the case fascinated me, and the poor fellow was badly in need of help, I told him not to worry about it—to pay me whatever he could as we went along.”

The judge cast an admiring glance at the man before him. “There should be more practitioners like you, Dr. Timmons.”

“Not all of us are money grabbers,” said the doctor modestly. “Well, to go on with this man’s case history. A quick test showed that the condition was not dermatological. In lay language that means that it was not a skin infection. I hadn’t thought it was because it came and went, instead of being constant. Therefore there was only one other thing it could be. It had to be an allergy.

But just knowing it was an allergy wasn’t enough. It had to be identified, isolated, its cause discovered, or the

patient couldn’t be helped. I tested him on a number of foods first, and got negative results. Then I tested him on fabrics, such as are worn on the body—wool, cotton, dacron. Again negative. I even tested him on lint, such as is commonly found in the linings of most pockets. Nothing there either.”

He broke off to ask, “I’m not being too technical for your Honor, am I?”

The judge was sitting engrossed, his hands supporting the sides of his face. He said, “I don’t know when I’ve heard a more interesting exposition than the one you’ve been giving, Doctor. Go on, by all means. This is almost like a medical detective story!”

“These exhaustive tests,” resumed the magnetic medic, “might have continued indefinitely, might still be going on today and for many months to come, if it hadn’t been for one of those little accidental breaks which pop up when least expected and give an investigator a short cut to the answer. As I’ve said, I was lenient in collecting payment for the treatments. After several visits for which he’d paid me nothing, the patient one day said he’d like to make a small payment on account. I agreed, of course, and he handed me a five-dollar bill. I’d already noticed he was somewhat improved on that particular day. The ailment had not disappeared by any means, but it was in one of its occasional periods of remission.

“I thought it only fair to dash off a receipt for the fee. When I happened to look up a moment later, I was amazed to see what had occurred.”

Like the good showman he was, the doctor paused artfully.

“But rather than describe it in dry words, I’m going to let you see for yourselves just what happened.”

He turned to Al. “Please remove your jacket, Mr. Bunker.”

Al complied, but with a somewhat apprehensive look on his face. He handed the jacket over to the doctor, who in

turn handed it to the clerk, who draped it neatly over the edge of his table-top desk.

“Now, roll up the sleeves of your shirt,” was the doctor’s next instruction. “As high as they’ll go—all (he way up to your shoulders.”

Al again obeyed, but with more and more of a troubled expression, like someone who knows he is in for in uncomfortable experience. In this instance the doctor speeded up the process by helping him, in the course of which his own hands, unavoidably, glanced lightly upward along Al’s forearms.

The doctor turned to the others.

“I want you to look at his hands and arms before we go any further. Hold out your arms, Mr. Bunker.”

Al stiffly extended his arms straight out before him at chest level, in grotesque resemblance to a high-diver about to launch off into space. His arms were no different from other arms of the male variety—hairy on one side, smooth and heavily veined on the other, but otherwise unblemished.

“Now I’d like a piece of paper currency from one of you, if I may. An ordinary banknote. I’m asking you to furnish it, instead of using one of my own, so there can be no question of the genuineness of this test.”

Like three men at a table when the waiter brings the check, each reacted according to his personal characteristics. The arresting officer made no move toward his pockets at all. The clerk, who was on small salary, managed to outfumble the judge, even in spite of the latter s encumbering robes. The majesty of the law produced a wallet that seemed to contain nothing less than bills in double digits.

Hill a ten be all right?” asked the judge.

“Quite all right.” assured the doctor. “It isn’t the denomination that’s the chief factor.”

He turned back to Al with the ten dollars.

“Now take this in your hands, Mr. Bunker.”

Al drew back, like a child who is about to be given castor oil.

“Now come on,” said the doctor with a touch of impatience. “I’m trying to help you, not harm you.”

Al pinched one corner of the bill between his thumb and forefinger, as though he were holding onto a fluttering moth by one wing.

“Don’t just hold it between two fingers—put all your fingers on it at once,” insisted the doctor. Then when Al had done so, the doctor urged, “Now pass it over into your other hand.”

A few portentous seconds ticked by, as though the doctor were taking a pulse count.

“That’ll do. You’ve held it long enough.”

Al released it with a long-drawn sigh that could be heard throughout the judge’s chamber.

There was a breathless wait.

For several moments nothing happened. Then Al dug his fingernails into the back of one hand and raked it. Then the other. Then the back of one arm. Then the inside. Angry red blotches, almost the size of strawberries, began to appear.

By now Al was almost like a sufferer from St. Vitus’s Dance. His feet stood still, but up above he writhed as though he’d been bitten by five hundred mosquitoes. He couldn’t get at all the places that needed scratching. He didn’t have enough fingernails.

“This poor devil,” said the doctor with dramatic effect, “is allergic to paper money. Whether it is something in the paper itself, or some dye in the ink used in the engraving, I can’t say. But I can say this: he can no more touch paper money, his own or somebody else’s, without having this happen to him, than I can fly out of that window.

“You will remember from the detective’s own testimony that this man had only coins on him at the time he was arrested. That was the result of instructions I myself gave

him—a prescription, as a matter of fact, as much as if I had given him pills or capsules. His wife breaks a dollar or two every day—bills, you understand—and hands him the change when he leaves the house. That way he can make whatever small purchases are required without falling into the lamentable condition you see him in now."

Al's forehead was a ripple of parallel ridges. He wasn't making believe either. No actor could have simulated the wish, the yearning, the compulsion to scratch that so obviously possessed Al. "And finally," concluded the doctor, "I only wish to point out that *had* my patient actually taken the money he is accused of stealing, he could not have run as he did and then later stood perfectly still while being searched. He would have been squirming uncontrollably, scratching himself all over, as you see him doing right now. The arresting officer admitted nothing of the sort took place."

The judge cleared his throat.

"It seems fair enough to assume, in view of what we have all witnessed with our own eyes, that the money could not possibly have been taken by the accused. It must have been taken by some other, unknown person, who somehow made good his escape in the crowd." He addressed Al in an almost fatherly manner.

"You can thank Dr. Timmons for getting you out of what might have been very serious trouble. But you brought all this on yourself, Albert. Next time, don't run from a parole officer when you see him coming towards you. These men are your friends, not your enemies. They are only trying to help you."

"Yes, sir," said Al meekly. He looked at his friend the detective, and his friend the detective looked at him. It was a most undecipherable look—as a cat looks at its friend, the mouse, and a mouse looks at its friend, the cat.

"Charges dismissed," said the judge, with self-satisfaction.

Outside Joe walked a few steps with Al, toward where Rose was waiting. Joe had one arm slung over Al's shoulder, giving him sound medical advice. "And from now on, see that you keep your hot little mitts off any stray money that happens to be floating around. I his is a trick that will work only once."

"For Pete's sake, what'd you do to me?" Al demanded.

Joe murmured, "A solution of itching powder, mixed with something to delay the action a few minutes, so I'd have time for my spiel."

"How come it didn't get you?"

"Skin-colored plastic gloves. I soaked them in it. You can't tell unless you look close—they have the nails painted on, and I wore my ring on the outside. Dunk yourself in a hot tub when you get home," he added. "It ought to wear off in about half an hour." Al and Rose went walking off arm in arm, like the devoted man and wife they were.

"Mr. Bunker!" an urgent voice suddenly called out behind them.

Rose nudged Al sharply. "Better tum around and see what he wants. It'll look funny if you don't."

"Ung-ung," said Al in a calamitous undertone. He turned slowly.

It was the clerk of the court, panting with an inscrutable look on his face—a look impossible to describe unless you actually saw it.

"Would you mind—his Honor—I'm glad I caught up with you—you forgot to return his Honor's ten dollars."

ONE DROP OF BLOOD

I
The Crime—and the Events Leading Up to It

He didn’t premeditate it, and yet, he told himself afterward, it all turned out better than if he had. Much better. He might have done all the wrong things, he told himself. Picked the wrong place, the wrong time, the wrong weapon. Too much careful planning ahead might have made him nervous, as it had many another. In the effort to remember *not* to forget something, he might have forgotten *something else.* How often that had happened!

This way, there was nothing to forget—because there had been nothing to remember in the first place. He just walked through the whole thing “cold,” for the first time, without having had any rehearsal. And everything just seemed to fall into place—the right place, by itself. These hair-split timetables are very hard to stick to. Impromptu, the way he did it, the time element doesn’t become important. You can’t trip over a loose thirty seconds and fall flat on your face when there aren’t a loose thirty seconds to trip over.

The situation itself was old and trite. One of the oldest, one of the tritest. Not to him, of course, and not to her—it never is to those involved. It’s always new, first-time new.

To begin with, he was single, and had no troubles whatsoever to deal with. He had a car, he had a job, he had

health, and he had good looks. But mainly, he had freedom. If he came home at ten o'clock or if he came at two, if he had one drink or if he had a few, there was no one but himself to keep score.

He was the personification of the male spirit, that restless roving spirit that can only get into trouble because it didn't have any trouble to start with, that had no other way to go but—from lack of trouble into a mess of trouble.

And so we find him one star-spiked May evening, in a $95 suit, with $75 in his wallet, with a new convertible waiting outside to take him in any direction he wanted to go, and with a girl named Corinne in his arms—a very pretty Corinne too, dexterously dancing and spinning around together, breaking apart, coming together again, and above all (a favorite step of theirs) making an overhead loop of their two hands so that she could walk through it, turn, then go back through it again. All in excellent time and in excellent rhythm to the tune of *The Night They Invented Champagne*, played by an excellent band.

Beautiful to watch, but what a fatal dance that was, because—it was their first together. They should have turned and fled from each other in opposite directions.

Instead they went out to the car. She patted it admiringly as he beamed, proudly possessive as only a young male car-owner can be. Then they drove to where she lived, sat a while and watched the stars, and kissed and kissed, and watched the stars . . . and that was it.

Another night, another dance, same car, same stars, same kisses—or same lips, anyway. She got out to go in. He got out to keep her from going in. Then they both got in the car again and went to a motel . . . And that was it again.

After some time had gone by she asked him about marriage. But she didn't get much of an answer. He liked it the way it was. She hadn't asked him soon enough, or in the right order of things. So, afraid that she would lose him

altogether, and preferring to have him this way rather than no way at all, she didn't ask him again.

It was a peaceful, comfortable existence. It was definitely not sordid she was not a sordid girl. She was no different, in effect, from any other girl on her street who had stepped out and married. Only she had stepped out and not married. He was the first man she had ever loved, and it stopped there. The only thing was, she had left freedom of action, freedom of choice, entirely in his hands—which was a tactical error of the worst sort in the never-ending war between the sexes. She was a very poor soldier, for a woman. They were not actually living together. They were keeping company, one might say, on a permanent basis.

At any rate, one night when he called to take her out, she complained of not feeling well. In fact, it was easy to see she wasn't shamming, and noticing that she was alternately shivering and burning up he sent for a doctor and remained there while the doctor examined her. (She spoke of him as her fiance whenever it became necessary in front of a third person.) It was nothing serious—merely an attack of the flu, but she had to go to bed.

He would not—to give him some credit—have walked out on her then and there; but she was feeling so miserable that for her part she wished he would leave her alone. So, noticing this, he kissed her—a mere peck—and left.

His original intention—at least, from the door to the car—was to go to his own apartment and make the best of an unexpected solitary evening. But the stars were at their dirty work again, and his wrist watch didn't help either (9:48); he was 28 and *didn't* have the flu, so—

Her name was Allie.

And she wasn't going to be like Corinne—he found that out right from the start. She could enjoy the stars, sure, and she could kiss, sure, but she'd take up both those occupations on his time, as his officially credited fiancee or

his lawfully wedded wife—not on her own time, as a free-lance, if you get the distinction.

And her sense of timing was much better, too. He came out three or four kisses short the first meeting. So he wanted to see her again, to try to make up the shortage. But she always knew just when to stop. He was still a couple short the second meeting, so that made him want to see her a third time. By then he was so hopelessly in hock to her that his only chance of clearing up the debt was to marry her, and try to work it out on a lifetime payment plan.

She was a five-star general in the battle of the sexes. And it must have been inborn, because she'd never heard a shot fired until she met him.

At first he managed to sandwich the two of them in together. He saw Allie a couple of nights in the week, saw Corinne a couple of others. In fact, he would have liked to continue his three-way-stretch arrangement indefinitely; the difficulty, however, lay not with them but with himself. Soon more and more nights with Corinne reminded him of the night she'd had the flu: the stars above and the wrist watch were there, but not Corinne's stars any more and not Corinne's time. A waste of Allie's time, instead.

Finally there were no more nights with Corinne—just one last station-break and the program went off the air.

"You've lost interest in me. I'm not blind. I've noticed it for some time now."

"That's the chance you have to take," he told her, "when you're in love."

"But why did it happen to you?" she wanted to know, "and not to me? Shouldn't we both come out even?"

"You don't come out even in love," he told her. "Someone always has to come out behind." And then he added, "I'll call you up some night." Which is the way some men say goodbye to a woman.

She'll find somebody else, he thought; she was easy for me, she'll be easy for the next one. And he shrugged her off.

But there are three things in this world you can’t shrug off: death, taxes—and a girl who loves you.

Now they were in the homestretch, Allie and he. Now when they looped their hands above their heads on the dance floor, her engagement diamond blazed toward the lights, proclaiming, “This is mine. Hands off.” Not to jewel thieves, but to stealers of men.

Now all the tribal customs were brought to bear—everything the world insists shall surround the lawful mating of a man and a woman. The meetings with the relatives from far-off places; the luncheons, dinners, parties, showers; the choosing of a trousseau; the finding of their first home; even the purchase of the furniture that was to go into it.

Now the date was set, the license applied for, the church reserved, the flowers and the caterers and the champagne arranged for. Now even the blood tests were taken, and they were both declared pure. All that remained was the marrying and the honeymoon.

Now the boys got together and gave him his bachelor party, his last night to howl. And the howls were something to hear. Three separate times around town they were arrested *en masse*, and twice the arresting officers not only released them but even accompanied them for a short part of the way, and the third time wished them well and urged them only to “keep it down, boys.” Then finally the last two survivors, the die-hards whose pledge had been to see him safely home, had him at his door, and after much fumbling with keys, and draping of arms across shoulders, and swaying and tottering, they thrust him inside, closed the door, and left him.

And suddenly he was sober, stone-cold, ice-cold sober, and the whole party had been a waste of liquor—at least, for him.

Corinne was sitting there. Waiting for him.

“You took so long to get back,” she complained mildly. “I knew you still lived here, but I thought you’d never get back.”

“Had a little party,” he said. He was starkly sober, but his tongue hadn’t yet quite caught up with the rest of him. A warning bell started ringing: I wonder if she knows, I wonder if she knows.

“I’m not criticizing,” she went on. “You’re free to go out with your pals—free every night in the week. It’s only natural, so what’s the harm?”

The warning bell stopped suddenly. There was silence. She doesn’t know, he told himself, *and she’s not going to know from me.*

Business of fooling around with a cigarette, so he’d use up time and wouldn’t have to say too much to her. Maybe she’d go away.

“I know it’s late,” she said.

He looked at the wrist watch that had played such a double-crossing part in their little story. Meaning, it is late.

She doesn’t want to start over again, does she? For Pete’s sake, not that! Love is a one-way street.

“Aren’t you working?” he asked. “Don’t you have to get up early in the morning?”

“I haven’t been working since last week,” she said. Then, understandingly, “You’re tired; I know.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I do have to talk to you about something. I’ve got to. It’s very important.”

Now he knew, more or less. There were only two things a girl could possibly want from a man, in all the world, in all this life: love or money. And since love was out, that left only money. Another thing told him: she was much too tractable, noticeably taking pains not to antagonize or ruffle him in any way.

“Won’t it keep till tomorrow?” he said by way of acquiescence. “I’m beat Completely beat. I’ll come over to

see you tomorrow."

"But will you?" she asked, frowning, but still with that air of not wanting to push him, not wanting to crowd him.

"Aw, for the love of Mike, Cor," he said impatiently, "when did you ever know me to break my word to you?"

It was true. He never had—not in the little things.

She had to accept that—it was the best she could get

"I've moved since the last time I saw you," she said, and gave him the new address.

"All right, I'll be there, Allie," he promised. He was almost nudging the door inch by inch right in her face, anxious to get rid of her.

For a moment he lost an inch or two. "Allie?" she said. "Who's Allie?"

"That's Al," he said quickly. "Fellow I go around with—with him tonight I'm so used to saying his name every five minutes or so."

He finally got the door shut and went "Whew!"—from the shoelaces up. Money, he said, that's all it is—she wants money. That hint about not working. All right, I'll give her some. Wind the thing up that way. She was entitled to something after all, he supposed.

He took five hundred out of his savings account the next day, during his lunch hour. The nick it made wasn't too bad. There was still plenty to cover the honeymoon expenses and the first few months of married life. And he was making a good salary.

Then right in front of the bank, coming out, he met Dime; Allie's brother. Dune glanced up at the bank facade, then at him, and said, "Look, if you could use a little extra—I know how it is at a time like this, I went through the mill myself three years ago."

Bing! another two hundred and fifty from Dune, smack in his palm. His face didn't even change color. After all, they were both going to be in the same family, weren't they?

First, he thought, I'll put two fifty of my own back. Then he thought, why be a rat—let her have it all, it's only money. So she was coming out pretty good for a last year's leftover crush; she had no kick coming. She'll fall all over my neck, he thought complacently. But no fooling around tonight; I'm going to unwind her arms and give them back to her.

The bungalow was 'way out at the end of nowhere—dim in the growing darkness. Even the road in front of it wasn't paved yet, just surfaced with some kind of black stuff. But there were going to be other bungalows—he could just make out the skeleton frames of some of them already starting up in a straight line past hers, getting thinner as they went along, until there were only foundations, then just a bulldozer.

She had it fixed up real pretty, the way women like to do, even women with broken hearts. Chintz curtains fluttering out the windows, like vermilion lips coaxing to be kissed.

She didn't even give him a chance to get onto the porch and ring the bell. She was waiting there for him. She had on a little apron to match the curtains. Last year's love, playing house all by herself.

"I wasn't sure you were really coming."

He raised his brows. "Did I ever break my word to you?" "No," she said. "Not your word. Only—"

She had cocktails frosting in a shaker.

"You used to like martinis best," she said.

"I don't like martinis any more," he said,-and let that sink in.

She traced a finger on the frosting of the shaker and made a little track, shiny as a mirror. "I've got to talk to you."

"We don't have to," he said. "This talks better than anything. This talks best." He'd taken the money out and laid it down.

"What's that for?" she said, her face suddenly white with shock and insult and hurt

“Well, if you don’t know why, don’t ask me.”

She sat in a chair for a few moments getting over it—or, it would be more correct to say, getting familiar with it. She had a slow temper. Until this moment, as a matter of fact, he hadn’t known she had any temper at all.

Then she got up, and her face was unlike any face he’d ever seen her wear before. She flung the words point-blank at him.

“You don’t have to do *this* to me! You don’t have to do *this!*”

“Then what else is there?” In all honesty he couldn’t understand her outrage. He’d lost her train of thought, and the situation was becoming an irritant.

“What *else* is there? You have to stand by me, that’s what else there is! I can’t go it alone!”

Now his voice went up, almost into a wail of incomprehension. “Stand by you! What does that mean?”

She took her open hand and slammed it down on the table, so hard that the ice in the shaker went *tlink!* “I’m going to have your baby, that’s what that means!”

The shock was dizzying. He had to reach out and hold on to something for a moment “How do I—?”

“There never was another man in my life, that’s how you know.” And he did know.

“All right,” he said.

“All right what?”

“I’ll take care of everything. Hospital and—”

Now finally she screamed piercingly at him in her passion and torment, and she wasn’t the kind to scream. “Hospital? I don’t want a hospital, I want a husband!”

The second shock, on top of the first, completely unbalanced him. The rest was just physical reflex, not mental reaction at all.

She said only one thing more in her life. In her entire life. “You’re going to marry me, do you understand? You’re going to *marry* me!”

The object was suddenly in his hand, as though it had jumped into his hand of its own accord. He hadn't seen it before, hadn't even known it was in the room.

She died at almost the very first blow. But he kept striking on and on and on, to the point of frenzy, to the point of mama, to the point of sheer hallucination. And then she was gone, and it was over. And the thing that a hundred other men, a thousand other men, had done, and that he'd thought he'd never do—now he'd done it too. And the thing he'd read about a hundred times, a thousand times, now he wasn't reading about it, he was living it. And he liked it much better the other way.

He looked at the object he was still holding, and he realized he actually didn't know what it was even now. What could have been more unpremeditated than that? Some sort of long curving blade, razor-keen. Then at last he identified it—more by hearsay than by actual recognition. A Samurai sword, souvenir of the long-ago war with Japan. He remembered now she had once mentioned she had a brother who had served in the Pacific theater—only to come back and die in a car crash not long after. Many men had brought these back with them at the time.

He let go, and it dropped with a muffled thud.

After a while he located the bracket she had driven into the wall. It must have been hanging up there. When he went over to it he found, on the floor underneath, the severed cord it had hung by and the empty scabbard. His subconscious mind must have recognized it for a weapon, for he had no recollection whatever of snatching it down, and yet he must have, in the blinding red explosion that had burst in his brain and ended in murder.

In the beginning he was very mechanical, as the glaze of shock that coated him all over slowly thawed and loosened. He tipped the cocktail shaker into one of the two glasses and drank. He even ate one of the two olives she'd had ready at the bottoms of the two glasses. Not calloused. His

instinct told him he needed it, if he wanted to try to live. And he wanted to try to live very badly. Even more so now that he'd looked at death this close with his own eyes. Then he poured a second one, but let it stand. Then he emptied what remained in the shaker down the sink.

It seemed hopeless. There seemed no place to begin. The room was daubed with her, as though a house painter had taken a bucket of her blood, dipped his paint brush in it, then splashed it this way and that way and every which way all over the walls. He was splattered himself, but fortunately he was wearing a dark suit and it didn't show up much; and that part of the job could wait until later.

The first thing to do was to get her out of here. All the little things of hers . . . He went to her closet and found a number of opaque plastic garment bags—even more than he needed, in fact . . . and finally he zippered them up securely and let them lean there a moment.

Then he went out to his car, opened the trunk compartment, and made room. He went around to the front seat, got the evening newspaper that he remembered having left there, and papered the entire trunk with it, to prevent any errant stains or smears. It was so incredibly unpeopled out here that he didn't even have to be furtive about it. Just an occasional precautionary look around him.

Then he went in again, brought out the garment bags, put them in the trunk, and locked it He stepped back into the bungalow to put out the lights, took her key with him so he'd be able to get back in again, got in his car, and drove off.

And as far as that part went, that was all. There was nothing more to it.

He drove steadily for some hours. And strangely enough, at a rather slow pace, almost a desultory glide. He could do that because, again strangely enough, he felt no panic whatever. Even his fear was not acute or urgent. It would be untrue to say that he felt no fear at all; but it was distant

and objective, rather than imminent and personal—more on the level of ordinary prudence and caution. And this must have been because it had all come up so suddenly, and blown over so suddenly, that his nerves hadn't had time to be subjected to a long, fraying strain. They were the nerves of an almost normal person, not of a man who had just taken another person's life.

He even stopped once, left the car, and bought a fresh pack of cigarettes at a place he saw was still open. He even stayed there for a few moments, parked in front of it, smoking, then finally slithered on again.

At last his driving stopped being directionless, took on purpose, as he finally made up his mind about a destination. There was. very little noticeable change in it, and he still didn't hurry. He simply made fewer haphazard turns and roundabouts, and perhaps stepped it up another five miles per hour.

Even with a target, he still continued driving for several more hours. The metropolitan section was now left far behind. On the final lap he was purring steadily along a road that paralleled a railroad right-of-way. An occasional pair of lights would blink past him going the other way. There was nothing for anyone else to see or recall—just a relaxed silhouette behind the wheel, with a red coal near its lips, and tooling by. Although a good, wide road, it was not a main artery of traffic.

More than half the night had now gone by, but he still drove on. This had to be done, and when a thing has to be done, it should be done right, no matter how much time it takes.

At last, as he neared the outskirts of a large-sized town, the railroad tracks broadened into numerous sidings, and these blossomed finally into strings of stagnant freight cars of assorted lengths, some only two or three coupled together, others almost endless chains.

He came to a halt finally by the side of the road, took out a flashlight, and left the car. He disappeared into one of the dark lanes between the freight cars, an occasional soft crunch of gravel the only indication of his movements. He was gone for some time, taking his time in this as in everything else. Almost like a shopper shopping for something that exactly suits him, and refusing to be satisfied with anything else.

When he came back to his car there was very little more to it He went out to the middle of the road, stood there first looking up one way, then down the other. When he was sure there were no lights approaching even in the remotest distance, he stepped over to his car, moving deftly and quickly but still by no means frightenedly, opened the trunk, and took out the garment bags. He propped them for a moment against the car while he took the precaution of closing the trunk, so that it might not attract attention in case anyone should drive by while he was gone.

Then, half supporting and half trailing the garment bags, he disappeared into the lane of his choice between the parallels of freight cars—the one that led to the freight car he had found with its door left unfastened. There was the sound of the slide grating open, then in a few moments the sound of it grating closed again. And that was all.

When he came back to the car he was alone, unburdened.

The drive back was as uneventful as the drive out. If he had been of a cynical nature, he might have been tempted to ask: What’s there to a murder? What’s there to worry about?

In due course he came back to the point where the route that led out to her bungalow diverged from the route that would eventually bring him to his own apartment. He didn’t even hesitate. He took the road home. He was taking a gamble of a sort, and yet it wasn’t as great a gamble as it appeared; he felt now that the longer odds were in his favor, and besides, there was nothing more he could do in

her bungalow at this time. She had told him she had stopped working. There was a good chance no one would go there to seek her out during the course of the next day or two. And if someone should, there was an even better chance they would not force entry into the bungalow.

So he decided to go home, leave the bloodstained room the way it was for the time being, and not return until after he'd had a chance to make the necessary preparations for cleaning it up.

He set his alarm for nine, and slept the three hours remaining until then. Which is three hours more sleep than the average murderer can usually get on the first night following his crime.

When he awoke it was Saturday morning, and without even breakfasting he went to a paint store completely across town from where he lived and explained to the clerk that his so-and-so of a landlord wouldn't paint for him; so he was going to do the job himself and be damned to him.

The man in the paint store was sympathetic. "What color you want?" he asked.

"What color would you advise?"

"What color is it now?"

He picked it out with positive accuracy on a color chart the man showed him.

"Well, your best bet to cover that would be either a medium green or a medium brown," the clerk said. "Otherwise the color on now is going to show through and you'd have to give it two coats.

He thought of the color of dried blood and promptly selected the brown—a sort of light cinnamon with a reddish overtone. Then he bought a like shade of glossy paint for the woodwork, a ladder, and the requisite brushes and mixing fluids. Then he went to a clothing store—not a haberdashery but the sort of outlet that sells work clothes—and purchased a pair of overalls, and added a pair of

gauntlets so that he wouldn’t get any paint under his fingernails. Such a thing could be the devil to pay.

Then he went back to where he’d killed her.

It was only just past mid-morning when he got there. This time he drove off the unpaved roadway, detoured around to the back of the bungalow, and parked directly behind it in such a way that the house itself hid his car.

There was really no need for this precaution. Being Saturday, the neighborhood was empty—no workmen, no residents; but he felt better taking every possible safeguard, even against an unlikely prowler.

Then on foot he circled around to the front and examined the porch before unloading anything from his car. It was just as he had left it. There was every evidence that his gamble had paid off, that no one had come near the bungalow since it had happened. From a remark she had dropped at his place when they were setting up what had turned out to be the murder appointment, he knew she had no telephone. She was on the waiting list but they hadn’t got to her yet. From their old days together he remembered she had never been much of a newspaper reader, so it was extremely improbable she would have regular delivery service, especially in this deserted section. As for milk, there were no signs of that either; she must have brought home a carton from the grocery store whenever she needed it. Finally, the mail slot opened directly into the house itself, so there was no way of telling from the outside whether the mail had been picked up by its recipient or not

There wasn’t a single thing that wasn’t in his favor. He almost marveled at it himself.

He gave another precautionary look around, then opened up the front door with her key, and went in.

For a moment—and for the first time—his heart almost failed him. It looked even worse than he’d remembered from the night before. Maybe he’d been too taken up with

removing her to give it due notice. There was only one wall that was completely sterile. Two more were in bad-to-middling shape. But the fourth was practically marbleized, it had such veins and skeins twining all over it. It resembled nothing so much as a great upright slab of white-and-brown marble.

He could see what had caused the marbleized effect. It wasn't that the blood had spurted of its own accord: it was the strokes of the Samurai sword that had splashed it like that—all over everything.

It was too big a job; he felt he could never swing it.

And then he reminded himself: you got rid of her body, didn't you? If you did that, you can do this too.

He then did another of those incongruous things that he kept doing all the way through. He picked up the shaker from the night before, got out the gin and the vermouth, and made himself two more martinis. He left out the olives though.

Feeling more confident now, he changed to his work clothes. He even took off his shoes and remained in his socks. Paint spots on shoes could be just as hard to remove and just as incriminating as paint underneath fingernails.

When he began the new paint job he realized that he didn't have to be too finicky about it—they couldn't arrest you just because your painting wasn't up to major league standards. The daubing went as fast as a speed-cop's motorcycle on the way with a ticket. Almost before he knew it, he had all four sides done, including the one that hadn't needed it. The latter he threw in by way of artistic flourish. The room would have looked queer with three walls one color and the fourth another.

The ladder folded, the buckets out of the way, the overalls and gauntlets stripped off, he stood in the center of the room and took a comprehensive look at his handiwork—and drew a deep sigh. Not only of relief, but somewhat of cocksure pride.

It might not have been the best paint job that had ever been done, but it guaranteed one thing: the walls were bloodless; the damning stains were completely covered up.

The furniture, of course, was going to be a different matter. Fortunately, it wasn't outsized, the room itself being fairly small. He rolled up the rug and stood it in a comer, just inside the front door.

This part of the program, he knew, would be less arduous than the walls, but it was also going to be a good deal more risky. It necessitated arson.

He slipped out and made a tour of inspection of the skeleton bungalows that sprouted past hers, giving the interior of each one a quick glance.

The first three were too close to hers for his purpose—the inference might be a little too easy to draw. The one at the opposite end was nothing but a gouged-out foundation and poured concrete. The next-to-the-last already had its two-by-fours up, but no flooring or roofing. The next one in had enough wooden construction—plus a lot of shavings—to be ideal: it was like starting a fire in an empty lathe-basket.

Three trips were necessary. He carried the rolled rug, the removable cushions from settee and chair, a small end-table, a parchment lampshade, and whatever else had been stained beyond hope of cover-up, to the unfinished bungalow. He didn't forget to include the suit he had worn the night before. He made a pyre of these, topped it off with the paint-impregnated overalls, gauntlets, and brushes, and poured on the highly-inflammable residue from the paint cans.

Then he drained gas from his car, using a receptacle he'd brought from the bungalow, leaving just enough in the tank to get him home, and liberally doused it not only on the mount itself but on the wood around it.

He turned his car around, facing in the direction he was to go, killed the engine, and sat waiting, looking all around him. Finally he started the engine again, very softly, like a

newborn kitten purring, picked up a furled newspaper, took a lighter out of his pocket, clicked it twice to make sure it was in working order, got out of the car, leaving the door open in readiness, and went inside the unfinished house.

He came out again at a run—this was the first time since he'd killed her that he moved fast—jumped in the car and started off with a surge. He only closed the door after he was careening along, foot tight to the floor. This part of the operation, if no other, was split-second schedule, and not a stray moment could be spared.

For as long as the place remained in sight behind him he could see no sign of flickering flame, of incipient fire. After that—who was around to care?

He got out in front of his own door, locked the car, tossed his keys jauntily up into air and caught them deftly in the same hand.

Upstairs, he sprawled out in a chair, legs wide apart, and let out a great sigh of completion, of finality.

"Now let them say I've killed her." Then, sensibly, he amended it to: "Now let them *prove* I killed her."

II

The Detection—and How They Proved It

They did neither the one nor the other. They started very circumspectly, very offhandedly, in a very minor key—as those things often happen.

A ring at the doorbell.

Two men were standing there.

"Are you—?"

"Yes, I'm—?"

"Like to ask you a few questions. Mind if we come in?"

"Come in if you want. I have no objections. Why should *I?*"

“Do you know a Corinne Matthews?”

“I did at one time.” “When was the last time you saw her?”

“What is this—June, isn’t it? Either later February or early

March. I’m not sure which.”

“Not since then?”

“You asked me a minute ago and I told you. If I’d seen her since then, I’d say so.”

“Not since then. That’s your statement?”

“My statement, right”

“Any objection to coming downtown with us? We’d like to question you in further detail.”

“You re the police. When you ask people to come downtown with you, they come downtown with you. No objection.”

They came back again that evening. He went down again the next day. Then back again, down again. Then—

Down again for good.

Held on suspicion of murder.

A back room. Many different rooms, but a back room in particular.

“I suppose now you’re going to beat the hell out of me.”

No, we’re not going to beat the hell out of you—never do. Besides, we’re too sure of you; we don’t want anything to backfire. Juries are funny sometimes. No, we’re going to treat you with, kid gloves. In fact, you’re even going to wear kid shorts when you squat down in the old Easy Chair.”

“Is that what I’m going to do,” he asked wryly, “for something I didn’t do?”

“Save it,” he was advised. “Save it for when you need it, and you’re going to need it plenty.”

All through the long weary day identification followed identification.

Is this the man who bought a pack of cigarettes from you, and handed you in payment a dollar bill with the print of a

bloody thumb on one side and a print of a bloody forefinger on the other?”

“That’s him. I thought it was an advertising gag at first, the prints were both so clear. Like for one of them horror movies, where they stencil bloody footprints on the sidewalk m front of the heater, to pull the customers inside. I couldn’t help looking at him while he was pocketing his change. I didn’t call him on it because I could tell the bill wasn’t queer, and he acted so natural, so nonchalant. I even saw him sitting out there smoking for a while afterwards. Yes sir, that’s him all right!”

“I don’t deny it”

“Is this the man who bought a can of Number Two russet-brown paint from you? *And* gloss. *And* brushes. *And* a folding stepladder.”

“That’s him.”

“I don’t deny it.”

“Is this the man who bought a pair of overalls from you? And a pair of work gloves?”

“That’s him.”

“I don’t deny it.”

Room cleared of identifying witnesses.

“Then you took the materials you’ve just confessed you bought and went to work on the living room at One Eighty-two.”

“That I don’t admit.”

“You deny you repainted that room? Why, it’s the identical shade and grade of paint you bought from this paint store!”

“I didn’t say I denied it. What I said was, I don’t admit it.” “What does that mean?”

“Prove I painted there. Prove I didn’t paint somewhere else.”

They knew they couldn’t. So did he.

“Show us where you painted somewhere else, then.”

“No, sir. No, *sir.* That’s up to you, not up to me. I didn’t say I painted somewhere else. I didn’t say I didn’t pour it

down a sewer. I didn’t say I didn’t give it away as a present to a friend of mine. I didn’t say I didn’t leave it standing around some place for a minute and someone stole it from me.”

The two detectives turned their backs on him for a minute. One smote himself on the top of the head and murmured to his companion, “Oh, this man! He’s got a pretzel for a tongue.”

The plastic garment bags and their hideous contents were finally located. Perhaps all the way across the country in some siding or railroad yard in Duluth or Kansas City or Abilene. They didn’t tell him that outright, in so many words, or exactly where, but he could sense it by the subtle turn their questioning took.

They had their *corpus delicti* now, but they still couldn’t pin it on him. What was holding them up, what was blocking

them, he realized with grim satisfaction, was that they couldn’t unearth a single witness who could place him at or near the freight yard he’d driven to that night—or at any other freight yard anywhere else on any other night. The car itself, after exhaustive tests and examinations, must have turned out pasteurizedly pure, antibiotically bloodless. He’d seen to that. And the garment bags had been her own to begin with.

There was nothing to trace him by.

Even the Samurai sword—which he had had the audacity to send right along with her, encased in a pair of her nylon stockings-—was worthless to them. It had belonged to her, and even if it hadn’t, there was no way of checking on such a thing—as there would have been in the case of a firearm. Being a war souvenir, it was nonregisterable.

Finally, there was the total lack of an alibi. Instead of counting against him it seemed to have intensified the deadlock. From the very beginning he had offered none, laid claim to none, therefore gave them none to break down. He’d simply said he’d gone home and stayed there,

and admitted from the start he couldn’t prove it. But then they couldn’t prove he’d been out to the bungalow either. Result: each canceled the other out. Stand-off. Stalemate.

As if to show that they had reached a point of desperation they finally had recourse, during several of the periods of interrogation, to stronger measures. Not violence: no blows were struck, nothing was done that might leave a mark on him afterward. Nor were any threats or promises made. It was a sort of tacit coercion, one might say. He understood it, they understood it, he understood they did, and they understood he did.

Unsuspectingly he accepted some punishingly salty food they sent out for and gave to him. Pickled or smoked herring. But not water.

A fire was made in the boiler room and the radiator in one of the basement detention rooms was turned on full blast, even though it was an oppressively hot tum-of-spring-into-summer day. Still no water.

As though this weren’t enough, an electric heater was plugged into an outlet and aimed at his straight-backed chair. He was seated in it and compelled to keep two or three heavy blankets bundled around him. In no time the floor around his feet had darkened with the slow seep of his perspiration. But still no water.

Then a tantalizingly frosted glass pitcher, brimming with crystal-clear water and studded with alluring ice cubes, was brought in and set down on a table just within arm’s reach.

But each time he reached for it he was asked a question. And while waiting for the answer, the nearest detective would, absently, draw the pitcher away—just beyond his reach—as if not being aware of what he was doing, the way a man doodles with a pencil or fiddles with a paperweight while talking to someone. When he asked openly for a drink he was told (for the record): “Help yourself. It’s right there in front of you. That’s what it’s here for.” They were very meticulous about it. Nothing could be proved afterward.

He didn’t get a drink of water. But they didn’t get the answers they wanted either. Another stalemate.

They rang in a couple of ingenious variations after that, once with cigarettes, another time by a refusal of the comfort facilities of the building. With even less result, since neither impulse was as strong as thirst.

“All we need is one drop of blood,” the detective kept warning him. “One drop of blood.”

“You won’t get it out of me.”

“We have identified the remains, to show there *was* a crime—somewhere. We’ve found traces of blood on articles handled by you—like the dollar bill you gave the storekeeper—to show, presumably, that you were involved in some crime—somewhere. We’ve placed *you* in the vicinity of the bungalow: metal bits from the overalls and remains of the paint cans and brush handles in the ashes of the fire. Now all we’ve got to do is place the crime *itself* there. And that will close the circuit.

“One drop of blood will do it. One single drop of blood.”

“It seems a shame that such a modest requirement can’t be met,” was his ironic comment.

And then suddenly, when least expected, he was released.

Whether there was some legal technicality involved and they were afraid of losing him altogether in the long run if they charged him too quickly; whether it was just a temporary expedient so that they could watch him all the closer—anyway, release.

One of the detectives came in, stood looking at him.

“Good morning,” he said finally to the detective, sardonically, to break the optical deadlock.

“I suppose you’d like to get out of here.”

“There are places I’ve liked better.”

The detective jerked his head. “You can go. That’s all for now. Sign a receipt and the property clerk will return your valuables.”

He didn’t stir. “Not if there are any strings attached to it.”

“What do you want, an apology or something?”

“No, I just want to know where I stand. Am I in or am I out—or what.”

“You were never actually under arrest, so what’re you beefing about?”

“Well, if I wasn’t, there sure has been something hampering my freedom. Maybe my shoelaces were tied together.”

“Just hold yourself available in case you’re needed. Don’t leave town.”

He finally walked out behind the detective, throwing an empty cigarette pack on the floor. “Was any of this in the newspapers?”

“I don’t keep a scrapbook. I wouldn’t know,” said the detective.

He picked one up, and it was, had been, and was going to be.

The first thing he did was to phone Allie. She wouldn’t come to the phone—or they wouldn’t let her. She was ill in bed, they said. That much he didn’t disbelieve, or wonder at. There was also a coldness, an iciness: he’d hurt these people badly.

He hung up. He tried again later. And then again. And still again. He wouldn’t give up. His whole happiness was at stake now.

Finally he went back to his own apartment. There was nothing left for him to do. It was already well after midnight by this time. The phone was ringing as he keyed the door open. It sounded as if it had been ringing for some time and was about to die out. He grabbed at it.

“Darling,” Allie said in a pathetically weak voice, “I’m calling you from the phone next to my bed. They don’t know I’m doing it, or they—”

“You don’t believe what you’ve been reading about me?” “Not if you tell me not to.”

“It was just a routine questioning. I used to know the girl a long time ago, and they grabbed at every straw that came their way.”

“We’ll have to change everything—go off quietly by ourselves. But I don’t care.”

“I’ve got to see you. Shall I come up there?”

“No,” she said tearfully. “Not yet. You’d better wait a while first. Give them a little more time.”

“But then how am I going to—?”

“I’ll dress and come out and meet you somewhere.”

“Can you make it?”

“I’m getting better every minute. Just hearing your voice, hearing you say that it was not true—that’s better than all their tranquilizers.”

“There’s a quiet little cocktail lounge called ‘For Lovers Only.’ Not noisy, not jammed. The end booth.”

Her voice was getting stronger. “We were there once, remember?”

“Wear the same dress you did that night.”

It was on all over again. “Hurry, I’m waiting for your hello-kiss.”

He pulled his shirt off so exuberantly that he split the sleeve halfway down. He didn’t care. He shook the shave-cream bomb until it nearly exploded in his hand. He went back to the phone and called a florist.

“I want an orchid sent somewhere—end booth—she’ll be wearing pale yellow. I didn’t ask you that, but what does come after the fifteen-dollar one? Then make it two fifteen-dollar ones. And on the card you just say this—‘From a fellow to his girl.’ ”

And because he was young and in love—completely, sincerely in love, even though he’d killed someone who had once loved him the same way—he started, in his high spirits, in his release from long-sustained tension, to do a mimic Indian war dance, prancing around the room, now

reared up high, now bent down low, drumming his hand against his mouth. “O-wah-o-wah!”

I beat it! he told himself, *I’ve got it made. Just take it easy from here in, just talk with a small mouth—and I’m the one in a thousand who beat it!*

Then someone knocked quietly on his door.

Less than an hour after going to bed, one of the detectives stirred and finally sat up again.

His wife heard him groping for his shoes to put them back on. “What’s the matter?” she asked sleepily. “You want a drink of water?”

“No,” he said. “I want a drop of blood.”

If you couldn’t find a drop of blood in the daytime how are you going to find it at night?”

He didn’t answer; he just went ahead pulling his pants on.

“Oh, God,” the poor woman moaned, “Why did I ever many a detective?”

“Oh, God,” he groaned back from the direction of the door, “what makes you think you have?”

“O-wah-o-wah!”

Someone knocked quietly on his door.

He went over to it, and it was one of them again.

He looked at the intruder ruefully—confidently but ruefully. “What, again?” he sighed.

“This time it’s for real.”

“What was it all the other times, a rehearsal without costumes?”

“Hard to convince, aren’t you? All right, I’ll make it official,” the detective said obligingly, “You’re under arrest for the murder of Corinne Matthews. Anything-you-say-may-be-held-against-you-kindly-come-with-me.”

“You did that like a professional,” he smirked, still confident.

The detective had brought a car with him. They got in it

"This is going to blow right up in your face. You know that, don't you? I'll sue for false arrest—I'll sue the city for a million."

"All right, I'll show you."

They drove to the bungalow that had been Corinne Matthews, and parked. They got out and went in together. They had to go through the doorway on the bias. The detective had him on handcuffs now—he wasn't taking any chances.

The detective left it dark. He took out his flashlight and made a big dazzling cartwheel of light by holding it nozzle-close against one section of the wall.

"Take a good look," he said.

"Why don't you put the lights on?"

"Take a good look this way first."

Just a newly painted, spotless wall, and at one side the light switch, tripped to OFF.

"Now look at it this way."

He killed the flashlight, snapped up the wall switch, and the room lit up. Still just a newly painted, spotless wall, and at one side the light switch, reversed now to ON.

And on it a small blob of blood.

"That's what I needed. And look, that's what I got."

The accused sat down, the accuser at the other end of the handcuffs, standing, his arm at elbow height

"How can a guy win?" the murderer whispered.

"You killed her at night, when the lights were on, when the switch was up like this, showing ON. You came back and painted in the daylight hours, when the lights were not on, when the switch was down, showing OFF. We cased this room a hundred times, for a hundred hours—*but always in the daytime too,* when the lights were not on, when the switch was down, showing OFF. And on the part of the switch *that never showed in the daytime*, the part marked

ON, the way it is now, there was one drop of blood that we never found—until tonight."

The murderer was quiet for a minute, then he said the final words—no good to hold them back any more. "Sure," he said, "it was like that. That's what it was like."

His head went over, and a great huff of hot breath came surging out of him, rippling down his necktie, like the vital force, the will to resist, emptying itself.

The end of another story.

The end of another life.

TOO NICE A DAY TO DIE

Then she went back to where the cushions were, and quite simply and unstudiedly she lay down there, resting the back of her head on them.

There were no symptoms yet. To take her mind off it, she pulled a cigarette out of the package and lit it. Then, as was invariably the case whenever she smoked one, she took no more than two or three slow, thoughtful draws before putting it down on the ashtray and not going back to it again.

She thought of home. “Back home” she always called it whenever she thought of it. But there was no one there to go back to any more. Her mother had died since she’d left. Her father and she had never been very close. He had a housekeeper now, she understood. In any case, she had an idea he much preferred the unfettered company of his cronies to having her back with him again. Her sister was married and had a houseful of kids (three by actual count, but they seemed to fill the place to spilling over point), Her brother was doing his military hitch in West Germany, and he wasn’t much more than a kid anyway.

No, there was no one for her to go to, anywhere.

It was beginning now. This was it. She wasn’t drowsy yet, but she had entered that lulled state just preceding drowsiness. There was a slight hum in her ears, as if a tiny mosquito were jazzing around outside her head. It was too much effort to go ahead thinking things out any longer. She

wouldn’t beg the masked faces in the crowd for a friendly look any more. She wouldn’t hope for the slot in the letterbox to show white any more. She wouldn’t wish for the telephone to ring any more. Let the world have its wakefulness—she’d have her sleep. She turned her face to one side, pressed her cheek against the cushions. Her eyes drooped closed. She reached for the soaked cloth, to put it across them, so that they would stay that way.

Then she heard the bell ringing. First she thought it was part of the symptoms. It was like a railroad-crossing signal-bell, far down a distant track, warning when a train is coming. She contorted her body to try to get away from it, and found herself sitting up dazedly, propped backward on her hands. Consciousness peeled all the way back to its outermost limits like the tattered paper opening up on some circus-hoop that has just been jumped through.

It burst into sudden, crashing clarity then. It was right in the room with her. It was over there in the corner. It was the bell on the telephone.

She managed to get up onto her feet. The room swirled about her, then steadied itself. She felt like being sick for a moment. She wanted to breathe, even more than she did just to live, as though they were two separate processes and one could go on without the other. She threw the two windows open one after the other. The fresh air suddenly swept into her stagnant mind tingling like pine-needles in a stuffy place. She remembered to close off the key under the gas-burner in the kitchen-alcove.

It had never stopped ringing all this while. She stood by it, stood looking at it. Finally, to end the nerve-rack of waiting for it to stop by itself, she picked it up.

The voice was that of a woman. It was slightly accented, but more in sentence-arrangement than in actual pronunciation.

“Hello? It is Schultz’ Delicatessen, yes?”

In a lifeless monotone Laurel Hammond repeated the question word for word, just changing it to the negative. “It is not Schultz’ Delicatessen, no.”

The voice, hard to convince, now repeated the repetition in turn. “It is not Schultz’ Delicatessen?”

“I said no, it is not.”

The voice made one last try, as if hoping persistence alone might yet result in righting the error. “This is not Exmount 3—8448?”

“This is Exmount 3—8844,” Laurel said, with a touch of asperity now at being held there so long.

Unarguably refuted at last, the voice became properly contrite. “I must have put the finger in the slot the wrong way around. I’m sorry, I hope you weren’t asleep.”

“I wasn’t, yet,” Laurel said briefly. And even if I had been, she thought, it wouldn’t have been the kind you could have awakened me from.

Still coughing a little, but more from previous reflex now than present impetus, she hung up.

It took a moment for it to sink in. Then she began to laugh. Quietly, simmeringly, at first. Saved by Schultz’ Delicatessen. She wondered why there was something funny about it because of its being a delicatessen. If it had been a wrong-number on a personal call, or on a call to almost any other kind of establishment, there wouldn’t have been anything funny in it. Why was there something ludicrous about a delicatessen? She couldn’t have said. Something to do with the kind of food they sold, probably. Comedy-food: bolognas and salamis and pigs’ knuckles.

She was laughing uncontrollably now, almost in full-blown hysteria. Tottering with it, tears peering in her eyes; now holding her hand flat across her forehead, now over her ribs to support the strain of the laughter. No joke had ever been so funny before, no near-tragedy had ever ended in such hilarity. She only stopped at last because of physical exhaustion, because she was on the verge of prostration.

You couldn’t go back and resume such a thing, not after that kind of a farcical interruption. Your sense of fitness, your sense of proportion, alone—any life, even the most deprecated one, deserved more dignity than that in its finish. She turned on the key under the burner again, but this time she lit a match to it. She put on water, to make a cup of tea. (The old maid’s solace, she thought wryly: trade your hopes of escape for a cup of tea.)

I’ll see it through for one more day, she said to herself. That much I can stand. Just one more. Maybe something will happen, that hasn’t happened on all the empty, barren ones that went before (but she knew it wouldn’t). Maybe it will be different (but she knew better). But if it isn’t, then tomorrow night—she gave a shrug, and the ghost of a retrospective smile flitted across her face—and this time there’ll be no Schultz’ Delicatessen.

She spent the vestigial hours of the night huddled in a large wing-chair, looking too small for it, her little harmonica-sized transistor radio purring away at her elbow. She kept it on the Paterson station, WPAT, which stayed on all night. There were others that did too, but they were crawling with commercials, this one wasn’t. It kept murmuring the melodies of *Roberta* and *Can-Can* and *My Fair Lady*, while the night went by and the world, out there beyond its dial, went by with it. She dozed off finally, her head lolling over like a little girl’s propped-up asleep in a grown-up’s chair.

When the sun made her open her eyes at last, she gave a guilty start at first, thinking this was like other days and she had to be at the office. But it wasn’t. It was the day of grace she’d given herself.

When she was good and ready, and not before, she called the office and told Hattie on the reception-desk: “Tell Mr. Barnes I won’t be in today.” It was after ten by this time.

Hattie was sympathetic at first.. “Not feeling too good, nn?”

Laurel Hammond said, “As a matter of fact, I don’t feel too bad. I feel better than yesterday.” As a matter of fact, she did.

The girl on the reception-desk still tried to be loyal to a fellow-employee. “You want me to tell him you’re not feeling good though, don’t you?” she asked anxiously.

“No,” said Laurel, “I don’t. I don’t care what you tell him.”

The girl on the reception-desk stopped being sympathetic. She was up against something she couldn’t grasp. She became offended. “Oh,” she said, “just like that you take a day off?”

“Just like that I take a day off,” Laurel said, and hung up.

A day off, a lifetime off, forever off, what difference did it make?

Shortly before noon, with a small-sized summer hat on her head and a lightweight summer dress buoyant around her, she closed the door behind her, put the key in her handbag, and stepped out to meet the new day. It was a fine day too, all yellow and blue. The sky was blue, the building-faces were yellow in the sunlight, and the shady sides of the streets were indigo by contrast. Even the cars going by seemed to sparkle, their windshields sending out blinding flashes as they caught the sun.

Where did you go on your last day in New York? That is, on your *last day* in New York? You didn’t walk Fifth Avenue and window-shop, that was for sure. Window-shopping was a form of appraisal for the future, for a tomorrow when you might really buy. You didn’t go to a show. A show was an appraisal of the past, other people’s lives in the past, dramatized. A walk in the park? That would be pleasant, pastoral. The trees in leaf, the grass, the winding paths, the children playing. But somehow that wasn’t for today either. Its very tranquility, its apartness, its *lostness* in the center of the buzzing, throbbing city, she had a feeling would make her feel even more apart, more lost, than she felt already,

and she didn’t want that. She wanted people around her; she was frightened of tonight.

She got on a bus finally, at random, and let it take her on its hairpin crosstown route, first west along Seventy-second, then east along Fifty-seventh. Then when it reached Fifth and doubled back north to start the whole thing over, she got off and strolled a few blocks down the other way until suddenly the fountain and flower-borders of Rockefeller Center opened out alongside her. She knew then that was where she had wanted to come all along, and wondered why she hadn’t thought of it in the first place.

It was like a little oasis, a breathing-spell, in the rush of the city, and yet it was lively, it wasn’t lonely in the way the park would have been. It was filled with a brightly dressed luncheonbreak crowd, so thick they almost seemed to swarm like bees, and yet in spite of that it was restful, it was almost lulling.

She went back toward the private street that cuts across behind it, which for some highly technical reason is closed to traffic one day in each year in order to maintain its non-public status, and sat on the edge of the sunwarmed coping that runs around the sunken plaza, as dozens of others were doing. She’d come here once or twice in the winter to watch them ice-skate below, but now the ice was gone and they were lunching at tables down there, under vivid garden-umbrellas. Above, a long line of national flags stirred shyly in a breeze mellow as warm golden honey. She tried to make out what countries some of them belonged to, but she was sure of only two, the Union Jack and the Tricolor. The rest were strange to her, there were so many new countries in the world today.

And in every one of them perhaps, at this very moment, there was some girl like herself, contemplating doing what she was contemplating doing. In Paris, and in London, yes and even in Tokyo. Loneliness is all the same, the world over.

Her handbag was plastic, and not a very good plastic at that, apparently. The direct sunlight began to heat it up to a point where it became uncomfortable to keep her hand on it and she could even feel it against her thigh through the thin summer dress she had on. She put it down on the coping alongside of her. Or rather a little to the rear, since she was sitting slightly on the bias in order to be able to take in the scene below her. Then later, in unconsciously shifting still further around, she turned her back on it altogether, without noticing.

Some time after that she heard a curt shout of remonstrance somewhere behind her. She turned to look, as did everyone else. A man who up to that point seemed to have been striding along rather more rapidly than those around him now broke into a fleet run. A second man sprang up from where he'd been sitting on the coping, about three or four persons to the rear of her, and shot after him. In a moment, as people stopped and turned to look, the view became obstructed and they both disappeared from sight.

It was only then she discovered her handbag to be missing.

While she was standing there trying to decide what to do about it, they both came back toward her again. One of them, the one who had given chase, was holding her handbag under one arm and was holding the second man by the scruff of the coat-collar with the other. What made this more feasible than it might otherwise have been was that the captive was offering only a token resistance, handicapped perhaps by his own guilty conscience.

"Whattaya trying to do? Take your hands off. Who do you think *you* are?" he was jabbering with offended virtue as they came to a halt in front of Laurel.

"Is this yours?" the rescuer asked, showing her the handbag.

"Yes, it is," she said, taking it from him.

“You should be more careful,” he said in protective reproof. “Putting it down like that is an open invitation for someone to come along and make off with it.”

The nimble-fingered one was quick to take the cue. “I thought somebody had lost it,” he said artlessly. “I was only trying to find out who it belonged to, so I could give it back to them.”

“Oh, sure,” his apprehender said drily.

A policeman materialized, belying the traditional New York adage “They’re never around when you want them.” He was a young cop, and still had all his police training-school ideals intact, it appeared. Right was right and white was white, and there was nothing in-between. “Your name and address, please?” he said to Laurel, when he’d been told what had happened.

“Why?” she asked.

“You’re going to press charges against him, aren’t you?”

“No,” she demurred. “I’m not.”

His poised pencil flattened out in his hand. He looked at her, first with surprise then with stern disapproval. “He snatched your handbag, and yet you’re not going to file a complaint?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I’m not.”

“You realize,” he said severely, “you’re only encouraging people like this. If he thinks he can get away with it, he’ll only go back and do it some more. Before you know it, this city wouldn’t be worth living in.”

“You shouldn’t be so good-natured, lady,” another woman rebuked her from the crowd. “Believe me, if it was me, I’d teach him a lesson.”

Yes, I guess you would, thought Laurel. But then, you have a whole lifetime ahead of you to show your rancor in. I haven’t enough time left for that.

The prisoner had begun to fidget tentatively now that this unexpected reprieve had been granted him. “If the lady

don’t want to make a complaint, whaddye holding me for?” he complained querulously. “You got no grounds.”

The quixotic young cop turned on him ferociously. “No? Then I’ll find some, even if I have to make it loitering!”

“How could I be loitering when I was running full steam ah—” the culprit started to say, not illogically. Then he shut up abruptly, as if realizing this admission might not altogether help his case.

“Oh, won’t somebody get me out of this, please!” she suddenly heard herself say, half in wearied sufferance, half in rebellious discontent. She didn’t want to spend the little time there was left to spend standing in the center of a root-fast, cow-eyed crowd. Above all, she didn’t want to spend it making arrangements to have some fellow-wayfarer held in a detention-cell overnight until he could be brought before a magistrate in the morning. She hadn’t meant it for anyone to hear; she’d only meant it for herself. A plea to her own particular private fortunes of the day and of the moment.

But the man who had salvaged her handbag must have caught it and thought it was meant for him. He put a hand lightly under her elbow in guidance and opened a way for her through the ever-thickening crowd.

“Sure you won’t change your mind, lady?” the cop called after her.

“I’m sure,” she said without turning her head.

Once detached from the focus of attention, they continued to walk parallel to one another along the flower-studded, humanity-studded promenade or mall that led out to the Avenue. Past and past.

“You let him off lightly,” he remarked. “Not even a lecture.”

She nodded meditatively, without answering. It’s so easy to be severe, she thought, when you’re safe and intact and sure of yourself, as you probably are. But me, I feel sorry for

the whole world and everyone in it, today, even that poor cuss back there.

“I remember, in Chicago once,” he was saying, “I had my wallet lifted out of my back pocket right while I was standing in line outside the ticket-window in Union Station —”

They’d reached the Avenue. With one accord, without even a fractional hesitancy or break in stroll, they turned and continued on northward, back along the way she’d originally come. It was done as unself-consciously as though they’d known each other long and walked along here often. As naturally as though they had a common destination agreed upon beforehand.

She noticed it after a moment, but didn’t do anything to disrupt it. On any other day, she realized, she would have been alerted, taut to separate herself from him. Not today. Until he said something, or did something, that was out of order—not today. It was better to walk with somebody, than to walk with nobody at all.

“—Things like that happen in all large cities, far more than they do in smaller places. I guess the huge crowds give them better cover.”

“Aren’t you from a large city yourself?”

“We like to think of ourselves as a medium-large city, but we’re willing to admit we’re no Chicago or New York. Indianapolis.”

“Oh, where the speedway races are.”

“Our only claim to fame,” he said mournfully.

“I suppose you used to go to them regularly.”

“I never missed a year until this year, and then I couldn’t go because I was here. I saw it on t.v., but it wasn’t the same. Like a midget-race around a twenty-one-inch oblong.”

Suddenly and quite belatedly—for if she’d had any actual objections they would have manifested themselves long before now—he turned to ask: “I’m not bothering you by

tagging along like this, am I? I never realized I was until this very—”

“That’s quite all right,” she said levelly. “It’s not a pick-up. And if it were, I’d be the one who did the picking.”

“Nothing of the sort,” he asserted stoutly.

That was the conventional, the expected, answer, she recognized. But in this case it also happened to be true. A pick-up was a planned selection. This had been anything but that; un planned, unsought-after, by both of them.

“Been here long?” she asked him, to get off the prickly topic.

“About six months now. I was transferred here to the Company’s New York office.”

She asked him a question out of her own melancholy experience. “Did you find it hard to adjust?”

“Very. I was king, back home. The only fellow in a houseful of women. I got the royal treatment. They spoiled me rotten.”

That, she decided, was not apparent on the surface, at least.

“My mother spoiled me because I was the only son in a family of girls. (My eldest sister’s married and lives in Japan.) My elder sister spoiled me because she looked on me as her kid brother, and the younger one looked up to me as her big brother. I couldn’t lose.”

“And what did you do to entitle you to all this?”

“Brought home money, and could always be depended on to fix the car or the t.v. without calling in costly repairmen, I suppose.”

“That’s fair enough value received,” she laughed.

They’d reached Fifty-seventh Street. This time they did stop, but not to part, to decide what next to do, where next to go, together. They both seemed to have tacitly agreed to spend the balance of the afternoon together.

“Have lunch with me,” he suggested. “I haven’t had any yet, have you?”

“It’s late; don’t you have to go back to the office?”

“I have the day off. The Company’s founder died, an old man of eighty. He hasn’t been active in years, but out of respect to his memory all our offices everywhere were closed down for one day.” He repeated his invitation.

“I’m not hungry,” she said. “But I am thirsty, after that stroll in the sun. I’ll take you up on an ice-cream soda.”

They turned west for a short distance and stopped in at Hicks, at her suggestion. She waived a table, and they sat down at the counter.

“I stop in here every Christmas—or at least, the day before—and buy myself a box of candy,” she told him.

His brows rose slightly, but he didn’t say anything.

“I have to,” she added simply. “Nobody else does.”

“Maybe next time around,” he said very softly, “you won’t have to.”

She had a chocolate malted and he a toasted-ham and coffee.

They walked on from there and entered the park at the Sixth Avenue entrance, and drifted almost at a somnambulistic gait along the slow curving walk that paces the main driveway there, then finally straightens out and strikes directly up into the heart of the park itself, toward the Mall and the lake and the series of transverses.

Now they were becoming more personal. They spoke less of outside things, of things around them and things on the surface of their lives, and more of things lying below and within themselves. Not steadily, in a continuous stream, but by allowing occasional insights to open up, like chinks in the armor that was each one’s privacy and apartness. Thus she learned many of the things he liked, and a few he didn’t, and he learned them too about her. And surprisingly many of the things they liked were the same, and not a few of the things they didn’t, also.

We’re remarkably compatible, the thought occurred to her. Isn’t it too bad we had to meet—so late.

It’s not so late, she said to herself then, unless you will it to be so. And a daring thought barely ventured to peer forth around the corner of her mind, then quickly vanished again: it needn’t be late at all, it can be early, if you want it to be. Early love, first love.

“What were you doing six months ago today, exactly to the day?” she asked him suddenly.

“It’s difficult to pin-point it that closely. Let’s see, six months ago I was still back in ‘napolis. If it was a weekday, then I was slaving over a hot draught-board until five; after five I was driving back to the harem. If it was a Sunday I was probably out driving in the crate with some seat-mate.”

Anyone special? she wondered, but didn’t say it.

“Why did you ask that?”

She upped a shoulder slightly. “I don’t know.”

She did, though. How different my life might have been, she couldn’t help reflecting, if I’d met you—as you seem to be—six months ago instead of today.

“Do you get lonely at times, since you’ve come to New York?”

“Sure I do.” Then he reiterated, “I sure do. Anyone would.”

“It’s easier for a man, though, isn’t it?”

“No it isn’t,” he told her quietly. “Not really. Oh, I know, girls think that a man can go a lot of places they can’t, by themselves. And he can. But what does he find when he goes to those places? Loud, laughing companionship for an hour-or for an evening. Did you ever know, you can be lonely with someone’s loud laughter ringing right into your ear? Did you ever know?”

She had a complete picture, a vignette, of his life now, of that one aspect of it, without his having to say anything further.

“No,” he said, “we’re in the same boat, all of us.”

They sat down on a bench overlooking the lake. They didn’t talk any more for a while. After a time an indigent

squirrel spotted them, made toward them by fits and starts, looked them over from a propitiatingly erect position, then scrambled up to the top-slat of the bench-back and ran nimbly across it. She could feel the fuzz of its tail brush lightly across the back of her neck. It stopped by his shoulder and sniffed at it inquiringly. “Sorry, son,” he said to it. They both looked at it and smiled, then smiled to each other. Completely matter-of-fact, and far too venal to waste time allowing itself to be petted empty-handed, it dropped down to the ground again and went lumbering off bushy-tailed across the grass.

The irregular picket-fence of tall building-tops around them on three sides in the distance looked trim and spruce and spotless as new paint in the sunshine. Much better than when you were up close to them. It was a brave city, she decided, eyeing them. Brave in its other sense; not courageous, so rriuch as outstanding, commanding. It was too nice a town to die in. Though it had no honeysuckle vines and no balconies and no guitars, it was meant for love. For living and for love, and the two were inseparable; one didn’t come without the other.

By about four in the afternoon they were already using “Laurel” and “Duane” when they said things to each other. Sparingly at first, a little self-consciously. As though not wanting to abuse the privilege each one had granted to the other. The first time she heard him say it, a warm, sunny feeling ran through her, that she couldn’t contradict or deny. It was like belonging to someone a little, belonging to someone at last. While at the same time you at last had someone who belonged a little to you.

There is no hard and fast line that can be drawn that says: up to here there was no love; from here on there is now love. Love is a gradual thing, it may take a moment, a month, or a year to come on, and in each two its gradations are different. With some it comes fast, with some it comes slowly. Sometimes one kindles from the other, sometimes

both kindle spontaneously. And once in a tragic while one kindles only after the other has already dimmed and gone out, and has to burn forlornly alone.

By the time they left that consequential bench overlooking the tranquil little lake tucked away inside the park and started walking slowly onward in the general direction of her place, she was already well on the verge of being in love with him. And she sensed that he was too, with her. It couldn't be mistaken. There was a certain shyness now, like a catch, she heard somewhere behind his voice every time he spoke to her. The midway stage, the falter, between the assuredness of companionability and the assuredness of openly declared love. And when their hands accidentally brushed once or twice as they walked slowly side by side, he didn't have to turn his head to look at her, nor she to look at him, for them both to be aware of it. It was like a kiss of the hands, their first kiss. The heart knows these things. The heart is smart. Even the unpracticed heart.

They were beginning to be in love. The very air transmitted it, carried it to and fro from one to the other and back again. It had perhaps happened to them so quickly, she was ready to admit, because they both came to it fresh, wholehearted, without ever having known it before.

The June day was slowly ebbing away at last, in velvety beauty. The twin towers of the Majestic Apartments were two-toned now, coral where they faced the glowing river-sky, a sort of misty heliotrope where they faced the imminent starting point of night. The first star was already in the sky. It was like a young couple's diamond engagement-ring. Very small, but bright and clear with promise and with hope.

New York. This was New York, on the evening of what was to have been the last day in the world—but wouldn't be now any more. It had been a lovely day, a nice day, too nice a day to die.

They emerged at the Seventy-second Street pedestrian outlet, and sauntered north along Central Park West for a few blocks, until they'd arrived opposite the side-street her apartment was on. There they waited for a light, and crossed over to the residential side of the great artery, on which the headlights of cars in the deepening dusk were like a continuous stream of tracer-bullets aimed at anyone with temerity enough to cross their trajectory. There they stopped and stood again, a little in from the corner—in what they both hoped was to be only a very temporary parting—for she had to cross once more, to the north side of the street, to reach her door.

For a moment he didn't seem to know what to say, and for a moment she couldn't help him. They both turned their heads and looked up one way together. Then they both turned the opposite way and looked that way together. Then they looked at each other and they both smiled. Then the muteness broke too suddenly, and they both spoke at once.

"Well, I guess this is where—"

"Well, I suppose this is where—"

Then they laughed and there was no more constraint.

She knew he was going to ask her to dinner—the first of all the many that they'd most likely share together—and he did. First she was going to agree with ready willingness, and then she remembered the things that were waiting upstairs. Waiting just as she'd left them, from last night. Waiting dark and brooding all through the sunny, glorious day—for tonight. The pillow on the floor, the cigarette-dish. The little bowl of water with the handkerchief still soaking in it, the blindfold that was to have shut out the sight of death. She shuddered to think of them now. But more than that, she didn't want them to still be there if she brought him up with her. She wanted to go up ahead and quickly disperse them, do away with them.

“Look, I’ll tell you what,” she said animatedly. “The next time—the very next—we’ll go to a restaurant, if you want to. But tonight let’s do this: let’s eat in. It’s a good night for cold-cuts.” She knew he wouldn’t misunderstand if she had him up so soon after meeting him; she already knew him well enough to know that. “I want you to go to Schultz’ Delicatessen, and pick up whatever appeals to you—I’ll leave that to you—and bring it up to the apartment. I’ll make the coffee.”

“Schultz’,” he said dutifully. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted with a chuckle and a handspread. “But I know you can find it in the directory. I can give you the number. It’s Exmount 3—8448. It’s the same as my own number, just twisted around a little. Promise me you won’t go anywhere else. Only Schultz. I have a very special reason for it. I don’t want to tell you what it is right tonight, but some day I will.”

“I promise. Schultz’ and nobody but Schultz.”

They separated. She started across the street on a long diagonal. She turned and called back: “Don’t take too long.”

“I won’t,” he answered.

Then she turned unexpectedly a second time.

“I forgot to give you the apartment-number. It’s Three—”

It was a big black shape. It was less like a car than an animal leaping at its kill. It was feline in its stealth, and lupine in its ferocity, big malevolent eyes blindingly aglow. Whether its occupants were drunk, or crazed with their own speed, or fleeing from some misdeed, it gave her no warning. It came slashing around the corner like the curved swing of a scimitar.

She was caught dead-center in front of it. Had she been a little to one side, she might have leaped back toward her companion; a little to the other, she might have leaped forward to the safety of the empty roadway alongside it. She tried to, but at the same moment it swerved that way, also trying to avoid her, and they remained fixed dead-

center to one another. Then there was no more time for a second try.

She didn’t go down under it. It cast her aside in a long, low parabola. Then it slowed, then it stopped, with a crazy shriek that sounded like remorse. Too late.

She lay flat along the ground, but with her head propped up by the sharp-edged curbstone it had crashed against. The sound it had made striking was terminal. There could be no possibility of life after such an impact.

And it had been too nice a day to die.

IT ONLY TAKES A MINUTE TO DIE

Why he wanted to kill him need not be brought within the compass of this story. It would drag it too far back—through too many long, brooding, rancorous, and sick-minded years for it to be cohesive. And a story must have a concise starting point, otherwise it becomes just a formless loose-leafed casebook. All that need be said is that he wanted to kill him, he did kill him, and he botched it—and now let the story begin.

Names are not too important—they are only labels used to differentiate people. It is the action stemming from given characteristics within a given situation that counts more as identification, that brings forward the individual personality. And since one played the part of the killer, and one the part of the dead, let them be known as Killare and Dade. That will characterize them beyond all doubt. The killer and the dead.

As he stood there waiting for the bus he'd missed that night, Killare wasn't even thinking of this man he'd dedicated himself to kill. It was one of the few times, night or day, that he wasn't. A skin-teasing, mosquitolike rain was needling him, and it felt more like icy pollen than rainwater. His collar was turned up, his hat brim down, he was chilled and getting more chilled by the minute. His shoes were starting to squirt instead of scrape when he scuffed them.

The bus must have broken down along the way, and had to be taken off the run and towed back to the garage. Which meant there would only be one more coming along after that—the buslines closed down for the night at 1:00 a.m. and didn't start rolling again until 5:00 in the morning and the last bus wouldn't get to his stop until about 1:15 or even later.

He turned and looked around despairingly for some kind of shelter to tide him over during the wait he foresaw coming up. He was standing out in front of a corner residential hotel. He el noticed it when he first halted at the bus stop, but hadn't given it a second thought since.

Now as he looked again he caught sight of a small, neat neon sign with the word *Bar* on it posted above a separate doorway to one side of the main entrance. Also he noticed that the doorway was flanked by a number of lighted windows that looked out on the very stretch of sidewalk he was standing on.

He decided to do his waiting in there, and warm up while he was about it—that is, if he could find some place to sit that would let him keep an eye on the bus-stop zone outside. He walked over and went inside. It was a happy little place, warm and restfully lighted and sprightly—not raucous, but with the sound of soft-spoken voices. And his luck was working—the end seat at the bar, the one nearest the windows, was vacant. Probably because all the rest were taken up by couples, and this happened to be an odd seat, one left over.

He sat down on it, ordered a short but stiff bourbon, and as he slowly started to glow back to welcome warmth again, he kept his head turned, watching the sidewalk outside the window, which the rain kept covering with a patina of little disappearing pinpricks all the time, no two of which ever landed in the same spot twice. They looked like a swarm of drowning bees.

Finally, to ease the strain on his neck muscles, he turned around and glanced the other way, down the line of people extending along the bar. Man and girl, girl and man, two men, man and girl. Just then, at the opposite end of the barline, a man stood up to leave. This brought his head and shoulders up two or three feet higher than those of everyone else. If it hadn't been for that, the man would probably never have attracted Killare's attention or been given a second look, among all those people and in that subdued light.

But standing head and shoulders above everyone else like that, he caught Killare's eye. Killare focused it on him, Killare gave him a double-take, Killare recognized him.

And it was he, Dade, the man it had become his daydream and nightmare to kill.

If he had any doubts about it, the barman clinched it for him. "Good night, Mr. Dade," he said in a voice clearly audible above the confidential conversations going on all around. "Stop by and see us again sometime."

Dade nodded, said a word or two to the man in the next seat, then turned and went out. Not through the street door by which Killare had come in, but through a door at the opposite side of the bar—a door which led inside to the hotel lobby.

So he had a room right here in the hotel, Killare thought, noticing that Dade didn't have a hat or coat with him. And now that an extraordinary coincidence had dropped Dade right in his lap, he wasn't going to brush him off like an ash or a stray crumb; he was going to take advantage of it.

Killare put a dollar down on the bar top, got up, and went in the same direction Dade had gone. He didn't hurry or try to overtake him; he went at the same casual pace Dade had moved.

He turned right outside the door as he had seen him do.

He found himself in an intimate little side corridor, groomed with crystal prisms and white-leather banquettes.

It opened onto the main lobby, and he stopped there and hung back a moment. The desk was a little offside, not in a direct line, and Dade was standing in front of it.

He heard him say, “Can I have the key to Room 212, please.”

The clerk said, “Good night, Mr. Dade,” as he handed it to him.

Killare turned and doubled back out of sight. Not all the way, for he might not have been able to make it in time without Dade getting a glimpse of him. But everything seemed to be working out just right for him, to unroll as smoothly as in a dream. A dream about murder.

There was a pay telephone booth to one side of him, and all he had to do was edge into that and sit down on the little slab-seat. It obviously had a light to go with it—a light that usually went on automatically; but even this was on his side. The electric bulb was burned out.

There were a few moments’ wait. Then Killare heard the elevator panel slur open, click closed, and Dade had gone up.

Killare came out of his cranny and went over to the desk.

“I just missed the last bus,” he mourned as the clerk looked up.

This was literally true, but the clerk misconstrued it, just as Killare had wanted him to, and thought he meant an out-of-town or commutation bus. “Would you like a room?” he offered. “We’d be glad to have you with us.”

“You’ve saved my life,” Killare smiled. (“And cost somebody else his,” he refrained from adding.) “I like a low floor, as low as I can get. How about the second?”

“I’m sure we can fix you up with something.”

“Do you have a line of Number 13 rooms in this hotel?” Killare asked craftily.

“No, we’re superstitious. We skipped over them,” the clerk smiled.

“All right, how about 214 then?”

The clerk checked his file. “Sorry, Room 214 is occupied.”

“Well, 211 then?”

“I can give you that,” the clerk nodded, after checking a second time.

Killare thought: I haven’t given him a chance to realize yet how I’ve been fishing for one particular location; in a minute or two, after I’ve gone up, it’ll start to sink in, what I did just now. So I’d better take the sting out of it by beating him to it, and explaining it myself. Better mv own harmless explanation, freely given before it happens, than his own dangerous inference, put on it after it has happened.

“I met an old acquaintance I haven’t seen for years, in the bar just now. Mr. Dade. We’ve planned getting together over breakfast in the morning—that’s why I asked for a room near him, on the same floor.”

“How long will you be with us, just the one night?” the clerk asked as Killare signed in.

“How long is Dade staying?”

“Until the day after tomorrow.”

“Then I may as well stay over a second night myself, now that I’m here,” Killare told him. “I’ve got some important business to attend to.”

He needed the next day to get the gun. He’d decided long ago it should be a gun, and only a gun. A gun was tidy, swift, and usually successful. Knives were messy, and impact weapons like crowbars and wrenches and bludgeons—they got matted with gore and hair; and besides, they could be warded off by a sudden twist or turn of the body. A gun, now, that was a man’s weapon, and this was a man’s killing.

He’d paved the way for the gun long ago; he knew where to get it, whom to get it from, and how much it was going to cost him to get it. But he hadn’t wanted to get it until he was ready to use it; it was an illegal gun, it had to be, and to carry it around on him for any length of time beforehand was too risky—it would be asking for trouble in the worst way. Even to keep it hidden somewhere on his own

premises was no longer safe. The police now had this new break-in-and-search procedure, which didn't stand back to wait for warrants, and you could never tell when they were going to spring it on you. Violence that had become almost an everyday commonplace in the city had in turn brought about police methods that were often not strictly out of the lecture room or official handbook.

So the gun was his for the asking and paying—he'd already seen it and handled it; but he needed the extra day to get it. He hadn't had the faintest idea he was going to meet Dade that night, and in this unlooked-for way.

"Take this gentleman up to Room 211," the deskman instructed a bellboy.

The door to Dade's room was squarely, point-blank opposite his own, he saw when he got up there. And the separation wasn't the width of the main corridor, but of a side corridor. He could step from his door to Dade's without putting down the same foot twice.

Lingering behind a moment while the bellboy fiddled around the room, he imagined he could even hear Dade's breathing coming through the opposite door, with the cloying heaviness of approaching sleep.

Sleep tight, he wished him grimly. It's your last night on earth for doing so. Tomorrow night this time you'll be sleeping in a different way—cold and doughy and smelling of formaldehyde.

The bellboy went out, and Killare picked up the phone without a minute's waste of time, almost before the door had latched back into place, and asked for a number. It was in the Yellow Pages, but you wouldn't have found it if you'd looked under "Guns."

There was an unusually long wait, as though the telephone was ringing in the back of somewhere. The back room of somewhere. Then even after the connection opened up, there was nothing—no voice, no one said anything. As though the person standing by it was very cagey, very wary

about answering his calls, didn't even like to commit himself to a noncommittal "Hello" until he had some idea who was calling.

Finally, to break the deadlock, Killare said, "How about it? You there?"

"Whosis?" came back a guarded voice—so guarded it was barely allowed to pass through the speaker's lips.

"Remember me? I was in there a couple of times about—something."

"I don't remember you," the voice said peremptorily. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I am—" Killare started to elaborate. '

The voice cut him off almost hysterically. "Look, no names! There could be woodpeckers somewhere along the line. Tap, tap, tap—you know? Everybody has them nowadays," he went on. "Even housewives."

"This has nothing to do with your regular business. It's something we discussed on the side."

"Oh," the voice said, enlightened. "Now I know." The voice sounded almost relieved, as though bargaining over the sale of an illegal gun was a mere nothing, a bagatelle, compared to the man's main-line occupational hazards.

"You know that package?" Killare said. "That package you're holding for me? I'm coming around to pick it up. I have to have it tomorrow. I'm coming around tomorrow about five."

The voice was still determined to play it safe. "A lot of people leave packages in my care that I don't know anything about. It's like I was running a parcel service. Sometimes they never show up again, sometimes they show up a year later and expect me to remember." Which would be his "out" if the gun were ever to be traced back to him; Killare got that. "You could come around here tomorrow at five, like you say, and I still wouldn't know you from Adam." Which was an oblique way of saying, All right, come ahead around at five; and Killare understood that too.

“Even if you brought four hundred dollars with you, I still wouldn’t know you.” And he understood that too.

Killare gave an unmirthful laugh. “Price has gone up, I see.”

“When you want a thing bad it always goes up.”

“I want it bad,” Killare said to himself.

He was well satisfied as he hung up. The man on the other end made him smile, with his melodramatic antics, his stage waits on picking up the phone, his cryptic conversations, and the rest of his cover-up gymnastics—all of which were as out of date in today’s hard-shelled, gear-stripped world as a man’s opera cape or a mushroom-shaped helmet on a cop. The police themselves would have been the first to laugh at him. The man probably had read too many dime novels when he was a boy, or else he had an ineradicable sense of guilt about not having stayed honest, which expressed itself in this form. But he was reliable. He delivered the goods—when you laid cash on the line.

Nothing to do now but raise the money and wait. And strangely enough, he enjoyed the waiting too. It made him feel twice as good. It added a spice to the enterprise. It was like doing it over twice, once in contemplation and once in commission.

He stretched out across the threadbare sofa in one long, straight, unbroken line from the top of his head to the backs of his heels, and made a cushion of his clasped hands and placed them at the back of his head for a head-rest. A little table-top radio beside him, which he had flicked on, warmed up and cut in with almost bull’s-eye patness on a deep-throated woman growling a blues: *“There’s gonna be some shooting like there never was befoa, And the undertaker-man is gonna knock upon his doa—”*

“Sing it, lady, sing it,” he urged.

It may feel bad at first when you’re wronged or damaged or trampled on in some way there’s no forgiving, but it feels

good later to kill the man you hate for doing it to you. It sure feels good, he exulted.

It feels like a drink on the house.

It feels like a Cadillac all your own.

It feels like when the dice come up with your point, and the floor is papered with other people's money.

It feels like when a beautiful blonde runs her fingers through your hair, and then throws away her shoes because she says she's never going to walk away from there again.

It feels even better than all those things put together.

When he returned to the hotel at eleven the next night, he had the gun.

Dade wasn't back in his room yet—he could tell because he glimpsed the key still sticking out in the mail box adjoining his, when he stopped at the desk to pick up his own. Not that this was an infallible guarantee; most hotels kept spares in their mail boxes, in case a guest locked himself out and had left the key inside the room.

He preferred it this way—Dade not yet in. It could give him time to get things warmed up inside of him.

He went into his own room, closed the door, and made the few, very minor preparations there were indicated—and they were far less complicated and taxing than those required on many less crucial occasions, he reflected.

First, he adjusted his door so that it could open at one clean sweep, without the interruption hitch of freeing the latch by turning the knob, and without the accompanying warning sound this would give. In other words, the door was left open a narrow crack—but this couldn't be detected unless it was peered at closely from either side.

Next, he took the telephone directory, which each room was supplied with, from under the nightstand and stood it up on end against the wall just inside the door, in readiness for its particular use. To make it even more suitable to the

purpose he had in mind for it, the hotel had encased each directory in its own stiff binding, with the name of the hotel and the room number stamped at the top. The binding made the directory rigid and unbendable.

Finally, he checked the gun—but this was purely a fidget reflex, not a necessity, for it had been turned over to him in perfect readiness.

After that he spent the time walking aimlessly around the room—not wanting to sit down, for some unfathomable reason—touching various objects at random as he passed them, without even knowing he was doing so. Now the edge of the dresser, now the comer of the bed, now the back of a chair. Once he turned off a lamp as he went by it, then immediately turned it on again in the course of the same stride. A number of times he tightened and loosened his necktie, and once he lifted his foot to the arm of a chair, and undid, then retied the shoelace. All for some unknown reason.

The behavior pattern of a particular man passing the time while waiting to commit a murder.

The one thing he did not do was the one thing he might have been expected to do the most—smoke. Perhaps he did not want to be caught with one in his hand, if Dade unexpectedly showed up, and not know what to do with it, where to put it. Even infinitesimal things like that can throw a timetable off balance.

His excitement was very great—it would be a lie to say it wasn't; but equally it was under very great control. Besides, it wasn't an unwelcome excitement: it was a buoyant, uplifting one. It was a heady feeling, like the kind champagne gives. It was the feeling an actor has just as he's about to go onstage; a prizefighter when he's about to step into the ring; a racing-car driver when he's about to open up the throttle; a parachutist when he's about to dive out the hatch. It was Exhilaration—the benzedrine of the psyche.

A little short of 1:00 a.m. he heard the sound of a cab driving up at the street entrance, and wondered if it was Dade; but he didn't go to the window to look. If it was, then he'd find out when Dade got up here, and if it wasn't it wasn't.

But it was. After a couple of minutes' interval he heard the scuff of a step come up to the door across from his own. He widened the crack in his door just enough to frame one eye in it, and saw Dade standing there with his back to him, putting his key to his door. He wasn't staggering, ballbearing-kneed drunk, but he'd had a couple—you could tell that by the formless little tune that was simmering under his breath, and if nothing else that meant his reflexes would be slower by that much.

Everything was on Killare's side. Everything, everything. There never was such a stacked murder before.

The act of entering a room by opening up a closed door ordinarily entails three separate stances or directional pivots, although it is such an habitual act, performed so many times a day, that no one ever gives it that much thought. First, you face the door and open it. Second, you enter and turn around to face the direction in which the door is going to close. Third, you close it back to where you found it. It is simple, but it does have these three moves to it, which are usually run together as if they were one continuous motion.

Killare caught him neatly between the first and the second positions, right where the split was, right where the joint was. Dade had the door open, he was in through it, and he was just turning. Killare's door sluiced open without a hindering latch-break, and Killare aimed his telephone directory at the opening across the way and slid the thick book full force along the floor. It went in just right, dead center, in the groove, and jammed there.

Before Dade had time to react by more than just a bugged look downward, trying to understand what the

inexplicable obstacle was to closing his door, Killare had straddled the directory with a scissoring spread of his legs and was inside Dade's room with him.

He did the two things now that Dade hadn't had the coordination to do for himself in time: he kicked the slablike directory back out of the way into a corner of Dade's room, and he closed Dade's door. But from the *inside*—which made all the difference in the world. The gun had come out, somewhere during the course of his inleap, and immediately took charge of Dade's numbed reflexes.

"Now don't open your mouth to make any noise," he said with taut tonelessness, "because I'll let this go at you.

"And don't move your hands anywhere near me," he added. "Keep them by you where they belong."

Dade didn't open his mouth; he seemed unable to.

Killare went on talking, as if he found it a necessity to. "Those're the only two things you've got to remember, and then everything'll be all right," he cautioned him. Which was a false promise, but then there was no future beyond the next minute for one of them, and a promise by its very nature lies in the future.

"And don't be nervous about it," he warned him. "Because if you are, then you'll get me nervous too. And if I get nervous, then I won't be able to control myself. Just take it easy—that's the best thing for both of us."

Dade, through lips that were as loose as a rubber band—and almost about the same color—finally managed to quaver, "What is this? Is it money you're after?"

"No questions," Killare said curtly. "No conversation, I'm not going to tell you that a second time." And he lifted his thumb away from the gun, as if it were itching him, then allowed it to fall back again.

"Where's the bathroom?" he asked him.

Dade nudged toward it with his head, afraid now to talk any more.

"Go in there and put on the light."

Dade did.

“Now turn on the water full force—both taps, the hot and the cold. The tub, not the shower.”

He wanted this to deaden the dialogue. And to diminish the shot—when it came. Water running down inside a shower stall makes only a hissing sound. Water tumbling into the resonant hollow of a tub makes a deep booming sound. It pounded like walloping drumbeats.

He had to pantomime him outside again by head motion, since the rushing water drowned out their voices at that distance.

Even outside in the room Killare had to step closer to him than before, in order to speak and be heard, but he kept the gun beyond the orbit of any hand-swinging snatch, and that was what counted.

In stories and in television pictures men are continuously charging against guns and their holders, and overthrowing both; but in real life it doesn’t work that way. The only kind of man who would charge a pointed gun is not a brave man, but a fool.

“Now start getting undressed for bed, just like you would any other night. Put your things where you always put them.”

Dade discarded his outer clothes, seeming to have twenty fingers that got in each other’s way. He stood there holding the garments up like a jittering clothes-tree.

“Where do you put your coat and pants ordinarily, on other nights?” Killare demanded impatiently. He had to lean toward Dade’s ear a little to ask it, so that, ludicrously, it made it seem as if the information imparted was a secret.

“I put the coat on a hanger in the closet, and I attach the pants by their cuffs to that pants holder on the side of the door.”

“Well, do it, then. Don’t stand looking at me.”

After Dade had swung open the closet door, Killare kicked a chair over against it to hold it pinned back, so that Dade

couldn’t suddenly shut himself into the closet away from the gun.

“Don’t you take things out of your pockets?” he said sarcastically. “I do.”

Dade dumped out a pocket key-case with a snapdown cover, a wallet, a fistful of loose change, a ball-point pen, a warped package of cigarettes, a clean handkerchief, an unclean handkerchief, and two books of matches, all onto the dresser top. One rebellious quarter rolled off and landed on the floor.

“Let it lie there,” Killare instructed. “Looks more natural.”

“Now what do you do with your shirt?” he prodded, like a headmaster in some boy’s prep school trying to teach personal neatness. Only in this case the penalty wasn’t a demerit; it was death.

“I put on a fresh one every morning, so I just throw the used one across a chair.”

“Just throw it across a chair, then. And your necktie?”

“I change according to the shirt. So I just spread it out on the dresser, until I’m ready to take out another.”

“Spread it out on the dresser, then. Now get into your pajamas.” Dade turned a little to one side, self-conscious about stripping in front of a stranger.

“Now go over to the desk there. Sit down and put on the desk light . . .

“Now take out a sheet of notepaper, an envelope, and a pen . . . “What’s your wife’s first name?”

Dade shuddered uncontrollably; you could only see it from the back, the way he was sitting.

“Patricia,” he whispered, as though he were all out of breath.

“Turn around. I can’t hear you on account of the water.”

Dade turned and said it again. He looked as if the thought of her was making him feel ready to cry.

“What do you call her around the house?”

“Pat.”

“Then write this: ‘Dear Pat—’ ”

Dade wrote, Killare back of his shoulder reading as he wrote. “ ‘It’s no use, I can’t go on—’ How long you been married?”

“Fifteen years.” He said it with what sounded like a sob, but with the water pounding in the bathroom you couldn’t tell; it might have been a wet-hiccough sound.

“ ‘—after fifteen years. To have you tell me you’re in love with someone else and want to leave me is more than I can take.’ ”

Dade flashed him a white look over one shoulder, then turned back again, as the gun suggested with an almost imperceptible lift.

“ ‘I’m going to let you have your freedom, Pat, but not the way you think. This way.’ ”

Killare arched his back to scan what had been written.

“Make your handwriting shake a little more,” he criticized. “It looks too steady.”

“I don’t know how, on purpose,” Dade said with a haggard face.

“Try it. This ought to help you do it.” Killare twisted the bore of the gun, like an awl, flush against the nape of Dade’s cringing neck. The next specimen of handwriting came out spidery and agitated.

“ ‘I love you, Goodbye.’ . . .

“Now sign your first name . . .

“Now fold it over and put it in the envelope . . .

“Now seal the flap . . .

“Now write on the outside: ‘Kindly deliver to my wife.’ . . .

“What’s that on your finger, a wedding ring? Take it off and put it on the envelope.”

Dade had a hard time with it. “It hasn’t been off in fifteen years,” he said wistfully.

“Spit on it,” Killare ordered.

It came off with a jerk.

“Now have you got a snapshot of her in your wallet? Go over and get it.”

Dade tried to show it to him on the way back, as if hoping it would soften him. Killare didn’t look at it.

“Put that on top of the note too . . .

“All right, that’ll do it. Now come over here and sit down on the edge of the bed. No, don’t turn the covers down, you’re not going to get into it.”

Dade was unmanageably crying by now. His eyes were bright, and a shiny puddle had gathered in each comer without spilling over. The sight of the ring and the snapshot had probably hit him in his weakest spot.

“Die like a man,” Killare said scathingly. “Not like a sniffling schoolboy. It only takes a minute to die. What’s so big about it?

“Now swing your legs up onto the bed. That’s it. Take off the top one of those two pillows, and hand it over to me.”

Killare took it from him and shoved it under his own arm, temporarily.

“Now lie back on the other one. Put your head back on it and look straight up. No, don’t do that!” he warned suddenly.

Dade’s control began to shred. “I can’t take any more,” he moaned. “You do it too slow. Hurry, if you’re going to, only hurry. I can’t hold out any more.”

A scream of hysteria was trying to form and escape from him, far too late and far too useless. His mouth rounded into a noiseless

O. He put one hand over it, fingers spread out like spokes. Then he put the other hand over that, fingers also spread. It looked as if he was kissing some kind of a squirming baby octopus. Or munching it.

“Look straight up,” was the next to last thing Killare said to him. “See that spot on the ceiling? That one there? Keep watching it.”

He let his whole body fall forward on top of him, using the pillow as a buffer between them, obliterating Dade's face under it. Pressing it down hard at both sides. Then quickly releasing one side, but only to force the gun under the pillow, and fire into the middle of Dade's face.

Dade's legs quirked up, in motor-reflex response, fell back again, and that was all. He never made another move.

When Killare took the pillow off, which he did at once, he could tell Dade was dead. But so newly so, so just-now so, that the last breath was just coming out of his widened mouth, with no more behind to follow it. And his eyes were just dimming closed, to spring open again and stay that way forever.

The hole had gone right between the eyes. It was a beautiful shot, considering that it had been fired blind.

He pulled Dade's head up a little, using the collar ends of his pajama jacket as a halter to raise it by, in order not to have to touch the head itself, which he was squeamish about doing, and inserted the second pillow underneath again.

He did things to the gun the importance of which he was personally contemptuous of and which he felt to be greatly overrated; but for the sake of prudence he decided he might just as well be doubly sure: namely, he cleaned off both sides by scouring the gun diligently up and down one trouser leg, then held it thereafter with a scrap of tinfoil extracted from a package of cigarettes.

He tried to hook Dade's index finger around the trigger guard and let the gun hang that way. One of Dade's arms was dangling loose over the side of the bed. But the finger was not yet rigid as in rigor mortis, yet not resilient as in life; it was simply inert, and the gun kept sliding off and falling down.

He finally lifted the whole arm up over the body, and attached the gun there, and the body itself held it in place.

There was very little else to be done. He noticed a slab-shaped pint bottle of whiskey, nearly full and probably left over from the night before; he poured a little into a tumbler and stood it beside the bed close to Dade's head. Then he poured the rest up and down the bed and body, in flicking, criss-cross diagonals, giving Dade a last fling, so to speak. Or a requiem.

Then he let the bottle fall down empty, wherever it happened to fall—but not until he had made certain that none of his own fingerprints were on the glass or the bottle.

Then he went in and with a handkerchief wrapped round his hand, turned off the two apoplectic bath-taps. The stopper hadn't been set, so there was no danger of an overflow, but the continuing uproar might have finally attracted attention outside in the hall and brought about an investigation.

Then he went out and closed the door firmly after him.

And it was all over, just as easy as that.

All done with.

Finished.

He drew a vast sigh of unutterable, boundless release. He'd never felt so good before, never in his whole life. They told you that people were frightened after doing a thing like this, scared sick, that they sweated, panicked, didn't know which way to turn. Well, either they didn't know what they were talking about, or these were a different kind of people—weak, unsure; or perhaps they hadn't hated hard enough, as much as he had.

The others—the weak ones—shouldn't have done it in the first place. They weren't meant for murder—except on the receiving end. Because now all he felt was a supreme sense of well-being, placidity, repose; the calm after the storm. The way you feel when you come off the massage table in a Turkish bath, with every muscle encased in velvet and every nerve resting on rose petals.

Six long years of pent-up hate had been swept away, all in the space of a single minute (“It only takes a minute to die,” he’d said), and now he was shiny-new again, whole again, his own man again, free to lead his own life again.

He stood there by the window, his hands expansively in his pockets, teetering buoyantly on the balls of his feet, up and then down again, up and down. He stood there by the window, but he wasn’t looking out; he was looking inward, at himself, and he was content with what he saw. Love can’t hold a candle to murder, when it comes to emotional intensity and satisfaction. Not little fly-by-night, potshot murders in the course of a holdup, no; but a murder like this, like his, the goal of six years of hoping, planning, waiting, seething, living with it, almost dying with it.

He could have checked out then and there; there was nothing to keep him in the hotel any longer. But he thought, why mar an otherwise perfect accomplishment by a single false note, when it isn’t necessary? To check out at two in the morning from a room directly opposite the one in which a man will be found murdered is bound to be remembered afterward. But to check out at nine in the morning, perhaps after an innocent-looking attempt to call the dead man’s room to suggest they have breakfast together—that would be a master stroke of tactics, of bravado.

He couldn’t have been expected to hear the shot; other rooms nearby were occupied, the clerk had said, and the people in those rooms obviously hadn’t heard it. And there was no way in which he could be placed in the murder room—no way at all.

Yes, the clever thing to do was to stay on, normally, naturally. And it took no courage to do it, as he found when he proceeded to do so. He unslung his necktie, without taking it off; even, presently, asked for bar service and ordered a double bourbon sent up to the room.

He was amazed, after he’d finished it, to find himself actually nodding, dozing off, in the chair in which he was

sitting. He picked himself up, went over to the bed, and lay down on it, without taking off his clothes, only his shoes.

He wouldn't have believed it was going to happen, but the next thing he knew he opened his eyes and it was past nine in the morning. There was an unusual amount of subdued coming and going immediately outside his door, even for a bustling little hotel, and he saw that he'd slept for six hours, deeply, dreamlessly.

He wondered if anyone had ever done that, in the whole history of the world, after doing what he'd done the night before.

After he had showered and shaved—the hotel provided its male guests with little complimentary shaving kits, in case they were caught without their own, as he had been—he stuck his head out the door and took a quick, inquiring look. No harm in that, anyone would have, with the amount of traffic going on in and out the opposite door. At that particular moment the door across the corridor happened to be closed, but there was a conspicuous *Do Not Disturb* sign dangling from its knob. It was still jittering from its last swing back and forth. There was a low sound of voices going on in the room.

He shut himself in again, hesitated briefly, then picked up the phone and said casually, "Room 212, please."

The girl was patently disconcerted by it. She gave a noticeable breath-catch, said, "One moment please," and then went offside, apparently to ask instructions about what to do.

When she came back again she said, "I'm sorry, I can't reach Room 212 just now."

You bet you can't, he thought grimly.

"Do you care to leave a message?"

"No, nothing important," he said indifferently, and hung up. It would have involved leaving his name, and that would have been going a little too far. But the indifference in his

voice wasn’t put on; it was a genuine indifference—he really felt that way.

He decided to soak in, luxuriate in the sensation of complete immunity he had—to enjoy it, to play it up for all it was worth.

So he went to the phone and ordered breakfast sent up to his room. A big breakfast, with all the trimmings. It was a time to celebrate, to indulge himself.

It arrived remarkably quick, in less than ten minutes, but when he opened the door in answer to the knock, instead of breakfast he got two detectives.

They announced what they were, then came on in without waiting to be asked.

They began questioning almost before the door had closed behind them.

“Did you hear any sounds in the room opposite you—212—at any time during the night?”

“Not a thing. I slept like a log,” he said. Which was the truth.

“Mind if I use your phone?” one of them then said.

“Go right ahead.” But he wondered why they hadn’t used the one in the murder room, which was just a few steps away.

“What’s that number again, Barney?” one of them now asked the other.

His partner answered, “You’re a very absent-minded guy, Jack. Can’t even keep a telephone number in your head.”

Killare somehow received the impression that the conversation was completely insincere and meant only for his benefit.

“I’ll look it up,” the first one said. “Got a directory in here?” he asked Killare.

“Sure, help yourself.”

“Where is it?”

Killare saw the hole opening under his feet.

But there was nothing he could do.

He went tumbling in headlong, beyond all escape and all recovery.

The book wasn't in here. It was in there.

"You better come along with us," was the next remark. No more questioning, no more fooling around. All business now—deadly business.

"We checked every room on this floor. Every room but two has one directory in it. Standard equipment. *One* room has *two* in it. Where he died. One has *none*. This one."

They took a half-tum twist in his coat sleeve, one on each side of him.

"That doesn't place me in there," he said stubbornly. "How do you know it belongs in here? It might have come from somewhere else."

"Each directory is in a special hotel-binding. With the hotel's name stamped on the top of it. And the number of the room it belongs in. The second one in there has 211 at the top big as life."

One of them closed the door after the three of them with his free hand.

The *Do Not Disturb* sign on the opposite door seemed to mock Killare as he went past it. It even quivered a little with the draft from their passing—the way a person shakes a little when he's laughing to himself.

MANNEQUIN

As usual Leone was well in advance of the nightly seven o'clock stampede to quit work and go home. She was the first of them all to reach the bronze statuette with its spray of flesh-colored light-bulbs at the foot of the stairs on the main floor, while the rest of the girls were still only working their way down from the upper floors. Their clamor could be heard coming down the staircase ahead of them, they were like a bunch of noisy school-children when the dismissal-bell has rung.

"Take it easy there!" a voice ordered with phony severity as her feet came off the last step onto the marble floor with a flat, slapping impact. Startled, she turned her head around, but without stopping, for seven o'clock was seven o'clock. It was only the lift-boy, grinning at her. "Who for? You?" she called back with arrogant unconcern as she rushed on ahead to meet the evening.

Then she remembered just in time, and stopped short while still shielded by the projecting stone-trim framing the street-entrance. Cautiously, she extended just the tip of her nose and the width of one eye out beyond it for a moment's precautionary look beforehand out where she intended going.

There he was again, big as life, waiting a few yards down the sidewalk from her, shoulders leaning back up against the building-wall. She had an unappealing (to her, anyway) glimpse of a loose-fitting knee-short olive gabardine

topcoat, of a yeast-pallid complexion with a cigarette stuck into it, like a thermometer taking its owner's temperature.

Every night now for—how long? More than a week, wasn't it? And maybe even longer, for most likely she hadn't noticed him right away from the start.

She'd had men hang around and follow her before—every girl does—but not like this. They'd close in after a short distance, a few yards, a block or two, tip their hats, make an opening remark—and promptly get brushed off good and solid. He didn't do anything like this: never came any closer, never spoke or tried to speak to her. And most significant, and most unsalubrious, of all, after one or two long, hard, almost-paralyzing stares on the earlier nights, now he pretended not to be looking at her at all. She could never catch his eyes, even though she knew they had been on her only a second before, making her own respond in automatic reflex. It was this part of it that was the scariest and creepiest part of the whole thing. Being stalked is one thing, but this turned it from an amatory into a jungle-kind of thing.

In other words, he didn't give her any chance to defend herself. How can you defend yourself when no offense has been committed—yet?

What did he want with her? What was it all about? Was he one of these screws, these oddballs, that get their kicks just looking at girls from a distance without going near them at all, and then go home and dream their dirty little dreams?

Whatever he was and whatever it was he was after, he kept gaining ground, encroaching on her more and more as night followed night, while still keeping the distance between them fixed and unbridged, as it was now. The first couple of nights, for example, she'd managed to disengage herself from him at the crowded bus-stop where she took her bus, simply by waiting until the last possible moment before she jumped on, and thus leaving him stranded back

there in the crowd. After that he knew which bus she took, so it wouldn't work any more. Then she shook him off by a reverse twist, maneuvering so that she succeeded in keeping him *on* the bus while she bolted off it without warning at her rightful getting-off place, and he was sent riding on foolishly past her to a destination that hadn't even been his in the first place. But it was a hard thing to do, and now he knew her right departure-point this wouldn't work a second time either. From there on it, it was a case of following her along the street at a carefully held-back distance, just enough to keep her in sight the whole time, and seeing which house she went in. She knew he was back there somewhere every step of the way, even though she couldn't see him at all times. All that remained now was for him to come up openly to the door and try to get into the house after her. And the moment he did that, the tables swung all the way around and the law was suddenly over on her side.

But for tonight at least the problem remained, there before her, a few yards away.

She had to get the bus to go home down that way, past him. If she turned and went up the other way, she stood a good chance of slipping away unnoticed, he might not recognize her from the back. But this meant walking around all four sides of a very long block, in order to get back to where the bus-stop was. And after a hard day, on her feet most of the time since early that morning, she couldn't face the thought. A better idea suddenly occurred to her. She turned and went back in again, almost as quickly as she had come out just now. She had to fight her way upstream against the surging tide of girls who were now pouring out the front entrance.

"Forget something, Leone?" a passing voice asked.

She didn't bother to answer.

She accosted the lift-boy whom she'd passed a moment ago on her way out. "Emile, are you finished with that

newspaper you have stuck in your back-pocket?”

“Not quite,” he said reluctantly. “I don’t get much chance —”

She reached out and pulled it away from him anyway. “Don’t be so stingy. I’ve shared parts of my lunch with you often enough, haven’t I?”

“All right, keep it,” he consented grudgingly. “Since when are you getting so studious? Next thing, you’ll be reading a book.”

She went back to the outer edge of the doorway again, keeping herself in just far enough out of sight of the waiter staked-out out there. She folded the paper over three times, so that it had bulk enough to stand upright by itself without sagging over at the top. Then she raised it to the approximate level of her face, covering the side of it that would have to pass closest to him, and held it that way with one hand. As if she was reading with her head turned aside to the paper, while she was walking along. It looked a little grotesque, but not to the point of conspicuousness.

She looked behind her and waited until a group of three had come out together, all going the same way obviously because they had their arms linked in comradely relaxation after the long hard working-day. She attached herself to them with a long swing around to their outermost side, and the four of them passed him abreast. Looking under the bottom of the newspaper, she could see his shoes standing there up against the building.

Curious, how you could read shoes, what they could tell you. She had never thought of this before. And in this particular instance, it was a shivery kind of lore. Shoes could indicate a whole bodily movement, could even indicate thoughts, even though you couldn’t see any of the rest of the person, from the insteps up.

Black shoes, these were. Not expensive, plenty rundown. They’d been around a lot, today and every day. They had a patina of dust all over them. The hubs had a line of

perforations running around them and in the center a design like a musical clef-sign, she wasn't sure what it was called.

One was flat on the ground toe-to-heel, the way any shoe usually is. The other, crossed over in front of the first, was balanced on its toe, the heel lifted clear. The fixed waiting position, waiting for her to show up, waiting for her to pass by. And as she did so, it went back to where it belonged, on the opposite side of its mate, and flattened out. The readying position: he sees someone. Is it me? Sure. Who else would, it be? Now she was past. Looking backward, but still from under the newspaper's bottom, the hubs of both had swivelled, pointing themselves after her. The alerted, about-to-start-out position.

It hadn't worked. She hadn't really expected it to. It was just, she hadn't known what else to do, what other way to try to cover up.

Oh God, she thought with a sickish sinking sensation in her stomach, do I have to have *that* all over again now for the rest of the evening, until I can pull my flat street-door closed after me?

She couldn't look back any more, not without turning her whole head around, which would have given her away (she was already given away, to him anyway: he had singled her out, he had isolated her from the rest of the crowd; what she didn't want to give away was the fact that she was on to this, knew that he had spotted her; she wanted to hang onto this one last flimsy buffer for whatever slight advantage there might possibly be in it). She didn't have to look back anyway, to know that if he hadn't already started on the prowl after her, he was going to from one minute to the next.

I may live a long time, I may live only a short one, she told herself with a bitter inward shudder, but somehow I'll never again be able to look at a pair of men's shoes and not have a little bit of recollection of tonight come back to me.

At the corner she diverged from the other three. They kept going straight ahead, and she turned aside and went over to where the bus-stop was, just a little past the intersection. It was packed, this was the time for it to be that, and she wedged herself into the bee-swarm of people standing there all clustered together. Then later-comers, who kept coming every moment, closed her in and soon she was in the very core of the mass. You couldn't see anyone's shoes, there wasn't spread enough above to look down.

The first one wasn't hers, and then the next one was. She debated whether to hang back and let it go by. But this wouldn't fool him, he'd already been on it with her, he'd only hang back himself and let it go by. And of the two evils, she didn't want to be left there with him in a smaller crowd, or in no crowd at all. Which would soon happen if she let too many go by.

It was so packed you couldn't get inside it any more, but she managed to get onto the round back-apron, which was left open except for a guard-rail, so that people actually bulged out over its sides. She put her newspaper up alongside her face again, this time with a weary, disheartened gesture, as if to say, what good is this doing me? Her head inclined a little, as part of the same mood.

Alongside her were a pair of snub-toed mouse-colored pumps. And over right next to them—hubs with a design like a musical clef-sign. Like a handwritten capital S with a slanting line through it.

The stops came and the stops went past, and they all quivered and jittered a little in unison, like in a toned-down version of that dance that once was called "the twist." Electricity turned the sidewalks into a dazzling beach, so that even the particles of sand mixed into the cement glittered like spilled sugar. Red, blue, green, white neons warred and clashed in a long perspective that finally ended with a blurred, flashing, spinning Catherine-wheel-effect as its focal point. Inside lighted show-windows wax figures

engaged in Leone's own profession, that of modeling clothes, stared down their noses haughtily at the real people going by. Most of the show-windows were oblongs, but a few were ovals with the excess space left-over outside their frames blacked-out, as if you were looking into a magnified peephole. Then as they left the more affluent section of the city behind and gradually worked their way into a lower-income district, these status-symbols became fewer and finally disappeared altogether. A movie-theater marquee blazed up like a real, live fire licking up the walls in back of it, proclaimed GIGI for an instant, and then was gone again as suddenly as it had appeared.

A teen-ager on a bicycle caught hold of something on the back end of the bus, lifted both legs to a near-horizontal position, and let it do her work for her and tow her along, blonde pigtailed hair slapping up and down behind her. The man sitting beside the nearest window to her turned his head her way and cautioned her with a typical middle-aged mildness. She gave a wild yell of derision for an answer, let go, and began to pedal madly and to actually outpace the bus and pull ahead of it. It was starting to slow for a stop ahead, anyway.

People had to get off, and this dispersed the pattern of the feet arranged around Leone as they pushed their way through and past them. Then when it had re-formed itself again, she saw that he had taken advantage of the wider amount of space now offered to move—not closer to her still, but further away, all the way over beside the opposite platform-railing. He was holding onto one of the upright stanchions and staring studiedly out and away from her on that side of the bus. All she could see was the back of one ear-rim and the nape of his-neck. And a very thin sliver of profile, thin as the peel of an onion.

This was his technique for throwing her off-guard, for trying to keep her from noticing him, for seeming not to be doing the very thing he was doing. And it was a poor,

pitifully poor technique indeed, she said to herself scornfully. What kind of a fool did he take her for, to expect her not to be aware of him, when he was always somewhere in the background, wherever she went, whichever way she turned. He must be a dope, among all the other things he was. But in this kind of a situation, she reminded herself apprehensively, dopes can be a real danger, rather than not.

He had the inevitable cigarette fixed in his mouth, that he never seemed without, as though it were a part of it, like a malformed tooth projecting. Smoking wasn't permitted, even on the open, back parts of the buses, and for a moment she wondered half-hopefully if this mightn't be a means of having him thrown off. Then she saw that it wasn't burning, it was dry, and the conductor noticed it too at the same time. She could tell that by the way he craned his neck out a little, to get a look around to the front of the offender's face, then went back to his own affairs again without saying anything. But what it indicated was an implicit breaking of rules and disregard for restraints, an outlaw-type of attitude. And that, too wasn't a good factor to have involved in a situation like this.

Her face was white and stony-hard with a mixture of fear and hostility, the fear of the pursued, the hostility of the put-upon, that marred and muddied all its usual good-looks. Her nerves were being drawn more taut all the time. Each evening she felt less confidence than the evening before, felt more of a desire for no reason at all to run and hide away. At times she could feel approaching panic lapping over her feet like a cold slowly-rising tide that had to be held back, fought down. One of these times, if it kept up too much longer, control would burst and she would suddenly scream out in the middle of everyone and everything and go all to pieces.

And so the bus swept along, like a majestic ocean-liner, scattering the shoals of taxis and lesser cars before it as

though they were tugs, while he looked out on his side at the buildings streaming endlessly by, and she looked down on her side at the platform-floor and brooded, eyes intent and furtive.

Her stop was coming up, there were only fixed stops on the buses, not improvised bell-signalled ones like in some other large cities, and the usual cat and mouse play was about to begin. Each one waiting to see the other move first. He didn't turn his head around, she didn't lift hers up from looking at the floor, and yet there was an electrical current of awareness going back and forth between them that almost prickled the skin and made stray hairs stand up singly.

She could feel the bus come to a stop under her feet with a soft slurring sensation and then a final shudder, and she heard the conductor call out the name of the stop.

She didn't move a muscle, didn't blink an eye. The shoes with the clef-signs were inert over there too.

It was no use trying to pin him onto the bus by waiting to the last minute and then jumping for it. He could do that far easier than she could, with her stiletto-heels. She might fall and turn her ankle or something.

She suddenly came to life and gave herself a push away from the railing by main force, almost like a violent fling around the other way, like when you cannot tear yourself away from something, have to exert every ounce of will-power to do so. And sprang down to the ground just as the bus got started once more.

She didn't have to turn around to see if he had followed her off; she knew he had. She knew what he was doing now, because he had done it each time before. He would stand there at first, kill time there, so that she could get far enough up the street, put enough distance between them, to make his coming after her less conspicuous. In other words, so that he wouldn't be treading right at her heels. Her street was straight and sloped slightly upward, so that

it was perfect for his purpose: he could keep her in sight without any difficulty from a distance of a whole block behind her.

His ways of marking time until she had gained enough of a lead were various. She had seen him do each one in turn, so she knew what they were. One was to gaze steadfastly in the direction in which the bus had gone, as if he intended walking along that way himself. Only he never did. Another was to actually start out in the reverse direction from her, going down the other way. Only to turn and retrace his steps once she was far enough off. One time he had gone behind a kiosk with a circular outer shell papered with colored three-sheets that stood on the twin corner to the bus-stop. From below the protective outer-rim, she could see his shoes standing there motionless, as she made her way up the sidewalk on the other side of the street. But they were pointed the opposite way. They were pointed outward. That told her it was a sham, in itself.

At the head of the second block to her flat—there were only two between it and the bus-stop—there was a neighborhood place where she always stopped in to eat when she came home from work. It couldn't be dignified by being called a restaurant, although it did have three or four little round white pedestal tables ranged along one wall. But these were mainly for reading your paper over a beer, or playing checkers, or honking, your concertina, for a quiet evening's relaxation. Everybody sat at the counter. It was run by a husband-and-wife team; she did the cooking, and he did the carrying and setting-out. The prices were sensible, for people who didn't have money to throw around.

Leone always sat on the third stool from where you came in. For no reason, just one of those little human habits that soon become fixed and firm. It became known as "Leone's stool." If it was taken when she came in, and she had to sit

somewhere else, as soon as it was vacant she would move herself and her food back over to it again.

I shouldn't have to put up with it, she kept telling herself while she sat there waiting for her order to be prepared. But if she went up to a policeman and complained, That man keeps following me everywhere I go, she knew what the outcome would be. Has he come up to you and spoken to you? No. Has he stopped you in any way? No. And even if he were halted and questioned, she knew what the answer there would be, after he gave his side of it. He has a right to take the same bus you do. The buses are free for anyone to ride on. He has a right to walk along the same street you do. The streets are free for anyone to walk on. And the policeman would stroll off with a rebuking shake of his head.

If he would only *do* something, that I could get my teeth into! she whimpered inwardly. But he was just like a shadow. And like a shadow, he left no mark.

When she had eaten, she opened her handbag to pay for the inexpensive little meal, which had been fish, because it was a Friday. (She didn't claim to be a *good* Catholic, but she did claim to *try* to be one as far as possible, without going overboard.) What was left-over in the bottle, of the wine that had come with it, he put away for her for the next night. She wasn't a drinker.

While she was waiting for her change to come back, she held the top flap of her handbag propped up and looked at her face in the mirror which was pasted to the underside of the flap. It was more a reflex of habit than a conscious, act, an inattentive idle, manipulation without any real meaning. And then suddenly she looked more closely, a second time. For, in the mirror, she saw not one face but two. Her own and—her persecutor's. Hers was in the foreground, enlarged, so that just a cross-section of one eye and cheek showed. His was in the background, a small-scale, peering in through the eating-place window. Yellow in the face of

the light and shaped like an inverted pear. Or like a child's toy balloon beginning to sag because of losing some of its air. She couldn't see any of the rest of him, his face seemed to hang there disembodied against the night, to one side of the reversed letters E F A. Perhaps this was because he was bending over sideward to look in, and the rest of his body was offside to the plate-glass. It made him look like an apparition, a hallucination. Then suddenly, as he sensed that he had caught her eye, his face vanished.

She drew a deep breath of helpless frustration. Every move she made, watched. Every mouthful she swallowed. And she couldn't fight back, shake him off, there was no way. "He has a right to glance into a restaurant-window as he's passing by outside, anyone does," they would say.

He had a right to go here, he had a right to go there, he had a right to do this, he had a right to do that. He had a right to do everything, it seemed. But he didn't have a right to make her life miserable like this and put such fear into her like he was doing now!

She banged her empty coffee-cup down into its saucer so angrily that the owner of the place heard the sound and came over to her.

"What's the matter, coffee no good?" he queried solicitously. She was a good, steady, nearly-everynight customer, and he didn't want her to be displeased.

"It's not the coffee that's the matter, it's something else that's the matter," she answered gloomily. "I was just thinking to myself, that's all."

He shrugged and spread his hands out, much as to say: Well, we each have a right to our own problems, after all.

She got up and went over to the door, and looked around from there, before stepping outside. Gone. There was no sign of him. Or more likely he was covered up in some doorway, and she couldn't distinguish him from here.

There was very little distance left to cover now, but she liked this last lap least of all. On the bus, there were people.

In the eating place, there was the proprietor. But the street was not an overly-populous one, and this last had to be made all by herself, strictly on her own.

She almost ran the final few yards until she got safely to her own door. She blew a breath of relief. “Made it once more,” was the thought in her mind. And the inevitable corollary to it was, But some night I won’t. The pitcher goes to the well once too often.

One foot safely within the open door, she leaned back far enough to turn her head and scan the street, down along the way she had just come from. Nothing, no one. But in a black door-embrasure a few houses down she thought she saw a wavy line that ran up and down one side of it, instead of being clear-cut and straight-edged like the other side was. That must be him, right there. She didn’t hang back to investigate. The door closed after her, and the street kept what it knew to itself.

Winded from the long climb, it was a walk-up of course, she let herself into her own individual flat, and went over to the window to investigate before putting on the lights. She’d been doing this for the last few nights, now. She didn’t need the lights to guide her, she knew the place so well, where everything was and how to go around it to avoid it.

The one thing he still might not know was which floor she was on and which window was hers, and she wanted to keep that final protective margin of error for as long as she could.

She went over to the side of the curtain and looked through from there, instead of dividing it in the middle, which might have been noticeable from the street.

She could see him down there, standing still down there. The olive topcoat stood out palely against the dinginess of the night. He wasn’t moving. Only one thing moved about him, and that moved while remaining in a still position. That is to say, it pulsed or throbbed; it glowed and dimmed and

glowed again. It had a beat to it. The little ember-dab at the end of his immovable cigarette. There was something freezing and horrid about the way that nothing moved about him but that. It had in it a suggestion of leashed ferocity. Of hot-breathing, crouched batedness. Of a mauler snuffing and scenting its prey-to-be.

She put her hands up to the sides of her head and pressed them hard. She told herself: I'm walled-in here. If only there were another way out of here, a back way, a side way, any way at all. I'd like to run and run, and never stop. To the ends of the night. To the ends of the earth.

Then she said to herself: stop thinking things like that. This is your place. You belong in it. Nobody has the right to drive you out of it. He can't come in here. He can't come any nearer than he is now.

She bunched a fist and pounded it down against the top of a chair-back in helpless remonstrance. Why couldn't it have been any of the other girls I work with? Why did it just have to be me? That's not a very charitable thought, I know, but being in a fix like this doesn't give you time to be very charitable.

That's not love, down there. It can't be. Love sends you different kinds of messages. Love begins with talking-first, with smiling. Love turns its face toward you, soft and shining, not hides it away from you. Love wants you to know it, not skulks in doorways in the dark.

It's not just ordinary everyday sex either. *That* sends you different kinds of messages too. Blunt maybe, but honest and open in their crude way. A hard meaningful body-stare. A look that asks you. How about it? You willing? A jostling in the crowd. A brushing of the elbows, a nudging of the foot. Maybe an opening remark in a slurred undertone for no one else to catch.

No, this isn't that either. This is something clammier than that.

He’s sick inside his head. What else could he be but that? Some kind of a maniac. And if people like that once ever get their hands on you—She winced with superstitious horror.

After some time had passed she finally closed the door, which she had left slightly ajar so that its slender wand of outside hall-light would somewhat alleviate the total darkness of the room, and put on the lights. Enough of a time-lapse had now occurred for him not to necessarily connect her entry into the building with the going-on of the lights behind these particular windows. Or so she felt. And the dark held its own nervous terrors, anyway. She had a little radio there, not much of a thing, but at least it worked. It coughed a lot, and it spit when you turned on any nearby light-switch, but at least it banished the silence of aloneness. In a croupy, asthmatic, but better-than-nothing way.

She thought maybe a little soft music would take the edge off her nerves, she liked Viennese waltzes in particular, but a news-break was winding-up just as she turned it on.

“. . . meanwhile the war continues, no immediate end to it in sight.

“Back here at home, the second of three men who broke out of the penitentiary at (cra-a-ack, cra-a-ack, *cra-a-ack*), the so-called escape-proof jail, almost ten days ago has now been recaptured. His condition is serious from a gunshot wound suffered at the time of the break-out, during which two guards were also wounded. The third man, who is still at large, is considered especially dangerous, as he is believed to be armed. An all-out alert has been sounded . . .”

“The weather for the metropolitan area for tonight and tomorrow promises to be fair and . . .”

Her eyes had started to widen even before she reached out to the knob and closed it off. Her fingers remained on the knob long after the sound had died, while without realizing it she turned her head slowly toward the window

and stared at it, her eyes now following the direction her thoughts had already taken swift minutes ago.

She took her hand away from the radio at last and started to go over toward the window. And without knowing it she was holding one hand clasped around her own throat, in the immemorial gesture of feminine fear and trepidation.

It couldn't be. There could be no connection. The one thing had nothing to do with the other. How could a runaway, a wanted man, to whom every moment counted, for whom cover-up was essential, how would he have the nerve to hang around a bus-stop night after night in full view of dozens of people, then ride the crowded bus with any number of faces pressed close to his?

And yet, who knows? A man in prison for any length of time becomes sex-starved, which is the same thing as insanity, if only temporarily. She happened to cross his path, his eyes fastened themselves on her and couldn't let go, his thoughts fastened themselves on her and wouldn't let go. And the rest of the sequence followed from there on in natural order. He started to follow her around. Since the sex-drive is stronger than thirst and stronger than hunger, perhaps, at least in his case, it was stronger also than his fear of being recognized, being recaptured, and being taken back to jail. A man in his condition has no sense of precaution, he loses it, it is blotted out, inevitably.

But all this was no solace. This was an explanation only but not a solution.

She had the edge of the curtain back a little now, and was looking down into the street.

He wasn't there, he'd gone, he'd moved on. Maybe he was still watching her from someplace else where she couldn't see him now, but there was no sign of him where he'd been before. The street was empty, and showed up in two shades of gray: a silvery-gray where the street-light washed over it in a wide ellipse that climbed partly up the walls of the nearer buildings, and a dark pewter-gray

elsewhere. Then a taxi vibrated through it, making looming yellow moons that went out again after it had passed, but that was another matter.

No, he wasn't down there any longer. It was over for tonight. She phrased a little prayer to her guardian star, her destiny, her luck, whatever it was. Someone, something: "Oh, don't let it happen again tomorrow night. I can't stand any more of it. I'm ready to—*Please*, not tomorrow night. No more . . . No more . . .."

She started to cry. She hadn't cried since she was a little girl. Twelve, eleven maybe. Or if she had, not like this, not ever like this before. All of a week's accumulated and compounded terror started to pour out of her, like when a sluice-gate is suddenly pulled open, in gushes that ran down her cheeks, and when her hands went up as if to stem them, in trickles that still crept through the crevices between her fingers, while her body writhed and twisted with her own sobs and suppressed, stuttering breaths, her head supine on the seat of a chair and her legs drawn out on the floor.

And with that, as if in direct and vengeful rejection of her prayer, as if her pleas had cabalistically produced the very thing she wanted to avert, came the stealthy indicating-signal of someone there outside the door. It wasn't a knock, or even a tap; it was like someone stroking the door with the nails of two fingers, trying to make as little sound as possible and yet attract her attention.

"Are you in there?" a hushed voice wanted to know, mouth pressed up close against the door-seam.

She jumped erect so swiftly that the whole thing was like a coil shooting free; one single motion and she was up and straight and quivering like the feelers of an insect caught under somebody's palm.

She didn't answer, she couldn't have, but maybe the stunned silence betrayed her. Such things can happen.

There is a silence that vibrates, that speaks, that tells things.

It came again, the rasp, about like a match flicking sandpaper. And then a hiss to punctuate it, to attract.

"*Sst*. Are you in there?"

She went over by it, on hushed tipped feet and stood there close to it, face lowered intently, her balance in flux but afraid to touch it for support even from the inside.

Then it breathed a name, the door, it spoke a name.

"*Gerard*."

And suddenly no door had ever opened so fast. Suddenly there *was* no door any more. Just two in love, trying to make themselves one. Suddenly all the world was heaven, noon-bright, and there was no such thing as fear, even its very definition had faded away from the language-books and left just a blank space where it once had been.

She didn't even wait to see if it was he. There was no time to look at him, scan his face. It didn't matter, her heart knew. Her arms went around him like the back-fling of a cracked whip. Her head was on his shoulder, her face was beside his face, and all she saw was blank wall opposite, but her heart knew him just the same.

His voice was low and cautioning in her ear, and a slight move his head made told her he had looked over his shoulder guardedly. "Not out here. Hurry up, let me get inside first!"

She reclosed the door after them. He went over to a chair, fixed the top of it with his hand first as if afraid it would get away from him, and then sank into it loose as a puddle of water. She thought she never had seen such exhaustion before. It was a collapse.

She couldn't take her eyes off him. She moved first to one side of him, then to the other, then directly before him, slightly crouched, her hands to her knees. "I can't believe it, I can't, I can't! When did you get out?"

He raised his head, which had sunk low almost to his chest with weariness, and looked at her. “I didn’t. I broke out.”

She gave a quick head-turn across the room, then back again. “God in heaven! You’re one of those three, on that broadcast I heard—? I never dreamed—They didn’t give any names.”

“They never do,” he said dully. “We’re just people without names. That’s so anyone on the outside who might know us, want to help us or hide us, won’t hear about it.”

“I didn’t even know where they’d sent you.”

“I didn’t want you mixed up in it at all. Did you get that note I smuggled out to you, after I was picked up and being held for trial?”

“A woman I didn’t know sat down next to me one night, at that little place I eat down the street. She folded her arms on the counter, and with the outside one slipped it to me underneath the one that was next to me. Then she got up and walked out without a word.”

“That was Malin’s wife,” he said without emotion. “He was the one killed a week ago Monday. Three little kids.”

“It wasn’t in your handwriting, but I knew it must be—”

“He passed her the message on from me, and had her write it down.”

“I can still remember every word of it by heart,” she said devoutly, like when you recite your rosary. “ ‘*Stay out of it. Keep away from the trial. And if I’m sent up don’t come down and try to say goodbye to me before I go. If they question you, you don’t know me*.”

“I kept it for two whole days, and then I did away with it,” she said tenderly, as if she were speaking of a love-poem.

“That was the thing to do,” he approved.

Outside in the hall before, without looking at him at all, she had known him. Now, inside *and* looking at him, she almost *didn’t* know him any more. The terrible changes the thing had brought to him. The dust of the wayside and the

soot of the box-car that were no longer just surface grime any more but gave the appearance of having gotten under his skin and made him look permanently dingy. The deep sweat-etched lines of intolerable strain and tiredness that would never quite go away again. The hunger of the in-drawn cheeks and the out-starting eyes.

He'd been so young once and been so spruce and eye-pleasing. He wasn't now. And strange is the way of the heart: she loved him now more than she ever had then.

She saw him dipping two fingers into the patch-pocket of the caked, bedraggled blue denim shirt he had on, trying to locate a cigarette. All he could find was a charred butt, put out short to save for the next time.

"Wait," she said, and got hold of a box of them she had in the place there, took one out and lit it for him. Then she passed it to him from her own mouth.

"You didn't used to smoke," he remembered.

"I still don't, much. I've had these, I don't know how long. One of the girls at the place gave them to me once, in a fit of generosity. They weren't her brand, or something."

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked it over, and it seemed to suggest some other train of thought to him.

"You haven't been going with anybody while I've been away?"

She looked him quietly and simply in the eye. "*Is* there anybody but you—to go with? I didn't know, you'll have to tell me."

She thought of that man on the street and on the bus—and he already seemed so long ago and half-forgotten, like something in a last week's dream—and she decided not to tell him about it. Men were a little peculiar about some things, even the best of them, you had to understand that. He might think, even if he didn't come out with it, that she must have given him some slight encouragement in the very beginning to trigger the thing off like that, and she didn't

want him to. It was all over now, anyway. She wasn't alone any more.

"How'd you get into the house here? Did *she* see you, downstairs?"

"I've been in it since early this afternoon. I came along intending to take just a quick look and see if I could figure out from down below whether you still lived up here or not. Then I saw this junk-cart standing out at the door, and two men were unloading somebody's furniture and taking it into the house—"

"That's the flat on the floor below," she explained. "The old lady there died last week, and it's been rented over."

"So on the spur of the moment, while they were inside, I picked up a chair from the sidewalk and went in after them. I walked right by her. She thought I was with them, I guess. Then when I got up to the floor they were on, I put it down outside the door while their backs were turned, and came on up here to your floor. I found a closet at the back of the hall for keeping rags and pails, and I crouched down inside it. She came to it once and tried to get the door open, but I held onto the inside of the knob with both hands, and she gave up finally and went away again mumbling something about getting a carpenter to come and plane it down.

"I knew if you still had your modelling-job, you wouldn't be back until much later. Then when the people started coming home from work, I had to try to translate their footsteps on the stairs. A man came up first. Then a woman; I knew it wasn't you, because I heard her call out to some kid on the inside, 'Open the door for me, I have my arms full of bundles.' Then I heard a young step, a girl's step, and it seemed to go in right about where your door was, so I waited a couple minute's more and then I took a chance and came out."

"When did you eat last?" she asked him.

"So long ago I can't remember," he said dully. "While I was still out in the open country, it was easier. Farm-women

would give me handouts sometimes, if I was careful how I came up to them. But once I'd worked my way into the city, that stopped. In the city they don't give you anything without money. And how could I stand still long enough to earn any? I snatched an orange, I think yesterday morning. I ate the skin and all."

She closed her eyes for a moment, appalled.

"I have to get these things off," he said, bending down to his ravaged shoes. "My feet are like hamburgers."

Then when she saw the stains of the old blood that was already black and the newer blood that was still rusty-colored, "Oh those *feet!*" she moaned in unutterable compassion, clapping her hands together.

She got a basin of water and some cloths, and getting down on her knees before him gently tried to treat and soothe them. And when she had, wrapping a towel around one, held it up and pressed the side of her face against it.

"Cut it out," he said embarrassedly. "What am I, a baby?"

"I'll have to go to the pharmacy and get some kind of a salve."

She heated up and brought him coffee-and-milk, and some bread and other stuff that she always kept there for her own use in the mornings, and sat opposite him at the little pushed-over-to-the-wall table, watching him eat. Once she reached over and stroked back a tendril of hair that had come down before his eye.

"What are you going to do?" she murmured finally, low, as if afraid to hear the answer.

He blew out the match he was holding. "One thing I'm *not* going to do, is ever go back there again alive. For me, that's over."

"But how—?" The worry on her face finished it without words.

"All I need is a breathing-spell, one day or two, to rest up and clean myself up."

“You’ll stay here with me,” she said briefly, as if there were no sense in even discussing that part of it. “We’ll manage it somehow. But then—?”

“I know a guy who’ll fix me up some fake papers. With them, I can get some job on a ship, outbound. Jump it at the other end, and start all over again clean. It doesn’t matter where. Then as soon as I get my bearings, you—you’ll come, won’t you?”

“*Any*where,” she said fiercely. “The minute you say the word.”

“It’s asking a lot,” he admitted, as if telling it to himself.

“What is a lot?” she said. “And what is a little? There are no measurements when you—care. It is all one; one-size.”

He sat staring into the distance, hunched over his own lap, hands folded-together across his knees. She wondered what he saw there—their future?

After awhile she told him about it. This was the time to, to make them more one. When he needed somebody to be close the most.

“I’m going to have your baby. Our baby.”

“You fool,” was what he said to that at first. “You could have gotten out of that. You’ve been around.” And then he took the hardness, out of the words by putting the flat of his hand on top of her head and rumpling her hair in a rough-neck and yet an almost tender sort of way, and scraped his knuckle past her chin.

“I didn’t want to,” she said softly. And left the “get out of it” part unsaid.

He was testing it in his mind. “A guy likes a kid of his own. To show that he passed through this world at least once. Imagine, *me*. Me of all people. A kid of my own. How the old crowd would laugh. Lejeune, that was too fast for any cop. And too slick for any woman. Well, the cops got me first. And a woman’s got me now.”

He looked grimly up at her from under his thick black lashes, which were the only thing left of his old looks. “You

take good care of it, hear? You watch over it careful. If anything happens to it, I'll break your loving jaw."

She framed his face with her hands and kissed him, laughing but with a softness in her eyes that was more than just the light in the room shining back from them.

"You haven't even got it yet, and you're already growling like an old, experienced father."

When she put out the light, they lay close to one another for awhile, quiet and happy just to be together. Then in the darkness, his soft murmur sounded in her ear.

"Let's make doubly sure, shall we?"

Tomorrow was the big opening, the most trying day of the year for a fashion-house mannequin. Like an opening-night is for an actress. She had to be there early, she had to be on her toes. And she'd been rehearsing all day, today just past. But—he was Gerard, her Gerard and nobody else's.

"Let's," she whispered back to him in the dark.

Later, he was asleep but she was still awake, thinking about them and what their chances were. Something from the radio broadcast came back to her: "This man is believed to be armed." And then something that he had said himself. "I'm never going back there again alive." She wondered if he really had a gun on him or not. She hadn't thought about it the whole time until now. Now that she recalled, she hadn't been able to see one anywhere on him. But if he did have one on him, it might cost him his life. Men were so quick about using things like that, and he in particular was so hot-headed, she knew that well.

He was sleeping with his shirt on, turned toward her, lying on his side. She reached out carefully and felt his shoulder, the uppermost one, through the wide-spread gap of his shirt-front. There were several bands of tape spliced around it and going through his armpit. She reached around to the back, to his shoulder-blade, and the gun was there, bedded in some kind of a makeshift holster. She couldn't tell what it was (canvas perhaps or gunny-sack-

fibre, hurriedly put-together along the way) except that it held it there, so that he could swing his opposite arm up over-shoulder and pull it out with one swift move.

She started to ease it slyly out, a milimeter at a time. There was nothing to impede it, the impromptu holder or sac had no top to it, there was no lid to snap up as a leather one would have had. Then when it was halfway out, she stopped and began going over the possible consequences of what she was about to do.

No, it wasn't fair to do this, disarm him in his sleep this way like a thief in the night, leave him vulnerable to his enemy. It wasn't fair; he had to have his chance to defend himself. Right or wrong, she wouldn't be the one to do this to him. If their positions had been reversed, she couldn't see him doing this to her, she knew his attitudes too well.

She let the gun slide back in again, and he went on sleeping, never knowing.

In the morning she dressed swiftly and quietly, and left him there still sleeping in the pale-blue early-morning light, his face looking like a pale-blue terra cotta, with a little scribble alongside the bed for him to find in case he awoke.

> *"I've only gone down the street a minute to get some foodstuffs. If you hear someone at the door, don't jump at them, it's only me.*
>
> *L."*

On her way back inside, burdened with bags and bundles like an overladen coolie, she ran into the fat woman who was in charge of the house.

The latter grinned with a weazened monkey-like expression as she saw her go by. "It pays to buy in large quantities like that, it's more economical," she observed. "You almost have enough there for two people."

Leone halted and whirled around to face her. "Have I?" she challenged.

“One shouldn’t be alone too much,” the woman went on.

Now what does that mean? Leone wondered, beginning to tighten-up inside. She said, “If you mean me, haven’t I always been? What about it?”

“After awhile you—you know, you start talking to yourself.”

She overheard us, last night, Leone told herself, with a cold stricken sensation taking hold of her around the heart. “What do *you* do, come up and listen outside my door?” she flared up angrily. “Well, the next time, let me know what I say to myself! I want to know how good I sound!” And she swung around and continued on up the stairs, but with a chipper indifference she was far from feeling.

He was still asleep, he’d never even heard her leave. She put her things down, and then went over to where he was lying and stood looking at him for a moment. One of those gravely-sweet, inscrutable looks that love can give at times. Then she bent over and kissed him, soft as a petal dropping, on the forehead.

His lids flickered and started to go up several times, then lost their battle and settled down once more. But a spark of consciousness had been ignited that was slower in dying down again. He went “Mm,” and his head stirred a little, and she knew that he could understand her, even though he seemed not to. Or he would remember what she had said when he fully woke up.

“Listen, I have to go now. I’ll be late getting back, this is our big day. Are you listening? When you get up, lock the door on the inside. I’m going to try to fix it with the old woman downstairs, to keep her from coming up here, if I can. And keep away from the windows, don’t go near them and try to look out. There are some cigarettes in there, I put them where you can find them, and everything else you need. I brought you in a couple of magazines, too, to help pass the time with. On my way home I’ll try to stop off and buy you a clean shirt and underwear, if I can find a place

that’s still open. Now rest, rest all you can. I only hope God keeps His eye on you for me.”

She bent and kissed him twice more, this time once on each cheek.

From the open door she looked back. His arm, which had been too near the edge of the bed, over-balanced and fell loosely down and dangled there limply over-edge.

She went back a moment, lifted it, and put it back under the cover. Then she tucked it a little to hold it.

Then she went out and closed the door behind her. At the head of the stairs, before starting down, she opened her handbag and took out some money. About all she had, all she could afford, leaving just a little over for the bus and to buy him a shirt. She folded it tactfully out of sight under her palm and went down the stairs.

“Here,” she said going over to the fat woman, and held out her hand.

“What’s this for?” the fat woman said, looking at it. “You’re all paid up until the first.”

Leone said off-handedly: “You don’t need to go up to my place to look after anything today. In fact I wish you wouldn’t. It’ll hold. Some other time. I’ll let you know.”

The superintendant pinned her with a look that was undecided between being shrewd and sympathetic.

Leone suddenly threw discretion aside. It seemed the only thing to do. “Look, you’re a woman. There’s a time in life when—well, someone means a lot to you. You had the time come to you once too, yourself. Try to remember it now and—make an allowance, will you?”

This unkempt, heavily-fleshed hostile, with a shadowed upper lip and a mole on one cheek, who could be so shrill about disturbing noises and so steely about an overdue rent, showed a surprising streak of empathy that Leone hadn’t known she’d even had in her until now.

“We’re all sisters, all of us,” she said. She prodded money back down into the slashed hand-pocket of Leone’s

raincoat. “All in one big family.” She chopped the edge of her hand reassuringly against Leone’s upper arm.

As she went on out to the street Leone knew, at least, that she had her on her side.

When she got to the job, Leone raced up the stairs to the dressing-rooms as though she were pursued by devils. Those same stairs she had come bounding down so buoyantly at seven the night before. So much had happened to her in-between, her whole life had been altered. Here too, the place had changed almost beyond recognition from its workaday look. The huge alabaster vase at the back of the ground-floor corridor was filled with fat, puffy chrysanthemums in deftly-blended tones of orange, rust and copper. The glass doors leading into the display-room stood wide open, with a uniformed attendant stationed outside to collect invitations, and a discordant buzz of voices coming from inside, punctuated intermittently by the chirpy, twittering sounds of a small stringed orchestra tuning up. On the stairs and in the lower hall, there was a long roll of blue-velour carpeting that began on the floor above and stretched like a rivulet of escaping fountain-pen ink right down to the front door-sill. It stopped there so abruptly you almost expected it to continue out into the street beyond, but it didn’t.

There was no one in sight at the moment who could clock her lateness, only the impudent lift-boy, at Prussian-stiff attention before his cage and not at all impudent today. On the stairs she narrowly missed running head-on into a butler or caterer of some sort carrying a hamper of champagne-bottles, who was coming down them just as she hurled herself up. An agile swerve, and the collision was averted.

Everybody was already in the dressing-room and in their places when she came hustling in. The “daytime-wear” group were all dressed already and ready to parade on out. Leone’s own group, the “evening-wear” group were all

undressed already and having their faces made-up by a man in shirt-sleeves with a portable kit on his lap, untroubled by all the nudity about him. Renard did nothing by halves. He had it all jotted down on a chart with which she had supplied him; each triangular combination of mannequin's complexion, color of gown, and make-up required to go with them, had been worked out days before.

Paradoxically though, while he gave each face that came before him the expert touch it needed and passed it on improved, a bluish growth showed on the lower part of his own, hairs sprouted at right-angles out from his eyebrows and from the pits of his ears, and the creases ridging his forehead were emphasized by grime that looked as if soap had not disturbed it for weeks. But then he wasn't to go on public view, in one of the greatest selling competitions in the world.

One arm recurrently out to the wall to help her keep her balance in the jostling crowd around her, Leone stripped, literally down to the skin—for a Paris original always carries along its own indicated foundations—stuffed her personal things into her locker, pinned a towel around her waist, for the sake of comfort on the hard-surfaced wooden bench if not modesty, and sat down to wait her turn, elbow resting on the mirror-shelf in back of her and head propped in her upraised hand.

When the make-up man had finished work on her, he brushed off some excess powder that had fallen over her breasts with a completely impersonal swipe of the hand that set them dancing for a second or two.

A moment later the hairdresser took over, began switching her head this way and that as if her hair was taffy that he was pulling.

Suddenly the head of the establishment, Renard herself, stood behind her, studying her face and hair-do in the mirror before them both. Leone's that is. She nodded

approval, gave an upward hitch with one finger. Leone stood up. A brassiere was brought, attached.

“She’s too hefty,” Renard complained. “This number calls for a moderate bosom, not a pair of ostrich-eggs like that. Tighten it up a little.”

Leone’s eyes crossed briefly and inadvertently as the already tourniquet-like constriction was redoubled around her.

“Hold it in. Hold it in. *Breathe in*!” Renard said sternly, giving her a slap across it.

Leone went “iffffff” like the up-swing of a bicycle-pump handle.

Then finally, like the rains of April it was named for, the creation, the original, descended on her and drenched her in slanting streaks of bead-raindrops and fuming mists of silver-gray tissue. And the magic that Renard always wrought had come to pass. A bewildered, skinny, dead-for-sleep girl became a thing of mystic allure. Every man’s dream of Woman, that dream he never overtakes. Every woman’s dream of herself, that she never achieves.

Everyone’s hand was on her. They backed away, they closed in, they pulled, they pushed, they tucked, they tugged, they smoothed, they crimped. They could do nothing with it. It had been perfect to begin with.

Surrounded by a cluster of people still busily fussing at her, she was led out to the top of the stairs and poised there, as though they were about to throw her headlong down to the bottom.

The customary time-table, or pace, was that as one girl completed two entire circuits of the show-room, the next started down the stairs. They usually met and passed on the lower steps. This gave the briefest pause between numbers, just long enough for the viewers to adjust their minds for the new selection but not long enough to create an awkward delay or gap.

The go-ahead signal was given, and Leone took her first, baptismal step down, with the hypnotic, pavane-like slow-motion of the professional mannequin, feeling her way with the tip of her foot as though she were blindfolded.

There was an urgent, surreptitious follow-up footfall on the stairs behind her, someone thrust a catastrophically forgotten show-handkerchief into her hand, and then whoever it was retreated again into safe anonymity.

She and the other mannequin passed one another. They didn't look at each other, they weren't supposed to.

She reached the foot of the stairs, her course leveled-off, and the display-room was now hers alone.

There were some people standing out here, in the space between the stairs and the display-room entrance, all men, who either had shown up late and found all the seats taken, or who wanted to hold private discussions of their own out here, or whatever the reason was.

Those who had their backs to her, and some did, turned around to face her as she started to glide past them. All but one; he kept himself turned away from her. But the man he was standing in front of, looked at her hard and steadily. They all were doing that of course, but there was this difference: the rest were looking at the gown she was merchandising, *he* was looking at her face and only her face. Then the corner of his mouth moved a little, saying something secretive to the man with his back to her. And she saw the latter nod his head, she could see him do that from the back. And right after that, *he* turned too.

And they were looking at each other again, she and that face from the crowd, that was always there, wherever she went, each night now the whole week past. Outside the door here where she worked, and on the bus, and peering into the cafe, and under the windows of her flat.

She faltered in her stride, she couldn't help doing so, and gave a sagging little knee-dip for a moment, then picked up her swing again and went at a stylized stroll into the packed

salon behind, but with a feeling as if there was a knife in back of her poised between her shoulder-blades.

She heard a voice introduce: “April Rain, for the important moments of your life,” and thought, This is one of mine, but it isn’t a good one.

All she was conscious of was tiers of pinkish-beige ovals looking her over from all sides. Even when she felt secure and at ease, she never looked directly into their faces, she had been taught not to. It would have injected a personal note that would have been out of place; more to the point, it would have distracted attention from the very thing she was trying to draw attention to. And now, after seeing him standing out there, she wouldn’t have dared look into their faces, it would have broken her up in no time. So she fixed her eyes on an imaginary guide-line along the walls just high enough to miss the tops of their heads, and kept them on it whichever way she turned. And all the while she kept thinking, I have to pass him a second time, on my way out, to get back to the stairs: oh, my God!

There were murmurs of admiration and interest as she moved around the room, which swelled now and then to a sustained buzz or a spattering of applause. Individual remarks stood out here and there. “*Very* good!” “A natural!” “She always comes up with something!”

In the meantime she kept trying not to swallow (which would have been noticeable along her throat-line), and her tongue felt as if it were drowning in her own fears.

Every now and then she had to make a complete turnaround, to show off the back of the gown as well. The whole routine or technique was a simple one, that could be picked up in fifteen minutes. She had. What your job depended on more than that was word - of - mouth reputation, of having been known to work at one of the other big houses previously. In other words, once you were in, you were in. *Until* you were in, you couldn’t get in.

One corner was past, now the second. There remained only one more and then she would be back to the door, that dreaded door, again. And he was waiting out there beyond it. Whoever he was and whatever he was, one thing was sure, he wasn't good. He wasn't good news. Maybe if she—just went by fast, without stopping to think about it and without looking at him, he wouldn't have a chance to—do whatever it was he was going to do. And the other one with him, who was he? Birds of a feather? Maybe he was just some fellow-standee he'd struck up a conversation with. There was a certain freemasonry among men of that kind.

She was out through the door now and about to break into a headlong spurt. And then she suddenly had to slow it down again. Renard was standing there, come to drink in her own triumph. People all around her showering congratulations, but her eye didn't miss a trick. Her behind-the-hand whisper reached Leone as she was about to go past her. "Don't hurry so. You may catch that on something and damage it."

The voice of authority, that could not be disregarded. She tapered to a gracious walk, and one of the two men immediately made a signal to her. Not *him*. The other one.

She didn't stop for it, so they came over to her instead, stood alongside her one on each side, peering closely with professional interest and professional pitilessness. *Not* at the gown this time, but at her. Only at her. She halted, with fear-glazing eyes.

"Your name Leone Aubry?" said one, pointing with a slim putty-green cigar he was holding between his fingers.

"What do you want?"

"*Is* your name Leone Aubry?"

"*Yes*, but what do you want?"

"You're coming with us, is what we want."

Then he showed her something, in a sort of wallet-carrying-case that split open across the top and uplidded, instead of opening along its edge like the usual money-

carrying wallet does. She could make out the city's coat-of-arms, then he squeezed it closed, with the same hand he was holding it in.

The police. She knew now who they were. She clapped both hands to her mouth, and held them there, at cross-angles to one another. People started to turn and look curiously at her. Finally she let her hands drop again, so that she could speak without impediment. "What for? What have I done?" she asked them, in a sort of piteous, passive, boxed-in panic.

"We don't stand and talk to you here, in a place like this."

And the other one, the one who had been at her heels for a week, surly: "We didn't come here to buy our wives dresses, you know."

"Can't I go upstairs and change for a minute?" Just a minute more, anything for a minute more. You don't value freedom when you have unlimited lengths and stretches of it. Then when you don't have it any more, how sweet just one extra minute of it is.

"No delays, you're coming right as you are. Put a coat on over you."

"But I can't take it out of here. It belongs to the house. I'm not allowed to."

Renard intervened. "What's the trouble? Is this an arrest?"

"An interrogation."

"Then please, gentlemen, no commotion. We've all worked too long and too hard for this, to have it spoiled." And with that typical logic which had made her the successful business woman she was, she pointed out: "The dress is my property. You can't take it out of here unless you have an order for its confiscation. Which you don't have. Therefore the dress and the girl must be separated first before you can take the girl.

One of them scratched his head and mumbled in an aside to his partner something about, "—not only designs clothes

but she’s a lawyer in the bargain.”

“Go upstairs, Leone,” Renard said with a sort of localized sympathy. That is to say, a sympathy that was given freely and for the asking, until it collided with or obstructed her own one and only concern, the making and selling of dresses. Then it stopped and didn’t go any further. “Maybe it’ll work itself out all right. Let me hear from you, if you can.”

The three of them stood and stared after her, watching her heels flicker up the stairs like little flesh-toned mallets tacking down a carpet.

Upstairs in the hall, where there were no longer guests to be reckoned with, she made a bee-line for the dressing-room door, elbowing everyone aside and almost stumbling in her haste to get in there. The door clapped shut after her.

“Somebody help me to get out of here, quick!” she gasped.

They all turned on the long dressing-bench and stared at her with one accord.

“There’re two men down there—”

“Two?” one girl said. “There must be twenty-five.”

“This isn’t anything to joke about. These two are cops. They’re standing right down at the foot of the stairs. They’re waiting to take me with them.”

“How do you know it’s you?”

“They said so right in front of Renard.”

She had the dress off now. She was shivering from head to foot, and not from the cold either.

“By why you? What’ve you been up to?”

She summed the whole tragic little story up in just two words. “My fellow.”

“What is he, a loser with the cops? I had one like that once. Funny, how those guys always make the best kind of —”

Somebody gave a scream of synthetic modesty, of protest actually more than modesty, and one of the two from downstairs was standing in the open doorway motioning to her with his head. “Are you going to come out of there, or do you want me to come in and get you?”

The inescapability of the thing made her lose her nerve for a minute; the brief reprieve to get out of the dress was now over, there was no chance of any further out, and she was right up face to face with the most precarious of all prospects: apprehension by the police on a provable and grounded charge. Anyone would have quailed.

She looked around at each of the other girls in turn, in a last-minute appeal for aid that was sunk even before it was spoken. “Marthe!—Desi!—Nico!—We all work here together. I see your faces day-in day-out, and you see mine. Isn’t there one of you will stand up beside me now and help me, when I need it the most? I don’t want them to take me, I don’t want to go!”

They just looked at her helplessly. One of them lamented: “What can *we* do?” And another advised with sorrowful resignation: “Go with them, Leone. You have to anyway, and it takes all the fortitude out of it if you welsh.”

The ghost of a mannequin, a few minutes ago so radiant and chic and lovely, came out of the dressing-room door and stood there looking at the two men who were waiting for her outside it. Not fashion-show johnnies though, by any means.

She was immediately boxed-in between them and trundled along. They were not gentle, not gentle men, because it was not their business to be. “All right, hup, downstairs we go.”

“What is it?” someone asked as she went past the crowd on the lower floor.

“She’s being arrested. First time in the history of a fashtion-show that’s ever happened, I’d like to bet.”

They took her in an unmarked police car back to the street where she lived. It knifed along glossy-black and somber, and above the jurisdiction of the stop-and-go lights, its siren moaning a dirge that fitted this terrible death-ride. Hope and love and freedom all in one going to their funerals.

And when they turned in there the street was jammed, packed with people, she'd never seen it like that before. Not even on the Fourteenth of July. Not even when another country's President came on a visit.

But they were all on one side of the street only, they were kept back there, by a rope and by some policemen on foot, in a long black line, shoulder-to-shoulder and faces peering over-shoulder, all looking over at the opposite side of the street. And on the opposite side of the street there was nothing by comparison. Two or three policemen standing around, looking very small and lonely in all that emptiness. And something covered on the ground, like when you throw something away.

The drone of the crowd hushed temporarily as the new arrival drove up and stopped, and in the momentary silence the crack of the car-door rang out like a shot, as Leone was taken out and they closed it behind her.

They took her over to the quieter side of the street on a long diagonal walk, for the car that had brought her couldn't get in any closer, and long before she had reached there the crowd had started up its rolling, surf-like surge of sound again.

"There she is! That's her. She's the one the flat belongs to."

And a woman began again, for the twentieth time, to anyone around her who would listen: "They were creeping up the stairs, hoping to surprise him. Suddenly he came out of the flat and started firing at them, right there on the stairs. They backed down a little, and he ran up onto the roof. You could see him up there, from the street. I saw him

up there myself. They were firing up at him from the street, and he was firing down into the street at them. Then everything stopped, and you could tell someone had hit him.

"First he did a slow lean-over, like he was never going to fall, and then a somersault and then all the way down to the sidewalk—*Blapp!*"

Leone's escort tipped one edge of the covering back.

"You know this man?"

And then, "You know the penalty for harboring a fugitive?"

She freed her arm from him and sank slowly to her knees, with a peculiar, little-girl forlornness suggested by the attitude.

"How does a nice kid like you," he said, "come to get mixed up with such a type? You see what it's brought you to. It's too late now. You're in for it now. You can't go back and undo the damage now."

And kneeling there, sitting back on her own heels there, on that gritty Paris sidewalk, holding the dead head on her lap that had once kissed her, breathed against her breast, framing it gently with a hand against each side of it and rocking back and forth with it in aloneness and desertion and cold, she looked up at him and cried out in a bitter, defiant, and yet somehow almost exultant voice that rang up and down the packed street and hushed the jabbering crowd:

"And if I *could* go back, if I were given the chance, I'd do it exactly all over again! Because he was a *real* man. What would you understand about that? A *real* man. Just to know him, just to be loved by him, makes it all worthwhile. Go ahead, arrest me! Throw away the key forever! I still come out ahead . . .

"Still come out ahead."

THE END

THE RELEASE

I left the taxi with a splurge, like a man arching his legs to straddle a sidewalk puddle though no puddle was there. He called out something about my change; I showed him the back of my hand.

No elevator ever went so slowly as the one that took me up to Sutphen's office. There were never so many floors between; so many people never got off, never got on. So many latecomers never made it at the last minute and caused the doors that had already closed to a hair's width to reopen all the way again. The indicator sweep inside the cab never moved so reluctantly, never stayed on 3 so long, on 4 so long, on 5, on 6. Sweat never prickled so, along the pleats in somebody's forehead, in the crotches below his arms. A heart never beat so fast before, except in the hurtle finals of the Olympics, and everything else around it so slow, so slow before.

Then at last it was at 7, and I stepped on someone's toes, knocked someone else's hat askew, carried still someone else's handbag halfway out of the car with me, hooked onto the buttons of my coat sleeve.

Then I was out running, and no corridor was ever so long before or had so many people on it getting in your way before, playing that simultaneous impulse game, where they move to the left when you move to the left blocking, and to the right when you do, blocking you all over again.

He'd moved his office. The number on the door hadn't changed, but it was fifty doors farther down the line now and twenty-five more around the turn. I was on the other side of the door at last. There was a receptionist at the desk. She didn't try to stop me or ask me who I was. She saw my face, saw what was on it, had seen it before, but never with the shining light that showed all over me now. She just pointed. "In there, door on the left. He's by himself."

I pushed the door out of the way. Knocking was for other times; knocking was for times when there was time. And he was in there, walking back and forth.

I caught him doing that—no one with him—walking back and forth, one hand in his pocket like when you're broke, one hand hooked around the back of his neck like when you're at a loss. Sour in the face, disturbed, discouraged, disgusted—I couldn't tell what it was. Some other case, not mine. Mine was over; mine was squared. I didn't owe the law anything, anymore.

You know how lawyers are. They have dozens of cases. Some of them fizzle; some of them go wrong. You know how lawyers are—they have cases by the carload. He stopped his pacing and looked up to see who had come in. He said the funniest thing to himself. I heard him. He said, "Oh merciful God."

Then he asked me, after watching me, "What are you doing here? I thought they refused the parole."

"No parole." Triumph bubbling, escaping into the open. "A pardon."

He kept watching me. "How'd you come down here?"

"First by train and then by taxi. "I wondered why he'd asked that. I was here—that was all that mattered—or should have mattered.

"Did it have a radio? Was it on?"

I frowned. "It had a two-way radio, steering it to pickups by its dispatcher. Why?"

“Oh, that kind.” He seemed to lose interest—in the radio, not in me. “Did you tell her to expect you?”

“No, that was the whole idea.” I whipped the thing D’Angelo had signed out of my inside pocket, pushed it at him. “Don’t y ’ want to see what I’ve got here?” The jubilation was back. I was jabbering staccato. “Don’t y’want to read it? I’m free, like I was born. Free, like I’ll die. Free, like I was meant to be—” My voice slowed and started to dwindle. “Doesn’t it matter?” was the last thing that came out. Then it faltered, and it died.

It didn’t matter. He didn’t say it didn’t, but he showed it didn’t.

He took the paper the statement was on, pleated one end of it like he was making a paper dart out of it, poised it over his desk wastebasket, and speared it in.

I was jolted. “What’d you do that for?”

He just looked at me. Everything that anyone was every sorry for was in that look. You could see it there.

“I can’t tell you. I’ll have to let the radio do it for me. They can do it better.” He went over and thumbed the knob. “I’ll see if I can get one of the all-news stations. It’ll come around again. Sit down a minute.”

He took a cigarette out of a gold-tooled desk box and put it in my mouth—even lit it for me. He put his hand on my shoulder and pressed down hard, as if to say, “Brace yourself.”

In the background familiar names began to sound off dimly, names that were far away, that had nothing to do with me. Hanoi—Cape Kennedy—Lindsay—U Thant—Johnson—

He opened a drawer and took out a bottle of Hanky Bannister. I hadn’t known he kept anything like that there. He didn’t drink himself, not in the office, I mean. He kept it there for clients, I guess, and for sufferers who needed it for imminent shock, like he seemed to think I was going to. He passed me a good-sized drink.

I drank it down, still in happiness, although the happiness was now a little dazed—not dimmed, but dazed by his peculiarity. Even with the happiness I started to get scared by all this indirection—Like a guy waiting for surgery without knowing what form it was going to take.

It came. It hit. Before I knew it, it was already over. And the slow-spreading after-sting had only just started in.

He brought it up—the sound. I mean. Touched it with his finger. And I noticed as he did so he didn't look at me but looked the other way, as if he didn't like to look at me right then—couldn't face my face.

> ". . . Mrs. Janet Evans took her own life early today in the apartment in which she had been living on East Seventy-eighth Street. Mrs. Evans, whose husband had been serving an indeterminate sentence in connection with the death of singer Dell Nelson, left a note which is in the hands of the police. The death occurred sometime between four and six A.M. when the body was discovered . . ."

The cigarette fell out of my hand. Nothing much else happened. How much has to happen to show your life just ended, your heart just broken? Nothing shows it—nothing. Your cigarette falls on the carpet. After a while your head goes down lower, then lower, then lower. You stare, but you don't see. No words, no tears, no anything. It's a quiet thing. It's a your-own thing that no one else can share. You reach up behind you and turn your coat collar up and hold it close to your throat in front with your fingers, though you know the room is warm for anyone else.

You're cold, you're hungry, you're thirsty, you're scared, you're lonely, you're lost. And you're all those things together at one time.

“I saw her only two days ago,” I heard him saying. “I spoke to her. I think she tried to tell me then what was going to happen, only I didn’t catch on. ‘It’s too late now for both of us,’ she said. ‘We can’t win anymore now; we’ve already lost. Get together again? Two strangers hardly knowing each other, grubbing around in the debris looking for something they once had? Two ghosts sitting in the twilight, with a bottle somewhere between them? After a while, if we didn’t swallow the bottle, the bottle would swallow us. Both of those are worse than any prison is.”

I looked up at him and I complained. “I hurt all over.”

But he couldn’t help me. He wasn’t a bandage.

I stood up finally and turned to the door, and he said, “Where are you going?” and he tried to hold me back.

“Home. I’m going home.”

“You can’t. You know that, Cleve. There isn’t any home anymore for you. Stay here in the office awhile first. Lie down on the couch. I’ll take you with me when I leave. I’ll put you in a hotel for a week or two, pay all the expenses, see that you’re taken care of until the worst is over.”

“No. I’m going home. Home.”

And when he tried to hold me, I shrugged him off. And when he tried to do it again, I swerved violently, flinging his hands off.

“I’m going home. Don’t stop me.”

“Or come up with me for a week to my place. We live in Bronxville. I have two kids, but we’ll keep them away from you—you won’t hear them. You don’t even have to have your meals with us.”

“No,” I said doggedly. “I’m going home.”

“But you haven’t any anymore, Cleve.”

“Everyone has—someplace.”

The last thing he said to me was, “You’ll die, left on your own. I hate to see you die, Cleve. It seems such a waste; you loved so well and so hard!”

“Don’t worry,” I assured him gravely. “Don’t worry about me, Steve. I have to meet someone. I’m going out tonight. I’m late for it now.”

And I closed the door behind me. And he didn’t try to come after me, because he knew every man must find his own peace, his own answers. There is a point beyond which no man can accompany another, without intrustion. And no man must do that. It’s *not* allowable. That’s about all we’re given, our privacy.

As I went hustling down the corridor (which had become very short again now), I heard a curious sound from inside where I’d left him. It sounded like a whack. I think he must have swung his fist around, punching into some leather chair with all his might. I wondered why he’d do a thing like that, what its meaning was. But I didn’t have time to figure it out.

In the second taxi, the one that took me away from there, the driver did have his radio going this time. Unlike the one coming over, the one that Sutphen had asked me about, this one was only playing music—I guess to take the edge off the traffic sounds the cabby lived in all day long.

It was burbling away there. I didn’t pay much attention until suddenly I seemed to hear the words.

Peace and rest at length have come
All the day’s long toil is past
And each heart is whispering ‘Home,
Home at last.’

“That’s right, “I thought. “that’s where I’m going now. “I spoke to the driver. “Stop at the next flower shop you come to,” I told him. “I think there’s one just up ahead.”

I bought some yellow roses, barely opened, just past the bud stage, and those little things that look like yellow pom-poms. He wrapped them for me like I hope he would for festive giving—first in tissue, then in smooth lustrous green,

then folded flat across the top and stapled into a cone. When I came back to the cab with them. I felt like her young lover all over again.

I rang. I wanted her to come to the door. I wanted to make a big splash with the flowers, shake them out, spread them in front of her face, and say, “A guy sent these to you, lady, with his love.” But she didn’t come, so I put my key in it instead and went in on my own.

I didn’t see her, so I knew she must be in the bathroom, doing something to her hair or things like they do. I’d often found her in there when I came home nights like this.

I called her name. “Jannie, I’m back,” like that. I didn’t hear her answer, but that was all right. I guess she couldn’t at the moment. Maybe shampoo was running down her forehead. I knew she’d heard me, because she had the door open in there.

(“How’d it go?” she asked me. I could almost hear her.)

“Arrh,” I said with habitual distraction. “Same old treadmill, same old grind. Want me to fix you a drink?”

(I could almost hear her. “Not too strong, though—”)

I built us two Martinis from the serving pantry and the case I’d brought from the club; we hadn’t run through it yet. One tiger’s milk, the other weak as tears.

First I was going to take hers in to her, but I didn’t. The bathroom is no place to drink a drink or toast a toast—all that soap around.

I called out, “Let’s go out tonight. Let’s go out like we used to at the start. Let’s go somewhere and dance and eat where they have candles on the table. Let’s forget the world and all its troubles.”

(“What’s the big occasion?” I could hear her ask.)

“Who knows how long we have?”

(“That’s a cheerful thought.” I could detect the little make-believe shudder that went with it.)

“Stella’s, over on Second. Or the Living Room. Or Copain. Or that little Italian place on Forty-eighth where they have

the bottles of wine in wicker baskets hanging round the walls and the man plays “Come Prima” for you on his guitar if you ask him. You name it.”

(I could see her put the tip of her finger against her upper lip, like she always does when making a choice. “All right, the little Italian place on Forty-eighth, then.”)

“What dress d’you want? I’ll take it out for you, save time.”

(“Even if I told you, you wouldn’t find it.”)

“Try me.”

(“All right. That one you like the best. The one I got at Macy’s Little Shop. You know, the one that’s all gleamy and dreamy.”)

I found it easy and right away and took it out and off its hanger. The scent of her faint but unforgettable and unforgotten perfume came up to me from it. More like the extract of her personality than any literal blending of alcohol and attar of roses. She had never used much of it, if any.

While I was waiting for her to come out, I put on that record we’d often danced to before, back in the first days. It was a favorite of ours. It *expressed* us. It said for us what we wanted to say for ourselves, thought of, and couldn’t.

Then she came out, in all her sweetness and desirability, in all her tender understanding and compassion for a guy and his poor clumsy heart. All the things we live for and dream about and die without: a man’s wife and his sweetheart, his mistress and his madonna. All things in one. Woman. *The* woman. The *one* woman.

Rose-petal pink from her showering in there. Sweet and soft and just a touch of moistness still lingering here and there. The two little strips crossing her in front, the bra and the waistband, both narrow as hair ribbons, separating revealed beauty from veiled. And the terry cloth robe slung carelessly over her back, as I’d seen her come out so many times.

She infiltrated into the dress I'd been holding ready for her, and I helped her close the back of it, as I had so many times. Once, in sliding the zipper, I'd accidentally nipped her, and she'd turned partly around and pinched the tip of my nose and playfully shook it back and forth.

We started to dance, her dress floating in my arms, fluttering, rippling, as if it were empty. First in small pivots in the very center of the room. Then expanding into larger but still compact, still tight-knit circles. Then wider all the time, wider and wider still. Wider each moment and wider each move.

I put my hand down on one shoulder, then quickly brought it up again before it even had time to touch. "I just want your voice in my ear. Just want to hear your voice in my ear. Just say my name, just say Cleve, like you used to say Cleve. Just say it once, that'll be my forever, that'll be my all-time, my eternity. I don't want God. This isn't a triangle. There's no room for outsiders in my love for you. Just say it one time more. If you can't say it whole, then say it broken. If you can't say it full, then say it whispered. Cleve."

Then, because it warms you—dancing in a stuffy room—I broke off just long enough to throw both halves of the window apart as far as they would go. It was a picture window and nearly wall-wide. The city smiled in on us from out there, friendly, seeming to understand, sharing our joy and our rapture.

Back again to the spinning rounds of the dance, its tempo slowly mounting in a whirl. The lights, the sky, the monolith in the background swung now to this side, now to that, then all the way around and back again to where they were before, like a painted cyclorama around the outside of a merry-go-round.

Then at last, when we were as far as we could get from it, and it was as far as it could get from us, from all the way back at the back of the room, we turned as one and with

one accord started to run, devotedly, determinedly, yet somehow without grimness, toward it, our arms tight around one another, cheek pressed to cheek. Then at the last moment, instead of turning aside, we crossed the low sill and the ledge beyond with a spreadlegged leap, a buoyant arc, that never came down again—never ever came down again.

And as the suction funneled up around us and life rushed past our heads like the pull of a tornado gone into reverse, I heard someone cry out, “Wait! Let me catch up. Wait for the boy who loves you.”

And the empty music played in an empty room, to a gone love, two gone lives.

FOR THE REST OF HER LIFE

Their eyes met in Rome. On a street in Rome—the Via Piemonte. He was coming down it, coming along toward her, when she first saw him. She didn't know it but he was also coming into her life, into her destiny—bringing what was meant to be.

Every life is a mystery. And every story of every life is a mystery. But it is not what happens that is the mystery. It is whether it has to happen no matter what, whether it is ordered and ordained, fixed and fated, or whether it can be missed, avoided, circumvented, passed by; that is the mystery.

If she had not come along the Via Piemonte that day, would it still have happened? If she had come along the Via Piemonte that day, but ten minutes later than she did, would it still have happened? Therein lies the real mystery. And no one ever knows, and no one ever will.

As their eyes met, they held. For just a heartbeat.

He wasn't cheap. He wasn't sidewalk riffraff. His clothes were good clothes, and his air was a good air.

He was a personable-looking man. First your eye said: he's not young any more, he's not a boy any more. Then your eye said: but he's not old. There was something of youth hovering over and about him, and yet refusing to land in any one particular place. As though it were about to take off and leave him. Yet not quite that either. More as though it had never fully been there in the first place. In short, the

impression it was was agelessness. Not young, not old, not callow, not mature—but ageless. Thirty-six looking fifty-six, or fifty-six looking thirty-six, but which it was you could not say.

Their eyes met—and held. For just a heartbeat.

Then they passed one another by, on the Via Piemonte, but without any turn of their heads to prolong the look.

“I wonder who that was,” she thought.

What he thought couldn’t be known—at least, not by her.

Three nights later they met again, at a party the friend she was staying with took her to.

He came over to her, and she said, “I’ve seen you before. I passed you on Monday on the Via Piemonte. At about four in the afternoon.”

“I remember you too,” he said. “I noticed you that day, going by.”

I wonder why we remember each other like that, she mused; I’ve passed dozens, hundreds, of other people since, and he must have too. I don’t remember any of them.

“I’m Mark Ramsey,” he said.

“I’m Linda Harris.”

An attachment grew up. What is an attachment? It is the most difficult of all the human interrelationships to explain, because it is the vaguest, the most impalpable. It has all the good points of love, and none of its drawbacks. No jealousy, no quarrels, no greed to possess, no fear of losing possession, no hatred (which is very much a part of love), no surge of passion and no hangover afterward. It never reaches the heights, and it never reaches the depths.

As a rule it comes on subtly. As theirs did. As a rule the two involved are not even aware of it at first. As they were not. As a rule it only becomes noticeable when it is interrupted in some way, or broken off by circumstances. As theirs was. In other words, its presence only becomes known in its absence. It is only missed after it stops. While it

is still going on, little thought is given to it, because little thought nerds to be.

It is pleasant to meet, it is pleasant to be together. To put your shopping packages down on a little wire-backed chair at a little table at a sidewalk cafe, and sit down and have a vermouth with someone who has been waiting there for you. And will be waiting there again tomorrow afternoon. Same time, same table, same sidewalk cafe. Or to watch Italian youth going through the gyrations of the latest dance craze in some inexpensive indigenous night-place—while you, who come from the country where the dance originated, only get up to do a sedate fox trot. It is even pleasant to part, because this simply means preparing the way for the next meeting.

One long continuous being-together, even in a love affair, might make the thing wilt. In an attachment it would surely kill the thing off altogether. But to meet, to part, then to meet again in a few days, keeps the thing going, encourages it to flower.

And yet it requires a certain amount of vanity, as love does; a desire to please, to look one's best, to elicit compliments. It inspires a certain amount of flirtation, for the two are of opposite sex. A wink of understanding over the rim of a raised glass, a low-voiced confidential aside about something and the smile of intimacy that answers it, a small impromptu gift—a necktie on the one part because of an accidental spill on the one he was wearing, or of a small bunch of flowers on the other part because of the color of the dress she has on.

So it goes.

And suddenly they part, and suddenly there's a void, and suddenly they discover they have had an attachment.

Rome passed into the past, and became New York.

Now, if they had never come together again, or only after a long time and in different circumstances, then the attachment would have faded and died. But if they suddenly

do come together again—while the sharp sting of missing one another is still smarting—then the attachment will revive full force, full strength. But never again as merely an attachment. It has to go on from there, it has to build, to pick up speed. And sometimes it is so glad to be brought back again that it makes the mistake of thinking it is love.

She was thinking of him at the moment the phone rang. And that helped too, by its immediacy, by its telephonic answer to her wistful wish of remembrance. Memory is a mirage that fools the heart . . .

"You'll never guess what I'm holding in my hand, right while I'm talking to you . . .

"I picked it up only a moment ago, and just as I was standing and looking at it, the phone rang. Isn't that the strangest thing! . . .

"Do you remember the day we stopped in and you bought it . . ."

"I have a little one-room apartment on East 70th Street. I'm by myself now, Dorothy stayed on in Rome . . ."

A couple of months later, they were married . . .

They call this love, she said to herself. I know what it is now. I never thought I would know, but I do now.

But she failed to add: if you can step back and identify it, is it really there? Shouldn't you be unable to know what the whole thing's about? Just blindly clutch and hold and fear that it will get away. But unable to stop, to think, to give it any name.

Just two more people sharing a common human experience. Infinite in its complexity, tricky at times, but almost always successfully surmounted in one of two ways: either blandly content with the results as they are, or else vaguely discontent but chained by habit. Most women don't marry a man, they marry a habit. Even when a habit is

good, it can become monotonous; most do. When it is bad in just the average degree it usually becomes no more than a nuisance and an irritant; and most do.

But when it is darkly, starkly evil in the deepest sense of the word, then it can truly become a hell on earth.

Theirs seemed to fall midway between the first two, for just a little while. Then it started veering over slowly toward the last. Very slowly, at the start, but very steadily.

They spent their honeymoon at a New Hampshire lakeshore resort. This lake had an Indian name which, though grantedly barbaric in sound to the average English-speaker, in her special case presented such an impassable block both in speech and in mental pre-speech imagery (for some obscure reason, Freudian perhaps, or else simply an instinctive retreat from something with distressful connotations) that she gave up trying to say it and it became simply “the lake.” Then as time drew it backward, not into forgetfulness but into distance, it became “that lake.”

Here the first of the things that happened, happened. The first of the things important enough to notice and to remember afterward, among a great many trifling but kindred ones that were not. Some so slight they were not more than gloating, zestful glints of eye or curt hurtful gestures. (Once he accidentally poured a spurt of scalding tea on the back of a waitress’ wrist, by not waiting long enough for the waitress to withdraw her hand in setting the cup down, and by turning his head momentarily the other way. The waitress yelped, and he apologized, but he showed his teeth as he did so, and you don’t show your teeth in remorse.)

One morning when she woke up, he had already dressed and gone out of the room. They had a beautifully situated

front-view of rooms which overlooked the lake itself (the bridal suite, as a matter of fact), and when she went to the window she saw him out there on the white-painted little pier which jutted out into the water on knock-kneed piles. He'd put on a turtle-necked sweater instead of a coat and shirt, and that, over his spare figure, with the shoreward breeze alternately lifting and then flattening his hair, made him look younger than when he was close by. A ripple of the old attraction, of the old attachment, coursed through her and then was quickly gone. Just like the breeze out there. The little sidewalk-cafe chairs of Rome with the braidedwire backs and the piles of parcels on them, where were they now? Gone forever; they couldn't enchant any more.

The lake water was dark blue, pebbly-surfaced by the insistent breeze that kept sweeping it like the strokes of invisible broomstraws, and mottled with gold flecks that were like floating freckles in the nine o'clock September sunshine.

There was a little boy in bathing trunks, tanned as a caramel, sitting on the side of the pier, dangling his legs above the water. She'd noticed him about in recent days. And there was his dog, a noisy, friendly, ungainly little mite, a Scotch terrier that was under everyone's feet all the time.

The boy was throwing a stick in, and the dog was splashing after it, retrieving it, and paddling back. Over and over, with that tirelessness and simplicity of interest peculiar to all small boys and their dogs. Off to one side a man was bringing up one of the motorboats that were for rent, for Mark to take out.

She could hear him in it for a while after that, making a long slashing ellipse around the lake, the din of its vibration alternately soaring and lulling as it passed from the far side to the near and then back to the far side again.

Then it cut off suddenly, and when she went back to look it was rocking there sheepishly engineless. The boy was weeping and the dog lay huddled dead on the lake rim,

strangled by the boiling backwash of the boat that had dragged it—how many times?—around and around in its sweep of the lake. The dog's collar had become snagged some way in a line with a grappling hook attached, left carelessly loose over the side of the boat. (Or aimed and pitched over as the boat went slashing by?) The line trailed limp now, and the lifeless dog had been detached from it.

"If you'd only looked back," the boy's mother said ruefully to Mark. "He was a good swimmer, but I guess the strain was too much and his little heart gave out."

"He did look! He did! He did! I saw him!" the boy screamed agonized, peering accusingly from in back of her skirt.

"The spray was in the way," Mark refuted instantly. But she wondered why he said it so quickly. Shouldn't he have taken a moment's time to think about it first, and then say, "The spray must have been—" or "I guess maybe the spray —" But he said it as quickly as though he'd been ready to say it even before the need had arisen.

Everyone for some reason acted furtively ashamed, as if something unclean had happened. Everyone but the boy of course. There were no adult nuances to his pain.

The boy would eventually forget his dog.

But would she? Would she?

They left the lake—the farewells to Mark were a bit on the cool side, she noticed—and moved into a large rambling country house in the Berkshire region of Massachusetts, not far from Pittsfield, which he told her had been in his family for almost seventy-five years. They had a car, an Alfa-Romeo, which he had brought over from Italy, and, at least in all its outward aspects, they had a not too unpleasant life together. He was an art importer, and financially a highly successful one; he used to commute back and forth to Boston, where he had a gallery with a small-size apartment above it. As a rule he would stay over in the city, and then

drive out Friday night and spend the week-end in the country with her.

(She always slept so well on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. Thursdays she always lay awake half the night reminding herself that the following night was Friday. She never stopped to analyze this; if she had, what would it have told her? What could it have, if she didn't realize it already?)

As far as the house was concerned, let it be said at once that it was not a depressing house in itself. People can take their moods from a house, but by the same token a house can take its mood from the people who live in it. If it became what it became, it was due to him—or rather, her reaction to him.

The interior of the house had crystallized into a very seldom evoked period, the pre-World War I era of rococo and gimcrack elegance. Either its last occupant before them (an unmarried older sister of his) had had a penchant for this out of some girlhood memory of a war-blighted romance and had deliberately tried to recreate it, or what was more likely, all renovations had stopped around that time and it had just stayed that way by default.

Linda discovered things she had heard about but never seen before. Claw legs on the bathtub, nacre in-and-out push buttons for the lights, a hanging stained-glass dome lamp over the dining-room table, a gramophone with a crank handle—she wondered if they'd first rolled back the rug and then danced the hesitation or the one-step to it? The whole house, inside and out, cried out to have women in the straight-up-and-down endlessly long tunics of 1913, with side-puffs of hair over their ears, in patent-leather shoes with beige suede tops up to the middle of the calf, suddenly step out of some of the rooms; and in front of the door, instead of his slender-bodied, bullet-fast Italian compact, perhaps a four-cornered Chalmers or Pierce-

Arrow or Hupmobile shaking all over to the beat of its motor.

Sometimes she felt like an interloper, catching herself in some full-length mirror as she passed it, in her over-the-kneetop skirt and short free down-blown hair. Sometimes she felt as if she were under a magic spell, waiting to be disenchanted. But it wasn't a good kind of spell, and it didn't come wholly from the house or its furnishings.

One day at the home of some people Mark knew who lived in the area, where he had taken her on a New Year's Day drop-in visit, she met a young man named Garrett Hill. He was branch head for a company in Pittsfield.

It was as simple as that—they met. As simple as only beautiful things can be simple, as only life-changing things, turning-point things, can be simple.

Then she met him a second time, by accident. Then a third, by coincidence. A fourth, by chance . . . Or directed by unseen forces?

Then she started to see him on a regular basis, without meaning anything, certainly without meaning any harm. The first night he brought her home they chatted on the way in his car; and then at the door, as he held out his hand, she quickly put hers out of sight behind her back.

"Why are you afraid to shake my hand?"

"I thought you'd hurt me."

"How can anyone hurt you by just shaking your hand?"

When he tried to kiss her, she turned and fled into the house, as frightened as though he'd brandished a whip at her.

When he tried it again, on a later night, again she recoiled sharply—as if she were flinching from some sort of punishment.

He looked at her, and his eyes widened, both in sudden understanding and in disbelief. "You're afraid physically," he said, almost whispering. "I thought it was some wifely

scruple the other night. But you're physically afraid of being kissed! As if there were pain attached to it."

Before she could stop herself or think twice she blurted out, "Well, there is, isn't there?"

He said, his voice deadly serious. "What kind of kissing have you been used to?"

She hung her head. And almost the whole story had been told.

His face was white as a sheet. He didn't say anoher word. But one man understands another well; all are born with that particular insight.

The next week she went into the town to do some small shopping—shopping she could have done as easily over the phone. Did she hope to run across him during the course of it? Is that why she attended to it in person? And after it was taken care of she stopped into a restaurant to sit down over a cup of coffee while waiting for her bus. He came into the place almost immediately afterward; he must have been sitting in his car outside watching for her.

He didn't ask to sit down; he simply leaned over with his knuckles resting on the table, across the way from her, and with a quick back glance toward the door by which he had just entered, took a book out from under his jacket and put it down in front of her, its title visible.

"I sent down to New York to get this for you," he said. "I'm trying to help you in the only way I know how."

She glanced down at it. The title was: The Marquis de Sade. The Complete Writings.

"Who was he?" she asked, looking up. She pronounced it with the long A, as if it were an English name. "Sayd."

"Sod," he instructed. "He was a Frenchman. Just read the book," was all he would say. "Just read the book."

He turned to leave her, and then he came back for a moment and added, "Don't let anyone else see—" Then he changed it to, "Don't let him see you with it. Put a piece of brown wrapping paper around it so the title won't be

conspicuous. As soon as you've finished, bring it back; don't leave it lying around the house."

After he'd gone she kept staring at it. Just kept staring.

They met again three days later at the same little coffee shop off the main business street. It had become their regular meeting place by now. No fixed arrangement to it; he would go in and find her there, or she would go in and find him there.

"Was he the first one?" she asked when she returned the book.

"No, of course not. This is as old as man—this getting pleasure by giving pain. There are some of them born in every generation. Fortunately not too many. He simply was the first one to write it up and so when the world became more specialized and needed a separate tag for everything, they used his name. It became a word—sadism, meaning sexual pleasure got by causing pain, the sheer pleasure of being cruel."

She started shaking all over as if the place were drafty. "It is that." She had to whisper it, she was so heartsick with the discovery. "Oh, God, yes, it is that."

"You had to know the truth. That was the first thing. You had to know, you had to be told. It isn't just a vagary or a whim on his part. It isn't just a—well, a clumsiness or roughness in making love. This is a frightful thing, a deviation, an affliction, and—a terrible danger to you. You had to understand the truth first."

"Sometimes he takes his electric shaver—" She stared with frozen eyes at nowhere out before her. "He doesn't use the shaver itself, just the cord—connects it and—"

She backed her hand into her mouth, sealing it up.

Garrett did something she'd never seen a man do before. His lowered his head, all the way over. Not just onto his chest, but all the way down until his chin was resting on the tabletop. And his eyes, looking up at her, were smoldering red with anger. But literally red, the whites all suffused.

Then something wet came along and quenched the burning in them.

"Now you know what you're up against," he said, straightening finally. "Now what do you want to do?"

"I don't know." She started to sob very gently, in pantomime, without a sound. He got up and stood beside her and held her head pressed against him. "I only know one thing," she said. "I want to see the stars at night again, and not just the blackness and the shadows. I want to wake up in the morning as if it was my right, and not have to say a prayer of thanks that I lived through the night. I want to be able to tell myself there won't be another night like the last one."

The fear Mark had put into her had seeped and oozed into all parts of her; she not only feared fear, she even feared rescue from fear.

"I don't want to make a move that's too sudden," she said in a smothered voice.

"I'll be standing by, when you want to and when you do."

And on that note they left each other. For one more time.

On Friday he was sitting there waiting for her at their regular table, smoking a cigarette. And another lay out in the ashtray, finished. And another. And another.

She came up behind him and touched him briefly but warmly on the shoulder, as if she were afraid to trust herself to speak.

He turned and greeted her animatedly. "Don't tell me you've been in there that long! I thought you hadn't come in yet. I've been sitting out here twenty minutes, watching the door for you."

Then when she sat down opposite him and he got a good look at her face, he quickly sobered.

"I couldn't help it. I broke down in there. I couldn't come out any sooner. I didn't want everyone in the place to see me, the way I was."

She was still shaking irrepressibly from the aftermath of longcontinued sobs.

“Here, have one of these,” he offered soothingly. “May make you feel better—” He held out his cigarettes toward her.

“No!” she protested sharply, when she looked down and saw what it was. She recoiled so violently that her whole chair bounced a little across the floor. He saw the back of her hand go to the upper part of her breast in an unconscious gesture of protection, of warding off.

His face turned white when he understood the implication. White with anger, with revulsion. “So that’s it,” he breathed softly. “My God, oh, my God.”

They sat on for a long while after that, both looking down without saying anything. What was there to say? Two little cups of black coffee had arrived by now—just as an excuse for them to stay there.

Finally he raised his head, looked at her, and put words to what he’d been thinking. “You can’t go back any more, not even once. You’re out of the house and away from it now, so you’ve got to stay out. You can’t go near it again, not even one more time. One more night may be one night too many. He’ll kill you one of these nights—he will even if he doesn’t mean to. What to him is just a thrill, an excitement, will take away your life. Think about that—you’ve got to think about that.”

“I have already,” she admitted. “Often.”

“You don’t want to go to the police?”

“I’m ashamed.” She covered her eyes reluctantly with her hand for a moment. “I know I’m not the one who should be, he’s the one. But I am nevertheless. I couldn’t bear to tell it to an outsider, to put it on record, to file a complaint—it’s so intimate. Like taking off all your clothes in public. I can hardly bring myself even to have you know about it. And I haven’t told you everything—not everything.”

He gave her a shake of the head, as though he knew.

“If I try to hide out in Pittsfield, he’ll find me sooner or later—it’s not that big a place—and come after me and force me to come back, and either way there’ll be a scandal. And I don’t want that. I couldn’t stand that. The newspapers . . .”

All at once, before they quite knew how it had come about, or even realized that it had come about, they were deep in the final plans, the final strategy and staging that they had been drawing slowly nearer and nearer to all these months. Nearer to with every meeting, with every look and with every word. The plans for her liberation and her salvation.

He took her hands across the table.

“No, listen. This is the way, this is how. New York. It has to be New York; he won’t be able to get you back; it’s too big; he won’t even be able to find you. The company’s holding a business conference there on Tuesday, with each of the regional offices sending a representative the way they always do. I was slated to go, long before this came up. I was going to call you on Monday before I left. But what I’m going to do now is to leave ahead of time, tonight, and take you with me.”

He raised one of her hands and patted it encouragingly.

“You wait for me here in the restaurant. I have to go back to the office, wind up a few things, then I’ll come back and pick you up—shouldn’t take me more than half an hour.”

She looked around her uneasily. “I don’t want to sit here alone. They’re already giving me knowing looks each time they pass, the waitresses, as if they sense something’s wrong.”

“Let them, the hell with them,” he said shortly, with the defiance of a man in the opening stages of love.

“Can’t you call your office from here? Do it over the phone?”

“No, there are some papers that have to be signed—they’re waiting for me on my desk.”

“Then you run me back to the house and while you’re doing what you have to at the office I’ll pick up a few things; then you can stop by for me and we’ll start out from there.”

“Isn’t that cutting it a little close?” he said doubtfully. “I don’t want you to go back there.” He pivoted his wrist watch closer to him. “What time does he usually come home on Fridays?”

“Never before ten at night.”

He said the first critical thing he’d ever said to her. “Just like a girl. All for the sake of a hairbrush and a cuddly negligee you’re willing to stick your head back into that house.”

“It’s more than just a hairbrush,” she pointed out. “I have some money there. It’s not his, it’s mine. Even if this friend from my days in Rome—the one I’ve spoken to you about—even if she takes me in with her at the start, I’ll need some money to tide me over until I can get a job and find a place of my own. And there are other things, like my birth certificate, that I may need later on; he’ll never give them up willingly once I leave.”

“All right,” he gave in. “We’ll do it your way.”

Then just before they got up from the table, that had witnessed such a change in both their lives, they gave each other a last look. A last, and yet a first one. And they understood each other.

She didn’t wait for him to say it, to ask it. There is no decorum in desperation, no coyness in a crisis. She knew it had been asked unsaid, anyway. “I want to rediscover the meaning of gentle love. I want to lie in your bed, in your arms. I want to be your wife.”

He took hold of her left hand, raised the third finger, stripped off the wedding band and in its place firmly guided downward a massive fraternity ring that had been on his own hand until that very moment. Heavy, ungainly, much too large for her—and yet everything that love should be.

She put it to her lips and kissed it.

They were married, now.

The emptied ring rolled off the table and fell on the floor, and as they moved away his foot stepped on it, not on purpose, and distorted it into something warped, misshapen, no longer round, no longer true. Like what it had stood for.

He drove her back out to the house and dropped her off at the door, and they parted almost in silence, so complete was their understanding by now, just three muted words between them: “About thirty minutes.”

It was dark now, and broodingly sluggish. Like something supine waiting to spring, with just the tip of its tail twitching. Leaves stood still on the trees. An evil green star glinted in the black sky like a hostile eye, like an evil spying eye.

His car had hummed off; she’d finished and brought down a small packed bag to the ground floor when the phone rang. It would be Garry, naturally, telling her he’d finished at the office and was about to leave.

“Hello—” she began, urgently and vitally and confidentially, the way you share a secret with just one person and this was the one.

Mark’s voice was at the other end.

“You sound more chipper than you usually do when I call up to tell you I’m on the way home.”

Her expectancy stopped. And everything else with it. She didn’t know what to say. “Do I?” And then, “Oh, I see.”

“Did you have a good day? You must have had a very good day.”

She knew what he meant, she knew what he was implying.

“I—I—oh, I did nothing, really. I haven’t been out of the house all day.”

“That’s strange,” she heard him say. “I called you earlier—about an hour ago?” It was a question, a pitfall of a question. “You didn’t come to the phone.”

“I didn’t hear it ring,” she said hastily, too hastily. “I might have been out front for a few minutes. I remember I went out there to broom the gravel in the drivew—”

Too late she realized he hadn’t called at all. But now he knew that she hadn’t been in the house all day, that she’d been out somewhere during part of it.

“I’ll be a little late.” And then something that sounded like “That’s what you want to hear, isn’t it?”

“What?” she said quickly. “What?”

“I said I’ll be a little late.”

“What was it you said after that?”

“What was it you said after that?” he quoted studiedly, giving her back her own words.

She knew he wasn’t going to repeat it, but by that very token she knew she’d heard it right the first time.

He knows, she told herself with a shudder of premonition as she got off the phone and finally away from him. (His voice could hold fast to you and enthrall you too; his very voice could torture you, as well as his wicked, cruel fingers.) He knows there’s someone; he may not know who yet, but he knows there is someone.

A remark from one of the nightmare nights came back to her: “There’s somebody else who wouldn’t do this, isn’t there? There’s somebody else who wouldn’t make you cry.”

She should have told Garry about it long before this. Because now she had to get away from Mark at all cost, even more than she had had to ever before. Now there would be a terrible vindictiveness, a violent jealousy sparking the horrors where before there had sometimes been just an irrational impulse, sometimes dying as quickly as it was born. Turned aside by a tear or a prayer or a run around a chair.

And then another thing occurred to her, and it frightened her even more immediately, here and now. What assurance was there that he was where he’d said he was, still in the city waiting to start out for here? He might have been much

closer, ready to jump out at her unexpectedly, hoping to throw her offguard and catch her away from the house with someone, or (as if she could have possibly been that sort of person) with that someone right here in the very house with her. He'd lied about calling the first time; why wouldn't he lie about where he was?

And now that she thought of it, there was a filling station with a public telephone less than five minutes drive from here, on the main thruway that came up from Boston. An eddy of fear swirled around her, like dust rising off the floor in some barren drafty place. She had to do one of two things immediately—there was no time to do both. Either call Garry at his office and warn him to hurry, that their time limit had shrunk. Or try to trace Mark's call and find out just how much margin of safety was still left to them.

She chose the latter course, which was the mistaken one to choose.

Long before she'd been able to identify the filling station exactly for the information operator to get its number, the whole thing had become academic. There was a slither and shuffle on the gravel outside and a car, someone's car, had come to a stop in front of the house.

Her first impulse, carried out immediately without thinking why, was to snap off all the room lights. Probably so she could see out without being seen from out there.

She sprang over to the window, and then stood there rigidly motionless, leaning a little to peer intently out. The car had stopped at an unlucky angle of perspective—unlucky for her. They had a trellis with tendrils of wisteria twining all over it like bunches of dangling grapes. It blanked out the mid-section of the car, its body shape, completely. The beams of the acetylene-bright headlights shone out past one side, but they told her nothing; they could have come from any car. The little glimmer of color on the driveway, at the other side, told her no more.

She heard the door crack open and clump closed. Someone's feet, obviously a man's, chopped up the wooden steps to the entrance veranda, and she saw a figure cross it, but it was too dark to make out who he was.

She had turned now to face the other way, and without knowing it her hand was holding the place where her heart was. This was Mark's house, he had the front-door key. Garry would have to ring. She waited to hear the doorbell clarinet out and tell her she was safe, she would be loved, she would live.

Instead there was a double click, back then forth, the knob twined around, and the door opened. A spurt of cool air told her it had opened.

Frightened back into childhood fears, she turned and scurried, like some little girl with pigtails flying out behind her, scurried back along the shadowed hall, around behind the stairs, and into a closet that lay back there, remote as any place in the house could be. She pushed herself as far to the back as she could, and crouched down, pulling hanging things in front of her to screen and to protect her, to make her invisible. Sweaters and mackintoshes and old forgotten coveralls. And she hid her head down between her knees—the way children do when a goblin or an ogre is after them, thinking that if they can't see it, that fact alone will make the terror go away.

The steps went up the stairs, on over her, up past her head. She could feel the shake if not hear the sound. Then she heard her name called out, but the voice was blurred by the many partitions and separations between—as if she were listening to it from underwater. Then the step came down again, and the man stood there at the foot of the stairs, uncertain. She tried to teach herself how to forget to breathe, but she learned badly.

There was a little tick! of a sound, and he'd given himself more light. Then each step started to sound clearer than the one before, as the distance to her thinned away. Her

heart began to stutter and turn over, and say: Here he comes, here he comes. Light cracked into the closet around three sides of the door, and two arms reached in and started to make swimming motions among the hanging things, trying to find her.

Then they found her, one at each shoulder, and lifted her and drew her outside to him. (With surprising gentleness.) And pressed her to his breast. And her tears made a new pattern of little wet polka dots all over what had been Garry's solid-colored necktie until now.

All she could say was, "Hurry, hurry, get me out of here!"

"You must have left the door open in your hurry when you came back here. I tried it, found it unlocked, and just walked right in. When I looked back here, I saw that the sleeve of that old smock had got caught in the closet door and was sticking out. Almost like an arm, beckoning me on to show me where you were hiding. It was uncanny. Your guardian angel must love you very much, Linda."

But will he always, she wondered? Will he always?

He took her to the front door, detoured for a moment to pick up the bag, then led her outside and closed the door behind them for good and all.

"Just a minute," she said, and stopped, one foot on the ground, one still on the wooden front steps.

She opened her handbag and took out her key—the key to what had been her home and her marriage. She flung it back at the door, and it hit and fell, with a cheap shabby little clop!—like something of not much value.

Once they were in the car they just drove; they didn't say anything more for a long time.

All the old things had been said. All the new things to be said were still to come.

In her mind's eye she could see the sawtoothed towers of New York climbing slowly up above the horizon before her at the end of the long road. Shimmering there, iridescent, opalescent, rainbows of chrome and glass and hope. Like

Jerusalem, like Mecca, or some other holy spot. Beckoning, offering heaven. And of all the things New York has meant to various people at various times—fame, success, fulfillment—it probably never meant as much before as it meant to her tonight: a place of refuge, a sanctuary, a place to be safe in.

"How long does the trip take?" she asked him wistful-eyed.

"I usually make it in less than four hours. Tonight I'll make it less than three."

I'll never stray out of New York again, she promised herself. Once I'm safely there, I'll never go out in the country again. I never want to see a tree again, except way down below me in Central Park from a window high up.

"Oh, get me there, Garry, get me there."

"I'll get you there," Garry promised, like any new bridegroom, and bent to kiss the hand she had placed over his on the wheel.

Two car headlights from the opposite direction hissed by them—like parallel tracer bullets going so fast they seemed to swirl around rather than undulate with the road's flaws.

She purposely waited a moment, then said in a curiously surreptitious voice, as though it shouldn't be mentioned too loudly, "Did you see that?"

All he answered, noncommitally, was, "Mmm."

"That was the Italian compact."

"You couldn't tell what it was," he said, trying to distract her from her fear. "Went by too fast."

"I know it too well. I recognized it."

Again she waited a moment, as though afraid to make the movement she was about to. Then she turned and looked back, staring hard and steadily into the funneling darkness behind them.

Two back lights had flattened out into a bar, an ingot. Suddenly this flashed to the other side of the road, then reversed. Then, like a ghastly scimitar chopping down all

the tree trunks in sight, the headlights reappeared, round out into two spheres, gleaming, small—but coming back after them.

"I told you. It's turned and doubled back."

He was still trying to keep her from panic. "May have nothing to do with us. May not be the same car we saw go by just now."

"It is. Why would he make a complete about-turn like that in the middle of nowhere. There's no intersection or side road back there—we haven't passed one for miles."

She looked again.

"They keep coming. And they already look bigger than when they started back. I think they're gaining on us."

He said, with an unconcern that he didn't feel, "Then we'll have to put a stop to that."

They burst into greater velocity, with a surge like a forward billow of air.

She looked, and she looked again. Finally to keep from turning so constantly, she got up on the seat on the point of one knee and faced backward, her hair pouring forward all around her, jumping with an electricity that was really speed.

"Stay down," he warned. "You're liable to get thrown that way. We're up to 65 now." He gave her a quick tug for additional emphasis, and she subsided into the seat once more.

"How is it now?" he checked presently. The rear-view mirror couldn't reflect that far back.

"They haven't grown smaller, but they haven't grown larger."

"We've stabilized, then," he translated. "Dead heat."

Then after another while and another look, "Wait a minute!" she said suddenly on a note of breath-holding hope. Then, "no," she mourned quickly afterward. "For a minute I thought—but they're back again. It was only a dip in the road."

“They hang on like leeches, can’t seem to shake them off,” she complained in a fretful voice, as though talking to herself. “Why don’t they go away? Why don’t they?”

Another look, and he could sense the sudden stiffening of her body.

“They’re getting bigger. I know I’m not mistaken.”

He could see that too. They were finally peering into the rearview mirror for the first time. They’d go offside, then they’d come back in again. In his irritation he took one hand off the wheel long enough to give the mirror a backhand slap that moved it out of focus altogether.

“Suppose I stop, get out and face him when he comes up, and we have it out here and now. What can he do? I’m younger, I can outslug him.”

Her refusal to consent was an outright scream of protest. All her fears and all her aversion were in it.

“All right,” he said. “Then we’ll run him into the ground if we have to.”

She covered her face with both hands—not at the speed they were making, but at the futility of it.

“They sure build good cars in Torino, damn them to hell!” he swore in angry frustration.

She uncovered and looked. The headlights were closer than before. She began to lose control of herself.

“Oh, this is like every nightmare I ever had when I was a little girl! When something was chasing me, and I couldn’t get away from it. Only now there’ll be no waking up in the nick of time.”

“Stop that,” he shouted at her. “Stop it. It only makes it worse, it doesn’t help.”

“I think I can feel his breath blowing down the back of my neck.”

He looked at her briefly, but she could tell by the look on his face he hadn’t been able to make out what she’d said.

Streaks of wet that were not tears were coursing down his face in uneven lengths. “My necktie,” he called out to

her suddenly, and raised his chin to show her what he meant. She reached over, careful not to place herself in front of him, and pulled the knot down until it was loose. Then she freed the buttonhole from the top button of his shirt.

A long curve in the road cut them off for a while, from those eyes, those unrelenting eyes behind them. Then the curve ended, and the eyes came back again. It was worse somehow, after they'd been gone like that, than when they remained steadily in sight the whole time.

"He holds on and holds on and holds on—like a mad dog with his teeth locked into you."

"He's a mad dog all right." All pretense of composure had long since left him. He was lividly angry at not being able to win the race, to shake the pursuer off. She was mortally frightened. The long-sustained tension of the speed duel, which seemed to have been going on for hours, compounded her fears, raised them at last to the pitch of hysteria.

Their car swerved erratically, the two outer wheels jogged briefly over marginal stones and roots that felt as if they were as big as boulders and logs. He flung his chest forward across the wheel as if it were something alive that he was desperately trying to hold down; then the car recovered, came back to the road, straightened out safely again with a catarrhal shudder of its rear axle.

"Don't," he warned her tautly in the short-lived lull before they picked up hissing momentum again. "Don't grab me like that again. It went right through the shoulder of my jacket. I can't manage the car, can't hold it, if you do that. I'll get you away. Don't worry, I'll get you away from him."

She threw her head back in despair, looking straight up overhead. "We seem to be standing still. The road has petrified. The trees aren't moving backwards any more. The stars don't either. Neither do the rocks along the side. Oh, faster, Garry, faster!"

“You’re hallucinated. Your senses are being tricked by fear.”

“Faster, Garry, faster!”

“85, 86. We’re on two wheels most of the time—two are off the ground. I can’t even breathe, my breath’s being pulled out of me.”

She started to beat her two clenched fists against her forehead in a tattoo of hypnotic inability to escape. “I don’t care, Garry! Faster, faster! If I’ve got to die, let it be with you, not with him!”

“I’ll get you away from him. If it kills me.”

That was the last thing he said.

If it kills me.

And as though it had overheard, and snatched at the collateral offered it, that unpropitious sickly greenish star up there—surely Mark’s star not theirs—at that very moment a huge tremendous thing came into view around a turn in the road. A skyscraper of a long-haul van, its multiple tiers beaded with red warning lights. But what good were they that high up, except to warn off planes?

It couldn’t maneuver. It would have required a turntable. And they had no time or room.

There was a soft crunchy sound, like someone shearing the top off a soft-boiled egg with a knife. At just one quick slice. Then a brief straight-into-the face blizzard effect, but with tiny particles of glass instead of frozen flakes. Just a one-gust blizzard—and then over with. Then an immense whirl of light started to spin, like a huge Ferris wheel all lit up and going around and around, with parabolas of light streaking off in every direction and dimming. Like shooting stars, or the tails of comets.

Then the whole thing died down and went out, like a blazing amusement park sinking to earth. Or the spouts of illuminated fountains settling back into their basins.

She could tell the side of her face was resting against the ground, because blades of grass were brushing against it

with a feathery tickling feeling. And some inquisitive little insect kept flitting about just inside the rim of her ear. She tried to raise her hand to brush it away, but then forgot where it was and what it was.

But then forgot . . .

When they picked her up at last, more out of this world than in it, all her senses gone except for reflex-actions, her lips were still quivering with the unspoken sounds of "Faster, Garry, faster! Take me away—"

Then the long nights, that were also days, in the hospital. And the long blanks, that were also nights. Needles, and angled glass rods to suck water through. Needles, and curious enamel wedges slid under your middle. Needles, and—needles and needles and needles. Like swarms of persistent mosquitoes with unbreakable drills. The way a pincushion feels, if it could feel. Or the target of a porcupine. Or a case of not just momentary but permanently endured static electricity after you scuff across a woolen rug and then put your finger on a light switch. Even food was a needle—a jab into a vein . . .

Then at last her head cleared, her eyes cleared, her mind and voice came back from where they'd been. Each day she became a little stronger, and each day became a little longer. Until they were back for good, good as ever before. Life came back into her lungs and heart. She could feel it there, the swift current of it. Moving again, eager again. Sun again, sky again, rain and pain and love and hope again. Life again—the beautiful thing called life.

Each day they propped her up in a chair for a little while. Close beside the bed, for each day for a little while longer.

Then at last she asked, after many starts that she could never finish, "Why doesn't Garry come to me? Doesn't he know I've been hurt?"

“Garry can’t come to you,” the nurse answered. And then, in the way that you whip off a bandage that has adhered to a wound fast, in order to make the pain that much shorter than it would be if you lingeringly edged it off a little at a time, then the nurse quickly told her, “Garry won’t come to you anymore.”

The black tears, so many of them, such a rain of them, blotted out the light and brought on the darkness . . .

Then the light was back again, and no more tears. Just—Garry won’t come to you anymore.

Now the silent words were: Not so fast, Garry, not so fast; you’ve left me behind and I’ve lost my way.

Then in a little while she asked the nurse, “Why don’t you ever let me get up from this chair? I’m better now, I eat well, the strength has come back to my arms, my hands, my fingers, my whole body feels strong. Shouldn’t I be allowed to move around and exercise a little? To stand up and take a few steps?”

“The doctor will tell you about that,” the nurse said evasively.

The doctor came in later and he told her about it. Bluntly, in the modern way, without subterfuges and without false hopes. The kind, the sensible, the straight-from-the-shoulder modern way.

“Now listen to me. The world is a beautiful world, and life is a beautiful life. In this beautiful world everything is comparative; luck is comparative. You could have come out of it stone-blind from the shattered glass, with both your eyes gone. You could have come out of it minus an arm, crushed and having to be taken off. You could have come out of it with your face hideously scarred, wearing a repulsive mask for the rest of your life that would make peple sicken and turn away. You could have come out of it dead, as—as someone else did. Who is to say you are lucky, who is to say you are not? You have come out of it beautiful of face. You have come out of it keen and sensitive of mind,

a mind with all the precision and delicate adjustment of the works inside a fine Swiss watch. A mind that not only thinks, but feels. You have come out of it with a strong brave youthful heart that will carry you through for half a century yet, come what may."

"But—"

She looked at him with eyes that didn't fear.

"You will never again take a single step for all the rest of your life. You are hopelessly, irreparably paralyzed from the waist down. Surgery, everything, has been tried. Accept this . . . Now you know—and so now be brave."

"I am. I will be," she said trustfully. "I'll learn a craft of some kind, that will occupy my days and earn me a living. Perhaps you can find a nursing home for me at the start until I get adjusted, and then maybe later I can find a little place all to myself and manage there on my own. There are such places, with ramps instead of stairs—"

He smiled deprecatingly at her oversight.

"All that won't be necessary. You're forgetting. There is someone who will look after you. Look after you well. You'll be in good capable hands. Your husband is coming to take you home with him today."

Her scream was like the death cry of a wounded animal. So strident, so unbelievable, that in the stillness of its aftermath could be heard the slithering and rustling of people looking out the other ward-room doors along the corridor, nurses and ambulatory patients, asking one another what that terrified cry had been and where it had come from.

"Two cc's of M, and hurry," the doctor instructed the nurse tautly. "It's just the reaction from what she's been through. This sometimes happens—going-home happiness becomes hysteria."

The wet kiss of alcohol on her arm. Then the needle again —the needle meant to be kind.

One of them patted her on the head and said, “You’ll be all right now.”

A tear came to the corner of her eyes, and just lay there, unable to retreat, unable to fall . . .

Myopically she watched them dress her and put her in her chair. Her mind remained awake, but everything was downgraded in intensity—the will to struggle had become reluctance, fear had become unease. She still knew there was cause to scream, but the distance had become too great, the message had too far to travel.

Through lazy, contracting pupils she looked over and saw Mark standing in the doorway, talking to the doctor, shaking the nurse’s hand and leaving something behind in it for which she smiled her thanks. Then he went around in back of her wheel chair, with a phantom breath for a kiss to the top of her head, and started to sidle it toward the door that was being held open for the two of them. He tipped the front of the chair ever so slightly, careful to avoid the least jar or impact or roughness, as if determined that she reach her destination with him in impeccable condition, unmarked and unmarred.

And as she craned her neck and looked up overhead, and then around and into his face, backward, the unspoken message was so plain, in his shining eyes and in the grim grin he showed his teeth in, that though he didn’t say it aloud, there was no need to; it reached from his mind into hers without sound or the need of sound just as surely as though he had said it aloud.

Now I’ve got you.

Now he had her—for the rest of her life.

NEW YORK BLUES

It’s six o’clock; my drink is at the three-quarter mark—three-quarters down, not three-quarters up—and the night begins.

Across the way from me sits a little transistor radio, up on end, simmering away like a teakettle on a stove. It’s been going steadily ever since I first came in here, two days, three nights ago; it chisels away the stony silence, takes the edge off the being alone. It came with the room, not with me.

Now there’s a punctuation of three lush chords, and it goes into a traffic report. “Good evening. The New York Municipal Communications Service presents the 6:00 p.m. Traffic Advisory. Traffic through the Holland and Lincoln tunnels and over the George Washington Bridge, heavy westbound, light eastbound. Traffic on the crosscut between the George Washington and Queens-Whitestone bridges, heavy in both directions. Traffic through the Battery Tunnel, heavy outbound, very light inbound. Traffic on the West Side Highway, bumper to bumper all the way. Radar units in operation there. Traffic over the Long Island Expressway is beginning to build, due to tonight’s game at Shea Stadium. West 70th Street between Amsterdam and West End avenues is closed due to a water-main break. A power failure on the East Side I.R.T. line between Grand Central and 125th Street is causing delays of up to forty-five minutes. Otherwise all subways and buses, the Staten

Island Ferry, the Jersey Central, the Delaware and Lackawanna, and the Pennsylvania railroads, and all other commuter services, are operating normally. At the three airports, planes are arriving and departing on time. The next regularly scheduled traffic advisory will be given one-half hour from now—”

The big weekend rush is on. The big city emptying itself out at once. Just a skeleton crew left to keep it going until Monday morning. Everybody getting out—everybody but me, everybody but those who are coming here for me tonight. We’re going to have the whole damned town to ourselves.

I go over to the window and open up a crevice between two of the tightly flattened slats in one of the blinds, and a little parallelogram of a New York street scene, Murray Hill section, six-o’clock-evening hour, springs into view. Up in the sky the upper-echelon light tiers of the Pan Am Building are undulating and rippling in the humidity and carbon monoxide (“Air pollution index: normal, twelve percent; emergency level, fifty percent”).

Down below, on the sidewalk, the glowing green blob of a street light, swollen to pumpkin size by foreshortened perspective, thrusts upward toward my window. And along the little slot that the parted slats make, lights keep passing along, like strung-up, shining, red and white beads. All going just one way, right to left, because 37th Street is westbound, and all going by twos, always by twos, headlights and tails, heads and tails, in a welter of slowed-down traffic and a paroxysm of vituperative horns. And directly under me I hear a taxi driver and would-be fares having an argument, the voices clearly audible, the participants unseen.

“But it’s only to Fifty-ninth Street—”

“I don’t *ca-a-are*, lady. Look, I already tolje. I’m not goin’ up that way. Can’tje get it into your head?”

“Don’t let’s argue with him. Get inside. He can’t put you out.”

“No, but I can refuse to move. Lady, if your husband gets in here, he’s gonna sit still in one place, ’cause I ain’t budgin’.”

New York. The world’s most dramatic city. Like a permanent short circuit, sputtering and sparking up into the night sky all night long. No place like it for living. And probably no place like it for dying.

I take away the little tire jack my fingers have made, and the slats snap together again.

The first sign that the meal I phoned down for is approaching is the minor-key creak from a sharply swerved castor as the room-service waiter rounds a turn outside my door. I’m posted behind a high-backed wing chair, with my wrists crossed over the top of it and my hands dangling like loose claws, staring a little tensely at the door. Then there’s the waiter’s characteristically deferential knock. But I say “Who is it?” anyway, before I go over to open it.

He’s an elderly man. He’s been up here twice before, and by now I know the way he sounds.

“Room service,” comes through in that high-pitched voice his old age has given him.

I release the double lock, then I turn the knob and open the door.

He wheels the little white-clothed dinner cart forward into the room, and as the hall perspective clears behind him I get a blurred glimpse of a figure in motion, just passing from view, then gone, too quickly to be brought into focus.

I stand there a moment, holding the door to a narrow slit, watching the hall. But it’s empty now.

There’s an innocuous explanation for everything. Everything is a coin that has two sides to it, and one side is innocuous but the other can be ominous. The hall makes a right-angle turn opposite my door, and to get to the

elevators, those whose rooms are back of this turn have to pass the little setback that leads to my door.

On the other hand, if someone wanted to pinpoint me, to verify which room I was in, by sighting my face as I opened the door for the waiter, he would do just that: stand there an instant, then quickly step aside out of my line of vision. The optical snapshot I'd had was not of a figure in continuous motion going past my point of view, but of a figure that had first been static and then had flitted from sight.

And if it's that, now they know which room I'm in. Which room on which floor in which hotel.

"Did you notice anyone out there in the hall just now when you came along?" I ask. I try to sound casual, which only makes me not sound casual.

He answers with a question of his own. "*Was* there somebody out in the hall, sir?"

"That's what I asked you, did you see anyone?"

He explains that years of experience in trundling these food-laden carts across the halls have taught him never to look up, never to take his eyes off them, because an unexpected bump on the floor under the carpet might splash ice water out of the glass and wet the tablecloth or spill consommé into its saucer.

It sounds plausible enough. And whether it is or not, I know it's all I'm going to get.

I sign the check for the meal, add the tip, and tell him to put it on the bill. Then just as he turns to leave I remember something I want to do.

"Just a second; that reminds me." I shoot one of my cuffs forward and twist something out of it. Then the other one. And I hold out my hand to him with the two star-sapphire cuff links he admired so much last night. (Innocently, I'm sure, with no venal intent.)

He says I'm not serious, I must be joking. He says he can't take anything like that. He says all the things he's expected

to say, and I override them. Then, when he can't come up with anything else, he comes up with, half-hopefully (hopeful for a yes answer): "You tired of them?"

"No," I say quite simply, "no—they're tired of me."

He thanks me over and thanks me under and thanks me over again, and then he's gone, and I'm glad he's gone.

Poor old man, wasting his life bringing people their meals up to their rooms for thirty-five, forty-odd years. He'll die in peace, though. Not in terror and in throes of resistance. I almost envy him.

I turn my head a little. The radio's caroling "Tonight," velvety smooth and young and filled with plaintive desire. Maria's song from *West Side Story*. I remember one beautiful night long ago at the Winter Garden, with a beautiful someone beside me. I tilt my nose and breathe in, and I can still smell her perfume, the ghost of her perfume from long ago. But where is she now, where did she go, and what did I *do* with her?

Our paths ran along so close together they were almost like one, the one they were eventually going to be. Then fear came along, fear entered into it somehow, and split them wide apart.

Fear bred anxiety to justify. Anxiety to justify bred anger. The phone calls that wouldn't be answered, the door rings that wouldn't be opened. Anger bred sudden calamity.

Now there aren't two paths anymore; there's only one, only mine. Running downhill into the ground, running downhill into its doom.

* * * *

Tonight, tonight—there will be no morning star—Right, kid, there won't. Not for me, anyway.

There's a tap at the door, made with the tip of a key, not the tip of a finger. The voice doesn't wait, but comes right through before the signal has a chance to freeze me stiff. A woman's voice, soft-spoken, reassuring. "Night maid."

I wait a second to let a little of the white drain from my face before she sees me, and then I go over and let her in.

Her name is Ginny. She told me last night. I asked her, that's why she told me. I wanted to hear the sound of somebody's name, that's why I asked her. I was frightened and lonely, that's why I wanted to hear the sound of somebody's name.

On her face the beauty of two races blends, each contributing its individual hallmark. The golden-warm skin, the deep glowing eyes, the narrow-tipped nose, the economical underlip.

While she's turning back the bedcovers in a neat triangle over one corner, I remark, "I notice you go around the outside of the room to get to the bed, instead of cutting across the middle, which would be much shorter. Why do you?"

She answers plausibly, "People are often watching their television sets at this time, when I come in, and I don't want to block them off."

I point out, "But mine isn't on, Ginny."

I see how the pupils of her eyes try to flee, to get as far away from looking at me as possible, all the way over into their outside corners. And that gives it away. She's afraid of me. The rumors have already reached her. A hotel is like a beehive when it comes to gossip. *He never leaves his room, has all his meals sent up to him, and keeps his door locked all the time*.

"I want to give you something," I say to her. "For that little girl of yours you were telling me about."

I take a hundred-dollar bill out of the wallet on my hip. I fold the bill a few times so that the corner numerals disappear, then thrust it between two of her fingers.

She sees the "1" first as the bill slowly uncoils. Her face is politely appreciative.

She sees the first zero next—that makes it a ten. Her face is delighted, more than grateful.

She sees the last zero. Suddenly her face is fearful, stunned into stone; in her eyes I can see steel filings of mistrust glittering. Her wrist flexes to shove the bill back to me, but I ward it off with my hand upended.

I catch the swift side glance she darts at the fifth of rye on the side table.

“No, it didn’t come out of that. It’s just an impulse—came out of my heart, I suppose you could say. Either take it or don’t take it, but don’t spoil it.”

“But why? What for?”

“Does there have to be a reason for everything? Sometimes there isn’t.”

“I’ll buy her a new coat,” she says huskily. “A new pink coat like little girls all seem to want. With a little baby muff of lamb’s wool to go with it. And I’ll say a prayer for you when I take her to church with me next Sunday.”

It won’t work, but—“Make it a good one.”

The last part is all she hears.

Something occurs to me. “You won’t have to do any explaining to her father, will you?”

“She has no father,” she says quite simply. “She’s never had. There’s only me and her, sir.”

Somehow I can tell by the quick chip-chop of her feet away from my door that it’s not lost time she’s trying to make up; it’s the tears starting in her eyes that she wants to hide.

I slosh a little rye into a glass—a fresh glass, not the one before; they get rancid from your downbreaths that cling like a stale mist around the inner rim. But it’s no help; I know that by now, and I’ve been dousing myself in it for three days. It just doesn’t take hold. I think fear neutralizes alcohol, weakens its anesthetic power. It’s good for small fears; your boss, your wife, your bills, your dentist; all right then to take a drink. But for big ones it doesn’t do any good. Like water on blazing gasoline, it will only quicken and compound it. It takes sand, in the literal and the slang

sense, to smother the bonfire that is fear. And if you're out of sand, then you must burn up.

I have it out now, paying it off between my fingers like a rosary of murder. Those same fingers that did it to her. For three days now I've taken it out at intervals, looked at it, then hidden it away again. Each time wondering if it really happened, hoping that it didn't, dreading that it did.

It's a woman's scarf; that much I know about it. And that's about all. But whose? Hers? And how did I come by it? How did it get into the side pocket of my jacket, dangling on the outside, when I came in here early Wednesday morning in some sort of traumatic daze, looking for room walls to hide inside of as if they were a folding screen. (I didn't even know I had it there; the bellboy who was checking me in spotted it on the way up in the elevator, grinned, and said something about a "heavy date.")

It's flimsy stuff, but it has a great tensile strength when pulled against its grain. The strength of the garotte. It's tinted in pastel colors that blend, graduate, into one another, all except one. It goes from a flamingo pink to a peach tone and then to a still paler flesh tint—and then suddenly an angry, jagged splash of blood color comes in, not even like the others. Not smooth, not artificed by some loom or by some dye vat. Like a star, like the scattered petals of a flower. Speaking of—I don't know how to say it—speaking of violence, of struggle, of life spilled out.

The blood isn't red anymore. It's rusty brown now. But it's still blood, all the same. Ten years from now, twenty, it'll still be blood; faded out, vanished, the pollen of, the dust of, blood. What was once warm and moving. And made blushes and rushed with anger and paled with fear. Like that night—I can still see her eyes. They still come before me, wide and white and glistening with fright, out of the amnesiac darkness of our sudden, unpremeditated meeting.

They were like two pools of fear. She saw something that I couldn't see. And fear kindled in them. I feared and I

mistrusted but I couldn't bear to see my fear reflected in her eyes. From her I wanted reassurance, consolation; only wanted to draw her close to me and hold her to me, to lean my head against her and rest and draw new belief in myself. Instead she met my fear with her fear. Eyes that should have been tender were glowing with unscreaming fear.

It wasn't an attack. We'd been together too many times before, made love together too many times before, for it to be that. It was just that fear had suddenly entered, and made us dangerous strangers.

She turned and tried to run. I caught the scarf from behind. Only in supplication, in pleading; trying to hold on to the only one who could save me. And the closer I tried to draw her to me, the less she was alive. Until finally I got her all the way back to me, where I wanted her to be, and she was dead.

I hadn't wanted that. It was only love, turned inside out. It was only loneliness, outgoing.

And now I'm alone, without any love.

And the radio, almost as if it were taking my pulse count, electrographing my heartbeats, echoes them back to me: *For, like caressing an empty glove, Is night without some love, The night was made for—*

The hotel room ashtrays are thick glass cubes, built to withstand cracking under heat of almost any degree. I touch my lighter to it, to the scarf compressed inside the cube. The flame points upward like a sawtoothed orange knife. There goes love. After a while it stops burning. It looks like a black cabbage, each leaf tipped by thin red lines that waver and creep back and forth like tiny red worms. Then one by one they go out.

I dump it into the bathroom bowl and flip the lever down. What a hell of a place for your love to wind up. Like something disembowled.

I go back and pour out a little more. It's the seat belt against the imminent smash-up, the antidote for terror, the

prescription against panic. Only it doesn't work. I sit there dejectedly, wrists looping down between my legs. I'm confused; I can't think it out. Something inside my mind keeps fogging over, like mist on a windshield. I use the back of my hand for a windshield wiper and draw it slowly across my forehead a couple times, and it clears up again for a little while.

"Remember," the little radio prattles. "Simple headache, take aspirin. Nervous tension, take—"

All I can say to myself is: there *is* no fix for the fix you're in now.

Suddenly the phone peals, sharp and shattering as the smashing of glass sealing up a vacuum. I never knew a sound could be so frightening, never knew a sound could be so dire. It's like a short circuit in my nervous system. Like springing a cork in my heart with a lopsided opener. Like a shot of sodium pentathol up my arm knocking out my will power.

All I keep thinking is: this is it. Here it is. It's not a hotel-service call, it can't be, not at this hour anymore. The waiter's been and gone, the night maid's been and gone. It can't be an outside call, because nobody on the outside knows I'm here in the hotel. Not even where I work, where I used to work, they don't know. This is it; it's got to be.

How will they put it? A polite summons. "Would you mind coming down for a minute, sir?" And then if I do, a sudden preventive twisting of my arm behind my back as I step out of the elevator, an unnoticeable flurry tactfully covered up behind the backs of the bellboys—then quickly out and away.

Why don't they come right up here to my door and get me? Is it because this is a high-class hotel on a high-class street? Maybe they don't want any commotion in the hall, for the sake of the other guests. Maybe this is the way they always do it.

Meanwhile it keeps ringing and ringing and ringing.

The damp zigzag path my spilled drink made, from where I was to where I am now, is slowly soaking into the carpet and darkening it. The empty glass, dropped on the carpet, has finished rocking on its side by now and lies still. And I've fallen motionless into the grotesque posture of a badly frightened kid. Almost prone along the floor, legs sprawled out in back of me in scissors formation, just the backs of my two hands grasping the edge of the low stand the phone sits on, and the rim of it cutting across the bridge of my nose so that just two big staring, straining eyes show up over the top.

And it rings on and on and on.

Then all at once an alternative occurs to me. Maybe it's a wrong-number call, meant for somebody else. Somebody in another room, or somebody in this room who was in it before I came. Hotel switchboards are overworked places: slip-ups like that can happen now and then.

I bet I haven't said a prayer since I finished my grammar-school final-exam paper in trigonometry (and flunked it; maybe that's why I haven't said a prayer since), and that was more a crossed-fingers thing held behind my back than a genuine prayer. I say one now. What a funny thing to pray for. I bet nobody ever prayed for a wrong number before, not since telephones first began. Or since prayers first began, either.

Please, make it a mistake and not for me. Make it a mistake.

Suddenly there's open space between the cradle and the receiver, and I've done it. I've picked it up. It's just as easy as pulling out one of your own teeth by the roots.

The prayer gets scratched. The call is for me, it's not a wrong number. For me, all right, every inch of the way. I can tell from the opening words. Only—it's not the one I feared; it's friendly, a friendly call no different from what other people get.

A voice from another world, almost. Yet I know it so well. Always like this, never a cloud on it; always jovial, always noisy. When a thing should be said softly, it says it loudly; when a thing should be said loudly, it says it louder still. He never identifies himself, never has to. Once you've heard his voice, you'll always know him.

That's Johnny for you—the pal of a hundred parties. The bar-kick of scores of binges. The captain of the second-string team in how many foursome one-night stands? Every man has had a Johnny in his life sometime or other.

He says he's been calling my apartment since Wednesday and no answer: what happened to me?

I play it by ear. "Water started to pour down through the ceiling, so I had to clear out till they get it repaired. . .. No, I'm not on a tear. . .. No, there's nobody with me, I'm by myself. . .. Do I? Sound sort of peculiar? No, I'm all right there's nothing the matter, not a thing."

I pass my free hand across the moist glisten on my forehead. It's tough enough to be in a jam, but it's tougher still to be in one and not be able to say you are.

"How did you know I was here? How did you track me to this place? . . . You went down the yellow pages, hotel by hotel, alphabetically. Since three o'clock yesterday afternoon? . . . Something to tell me?"

His new job had come through. He starts on Monday. With a direct line, and two, count 'em, two secretaries, not just one. And the old bunch is giving him a farewell party. A farewell party to end all farewell parties. Sardi's, on 44th. Then they'll move on later to some other place. But they'll wait here at Sardi's for me to catch up. Barb keeps asking, Why isn't your best-man-to-be here with us?

The noise of the party filters through into my ear. Ice clicking like dice in a fast-rolling game. Mixing sticks sounding like tiny tin flutes as they beat against glass. The laughter of girls, the laughter of men. Life is for the living, not the already dead.

“Sure, I’ll be there. Sure.”

If I say I won’t be—and I won’t, because I can’t—he’ll never quit pestering and calling me the rest of the night. So I say that I will, to get off the hook. But how can I go there, drag my trouble before his party, before his friends, before his girl? And if I go, it’ll just happen there instead of here. Who wants a grandstand for his downfall? Who wants bleachers for his disgrace?

Johnny’s gone now, and the night goes on.

Now the evening’s at its noon, its meridian. The outgoing tide has simmered down, and there’s a lull—like the calm in the eye of a hurricane—before the reverse tide starts to set in.

The last acts of the three-act plays are now on, and the after-theater eating places are beginning to fill up with early comers; Danny’s and Lindy’s—yes, and Horn & Hardart too. Everybody has got where they wanted to go—and that was out somewhere. Now everybody will want to get back where they came from—and that’s home somewhere. Or as the coffee-grinder radio, always on the beam, put it at about this point: *New York, New York, it’s a helluva town, The Bronx is up, the Battery’s down, And the people ride around in a hole in the ground—*

Now the incoming tide rolls in; the hours abruptly switch back to single digits again, and it’s a little like the time you put your watch back on entering a different time zone. Now the buses knock off and the subway expresses turn into locals and the locals space themselves far apart; and as Johnny Carson’s face hits millions of screens all at one and the same time, the incoming tide reaches its crest and pounds against the shore. There’s a sudden splurge, a slew of taxis arriving at the hotel entrance one by one as regularly as though they were on a conveyor belt, emptying out and then going away again.

Then this too dies down, and a deep still sets in. It’s an around-the-clock town, but this is the stretch; from now

until the garbage-grinding trucks come along and tear the dawn to shreds, it gets as quiet as it's ever going to get.

This is the deep of the night, the dregs, the sediment at the bottom of the coffee cup. The blue hours; when guys' nerves get tauter and women's fears get greater. Now guys and girls make love, or kill each other or sometimes both. And as the windows on the *Late Show* title silhouette light up one by one, the real ones all around go dark. And from now on the silence is broken only by the occasional forlorn hoot of a bogged-down drunk or the gutted-cat squeal of a too sharply swerved axle coming around a turn. Or as Billy Daniels sang it in *Golden Boy: While the city sleeps, And the streets are clear, There's a life that's happening here—*

In the pin-drop silence a taxi comes up with an unaccompanied girl in it. I can tell it's a taxi, I can tell it's a girl, and I can tell she's unaccompanied; I can tell all three just by her introductory remark.

"Benny," she says, "will you come over and pay this for me?"

Benny is the hotel night-service man. I know his name; he brought drinks up to the room last night.

As the taxi drives away paid, Benny reminds her with aloof dignity, "You didn't give me my cut last week." Nothing personal, strictly business, you understand.

"I had a virus week before last," she explains. "And it took me all last week to pay off on my doctor bills. I'll square it with you tonight." Then she adds apprehensively, "I'm afraid he'll hurt me." Not her doctor, obviously.

"Na, he won't hurt you," Benny reassures.

"How would you know?" she asks, not unreasonably.

Benny culls from his store of call-girl-sponsorship experience. "These big guys never hurt you. They're meek as mice. It's the little shrimps got the sting."

She goes ahead in. A chore is a chore, she figures.

This of course is what is known in hotel-operational jargon as a "personal call." In the earthier slang of the

night bellmen and deskmen it is simply a “fix” or a “fix-up.” The taxi fare, of course, will go down on the guest’s bill, as “Misc.” or “Sundries.” Which actually is what it is. From my second-floor window I can figure it all out almost without any sound track to go with it.

So much for the recreational side of night life in the upper-bracket-income hotels of Manhattan. And in its root-origins the very word itself is implicit with implication: re-create. Analyze it and you’ll see it also means to reproduce. But clever, ingenious Man has managed to sidetrack it into making life more livable.

The wafer of ice riding the surface of my drink has melted freakishly in its middle and not around its edges and now looks like an onion ring. Off in the distance an ambulance starts bansheeing with that new broken-blast siren they use, scalp-crimping as the cries of pain of a partly dismembered hog. Somebody dead in the night? Somebody sick and going to be dead soon? Or maybe somebody going to be alive soon—did she wait too long to start for the hospital?

All of a sudden, with the last sound there’s been all night, I can tell they’re here. Don’t ask me how, I only know they’re here. It’s beginning at last. No way out, no way aside and no way back.

Being silent is their business, and they know their business well. They make less sound than the dinner cart crunching along the carpeted hall, than Ginny’s stifled sob when I gave her that hundred-dollar bill, than the contestants bickering over the taxi. Or that girl who was down there just a little while ago on her errand of fighting loneliness for a fee.

How can I tell that they’re here? By the absence of sound more than by its presence. Or I should say by the absence of a complementary sound—the sound that belongs with another sound and yet fails to accompany it.

Like:

There’s no sound of arrival, but suddenly two cars are in place down there along the hotel front. They must have come up on the glide, as noiselessly as a sailboat skimming over still water. No sound of tires, no sound of brakes. But there’s one sound they couldn’t quite obliterate—the cushioned thump of two doors closing after them in quick succession, staccato succession, as they spilled out and siphoned into the building. You can always tell a car door, no other door sounds quite like it.

There’s only one other sound, a lesser one, a sort of follow-up: the scratch of a single sole against the abrasive sidewalk as they go hustling in. He either put it down off-balance or swiveled it too acutely in treading at the heels of those in front of him. Which is a good average, just one to sound off, considering that six or eight pairs of them must have been all going in at the same time and moving fast.

I’ve sprung to my feet from the very first, and I’m standing there now like an upright slab of ice carved in the outline of a man—burning-cold and slippery-wet and glassy with congealment. I’ve put out all the lights—they all work on one switch over by the door as you come in. They’ve probably already seen the lights though if they’ve marked the window from outside, and anyway, what difference does it make? Lighted up or dark, I’m still here inside the room. It’s just some instinct as old as fear: you seek the dark when you hide, you seek the light when the need to hide is gone. All the animals have it too.

Now they’re in, and it will take just a few minutes more while they make their arrangements. That’s all I have left, a few minutes more. Out of a time allotment that once stretched so far and limitlessly ahead of me. Who short-changed me, I feel like crying out in protest, but I know that nobody did; I short-changed myself.

“It,” the heartless little radio jeers, “takes the worry out of being close.”

Why is it taking them such a long time? What do they have to do, improvise as they go along? What for? They already knew what they had to do when they set out to come here.

I'm sitting down again now, momentarily; knees too rocky for standing long. Those are the only two positions I have left; no more walking, no more running, no more anything else now. Only stand up and wait or sit down and wait. I need a cigarette terribly bad. It may be a funny time to need one, but I do. I dip my head down between my outspread legs and bring the lighter up from below, so its shine won't glow through the blind-crevices. As I said, it doesn't make sense, because they know I'm here. But I don't want to do anything to quicken them. Even two minutes of grace is better than one. Even one minute is better than none.

Then suddenly my head comes up again, alerted. I drop the cigarette, still unlit. First I think the little radio has suddenly jumped in tone, started to come on louder and more resonant, as if it were spooked. Until it almost sounds like a car radio out in the open. Then I turn my head toward the window. It is a car radio. It's coming from outside into the room.

And even before I get up and go over to take a look, I think there's something familiar about it, I've heard it before, just like this, just the way it is now. This sounding-board effect, this walloping of the night like a drum, this ricochet of blast and din from side to side of the street, bouncing off the house fronts like a musical handball game.

Then it cuts off short, the after-silence swells up like a balloon ready to pop, and as I squint out, it's standing still down there, the little white car, and Johnny is already out of it and standing alongside.

He's come to take me to the party.

He's parked on the opposite side. He starts to cross over to the hotel. Someone posted in some doorway whistles to

attract his attention. I hear it up at the window. Johnny stops, turns to look around, doesn't see anyone.

He's frozen in the position in which the whistle caught him. Head and shoulders turned inquiringly half around, hips and legs still pointed forward. Then a man, some anonymous man, glides up beside him from the street.

I told you he talks loud; on the phone, in a bar, on a street late at night. Every word he says I hear; not a word the other man says.

First, "Who is? What kind of trouble?"

Then, "You must mean somebody else."

Next, "Room 207. Yeah, that's right, 207."

That's my room number.

"How'd you know I was coming here?"

Finally, "You bugged the call I made to him before!"

Then the anonymous man goes back into the shadows, leaving Johnny in mid-street, taking it for granted he'll follow him as he was briefed to do, commanded to do.

But Johnny stands out there, alone and undecided, feet still one way, head and shoulders still the other. And I watch him from the window crevice. And the stakeout watches him from his invisible doorway.

Now a crisis arises. Not in my life, because that's nearly over; but in my illusions.

Will he go to his friend and try to stand by him, or will he let his friend go by?

He can't make it, sure I know that, he can never get in here past them; but he *can* make the try, there's just enough slack for him to do that. There's still half the width of the street ahead of him clear and untrammeled, for him to try to bolt across, before they spring after him and rough him up and fling him back. It's the token of the thing that would count, not the completion.

But it doesn't happen that way, I keep telling myself knowingly and sadly. Only in our fraternity pledges and masonic inductions, our cowboy movies and magazine

stories, not in our real-life lives. For, the seventeenth-century humanist to the contrary, each man *is* an island complete unto himself, and as he sinks, the moving feet go on around him, from nowhere to nowhere and with no time to lose. The world is long past the Boy Scout stage of its development; now each man dies as he was meant to die, and as he was born, and as he lived: alone, all alone. Without any God, without any hope, without any record to show for his life.

My throat feels stiff, and I want to swallow but I can't. Watching and waiting to see what my friend will do.

He doesn't move, doesn't make up his mind, for half a minute, and that half a minute seems like an hour. He's doped by what he's been told, I guess. And I keep asking myself while the seconds are ticking off: What would *I* do? If there were me down there, and he were up here: What would *I* do? And I keep trying not to look the answer in the face, though it's staring at me the whole time.

You haven't any right to expect your friends to be larger than yourself, larger than life. Just take them as they are, cut down to average size, and be glad you have them. To drink with, laugh with, borrow money from, lend money to, stay away from their special girls as you want them to stay away from yours, and above all, never break your word to, once it's been given.

And that is all the obligation you have, all you have the right to expect.

The half-minute is up, and Johnny turns, slowly and reluctantly, but he turns, and he goes back to the opposite side of the street. The side opposite to me.

And I knew all along that's what he would do, because I knew all along that's what I would have done too.

I think I hear a voice say slurredly somewhere in the shadows, "That's the smart thing to do," but I'm not sure. Maybe I don't, maybe it's me I hear.

He gets back in the car, shoulders sagging, and keys it on. And as he glides from sight the music seems to start up almost by itself; it's such second nature for him to have it on by now. It fades around the corner building, and then a wisp of it comes back just once more, carried by some cross-current of the wind: *Fools rush in, Where wise men never dare to go*—and then it dies away for good.

I bang my crushed-up fist against the center of my forehead, bring it away, then bang it again. Slow but hard. It hurts to lose a long-term friend, almost like losing an arm. But I never lost an arm, so I really wouldn't know.

Now I can swallow, but it doesn't feel good anymore.

I hear a marginal noise outside in the hall, and I swing around in instant alert. It's easy enough to decipher it. A woman is being taken from her room nearby—in case the going gets too rough around here in my immediate vicinity, I suppose.

I hear them tap, and then she comes out and accompanies them to safety. I hear the slap-slap of her bedroom slippers, like the soft little hands of children applauding in a kindergarten, as she goes hurrying by with someone. Several someones. You can't hear them, only her, but I know they're with her. I even hear the soft *sch sch* of her silk wrapper or kimono as it rustles past. A noticeable whiff of sachet drifts in through the door seam. She must have taken a bath and powdered herself liberally just moments ago.

Probably a nice sort of woman, unused to violence or emergencies of this sort, unsure of what to bring along or how to comport herself.

"I left my handbag in there," I hear her remark plaintively as she goes by. "Do you think it'll be all right to leave it there?"

Somebody's wife, come to meet him in the city and waiting for him to join her. Long ago I used to like that kind of woman. Objectively, of course, not close-up.

After she’s gone, another brief lull sets in. This one is probably the last. But what good is a lull? It’s only a breathing spell in which to get more frightened. Because anticipatory fear is always twice as strong as present fear. Anticipatory fear has both fears in it at once—the anticipatory one and the one that comes simultaneously with the dread happening itself. Present fear only has the one, because by that time anticipation is over.

I switch on the light for a moment, to see my way to a drink. The one I had is gone—just what used to be ice is sloshing colorlessly in the bottom of the glass. Then when I put the recharged glass down again, empty, it seems to pull me after it, as if it weighed so much I couldn’t let go of it from an upright position. Don’t ask me why this is, I don’t know. Probably simple loss of equilibrium for a second, due to the massive infusion of alcohol.

Then with no more warning, no more waiting, with no more of anything, it begins. It gets under way at last.

There is a mild-mannered knuckle rapping at the door. They use my name. A voice, mild-mannered also, says in a conciliatory way, “Come out, please. We want to talk to you.” “Punctilious,” I guess, would be a better word for it. The etiquette of the forcible entry, of the break-in. They’re so considerate, so deferential, so attentive to all the niceties. Hold your head steady, please, we don’t want to nick your chin while we’re cutting your throat.

I don’t answer.

I don’t think they expected me to. If I had answered, it would have astonished them, thrown them off their timing for a moment.

The mild-voiced man leaves the door and somebody else takes his place. I can sense the shifting over more by intuition than by actual hearing.

A wooden toolbox or carryall of some sort settles down noisily on the floor outside the door. I can tell it’s wooden, not by its floor impact but by the “settling” sound that

accompanies it, as if a considerable number of loose and rolling objects in it are chinking against its insides. Nails and bolts and awls and screwdrivers and the like. That tells me that it's a kit commonly used by carpenters and locksmiths and their kind.

They're going to take the lock off bodily from the outside.

A cold surge goes through me that I can't describe. It isn't blood. It's too numbing and heavy and cold for that. And it breaks through the skin surface, which blood doesn't ordinarily do without a wound, and emerges into innumerable sting pin pricks all over me. An ice-sweat.

I can see him (not literally, but just as surely as if I could), down on one knee, and scared, probably as scared as I am myself, pressing as far back to the side out of the direct line of the door as he can, while the others, bunched together farther back, stand ready to cover him, to pile on me and bring me down if I should suddenly break out and rush him.

And the radio tells me sarcastically to "Light up, you've got a good thing going."

I start backing away, with a sleepwalker's fixity, staring at the door as I retreat, or staring at where I last saw it, for I can't see it in the dark. What good would it do to stay close to it, for I can't hold it back, I can't stop it from opening. And as I go back step after step, my tongue keeps tracking the outside outline of my lips, as if I wondered what they were and what they were there for.

A very small sound begins. I don't know how to put it. Like someone twisting a small metal cap to open a small medicine bottle, but continuously, without ever getting it off. He's started already. He's started coming in.

It's terrible to hear that little thing move. As if it were animate, had a life of its own. Terrible to hear it move and to know that a hostile agency, a hostile presence, just a few feet away from me, is what is making it move. Such a little thing, there is almost nothing smaller, only the size of a pinhead perhaps, and yet to create such terror and to be

capable of bringing about such a shattering end-result: entry, capture, final loss of reason, and the darkness that is worse than death. All from a little thing like that, turning slowly, secretively, but avidly, in the lockplate on the door, on the door into my room.

I have to get out of here. Out. I have to push these walls apart, these foursquare tightly seamed walls, and make space wide enough to run in, and keep running through it, running and running through it, running and running through it, and never stopping. Until I drop. And then still running on and on, inside my head. Like a watch with its case smashed open and lying on the ground, but with the works still going inside it. Or like a cockroach when you knock it over on its back so that it can't ambulate anymore, but its legs still go spiraling around in the air.

The window. They're at the door, but the window—that way out is still open. I remember when I checked in here the small hours of Wednesday, I didn't ask to be given a room on the second floor, they just happened to give me one. Then when I saw it later that day in the light, I realized the drop to the ground from one of the little semicircular stone ledges outside the windows wouldn't be dangerous, especially if you held a pillow in front of you, and remembered to keep your chin tilted upward as you went over. Just a sprawling shake-up fall maybe, that's all.

I pull at the blind cords with both hands, and it spasms upward with a sound like a lot of little twigs being stepped on and broken. I push up the window sash and assume a sitting position on the sill, then swing my legs across and I'm out in the clear, out in the open night.

The little stone apron has this spiked iron rail guard around it, with no space left on the outer side of it to plant your feet before you go over. You have to straddle it, which makes for tricky going. Still, necessity can make you dexterous, terror can make you agile. I won't go back inside for the pillow, there isn't time. I'll take the leap neat.

The two cars that brought them here are below, and for a moment, only for a moment, they look empty, dark and still and empty, standing bumper to bumper against the curb. Someone gives a warning whistle—a lip whistle, I mean, not a metal one. I don't know who, I don't know where, somewhere around. Then an angry, ugly, smoldering, car-bound orange moon starts up, lightens to yellow, then brightens to the dazzling white of a laundry-detergent commercial. The operator guiding it slants it too high at first, and it lands over my head. Like a halo. *Some* halo and *some time* for a halo. Then he brings it down and it hits me as if someone had belted me full across the face with a talcum-powder puff. You can't see through it, you can't see around it.

Shoe leather comes padding from around the corner—maybe the guy that warded off Johnny—and stops directly under me. I sense somehow he's afraid, just as I am. That won't keep him from doing what he has to do, because he's got the backing on his side. But he doesn't like this. I shield my eyes from the light on one side, and I can see his anxious face peering up at me. All guys are scared of each other, didn't you know that? I'm not the only one. We're all born afraid.

I can't shake the light off. It's like ghostly flypaper. It's like slapstick-thrown yoghurt. It clings to me whichever way I turn.

I hear his voice talking to me from below. Very near and clear. As if we were off together by ourselves somewhere, just chatting, the two of us.

"Go back into your room. We don't want you to get hurt." And then a second time: "Go back in. You'll only get hurt if you stand out here like this."

I'm thinking, detached, as in a dream: I didn't know they were this considerate. Are they always this considerate? When I was a kid back in the forties, I used to go to those tough-guy movies a lot. Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Cagney.

And when they had a guy penned in, they used to be tough about it, snarling: “Come on out of there, yuh rat, we’ve got yuh covered!” I wonder what has changed them? Maybe it’s just that time has moved on. This is the sixties now.

What’s the good of jumping now? Where is there to run to now? And the light teases my eyes. I see all sorts of interlocked and colored soap bubbles that aren’t there.

It’s more awkward getting back inside than it was getting out. And with the light on me, and them watching me, there’s a self-consciousness that was missing in my uninhibited outward surge. I have to straighten out one leg first and dip it into the room toes forward, the way you test the water in a pool before you jump in. Then the other leg, and then I’m in. The roundness of the light beam is broken into long thin tatters as the blind rolls down over it, but it still stays on out there.

There are only two points of light in the whole room—I mean, in addition to the indirect reflection through the blind. Which gives off a sort of phosphorescent haziness—two points so small that if you didn’t know they were there and looked for them, you wouldn’t see them. And small as both are, one is even smaller than the other. One is the tiny light in the radio, which, because the lens shielding the dial is convex, glows like a miniature orange scimitar. I go over to it to turn it off. It can’t keep the darkness away anymore; the darkness is here.

“Here’s to the losers,” the radio is saying. “Here’s to them all—”

The other point of light is over by the door. It’s in the door itself. I go over there close to it, peering with my head bowed, as if I were mourning inconsolably. And I am. One of the four tiny screwheads set into the corners of the oblong plate that holds the lock is gone, is out now, and if you squint at an acute angle you can see a speck of orange light shining through it from the hall. Then, while I’m standing there, something falls soundlessly, glances off the top of my

shoe with no more weight than a grain of gravel, and there's a second speck of orange light at the opposite upper corner of the plate. Two more to go now. Two and a half minutes of deft work left, maybe not even that much.

What careful planning, what painstaking attention to detail, goes into extinguishing a man's life! Far more than the hit-or-miss, haphazard circumstances of igniting it.

I can't get out the window, I can't go out the door. But there *is* a way out, a third way. I can escape inward. If I can't get away from them on the outside, I can get away from them on the inside.

You're not supposed to have those things. But when you have money you can get anything, in New York. They were on a prescription, but that was where the money came in—getting the prescription. I remember now. Some doctor gave it to me—sold it to me—long ago. I don't remember why or when. Maybe when fear first came between the two of us and I couldn't reach her anymore.

I came across it in my wallet on Wednesday, after I first came in here, and I sent it out to have it filled, knowing that this night would come. I remember the bellboy bringing it to the door afterward in a small bright-green paper wrapping that some pharmacists use. But where is it now?

I start a treasure hunt of terror, around the inside of the room in the dark. First into the clothes closet, wheeling and twirling among the couple of things I have hanging in there like a hopped-up discothèque dancer, dipping in and out of pockets, patting some of them between my hands to see if they're flat or hold a bulk. As if I were calling a little pet dog to me by clapping my hands to it. A little dog who is hiding away from me in there, a little dog called death.

Not in there. Then the drawers of the dresser, spading them in and out, fast as a card shuffle. A telephone directory, a complimentary shaving kit (if you're a man), a complimentary manicure kit (if you're a girl).

They must be down to the last screwhead by now.

Then around and into the bathroom, while the remorseless dismantling at the door keeps on. It's all white in there, white as my face must be. It's dark, but you can still see that it's white against the dark. Twilight-colored tiles. I don't put on the light to help me find them, because there isn't enough time left; the lights in here are fluorescent and take a few moments to come on, and by that time they'll be in here.

There's a catch phrase that you all must have heard at one time or another. You walk into a room or go over toward a group. Someone turns and says with huge emphasis: "*There* he is." As though you were the most important one of all. (And you're not.) As though you were the one they were just talking about. (And they weren't.) As though you were the only one that mattered. (And you're not.) It's a nice little tribute, and it don't cost anyone a cent.

And so I say this to them now, as I find them on the top glass slab of the shallow medicine cabinet: *There* you are. Glad to see you—you're important in my scheme of things.

As I bend for some running water, the shower curtain twines around me in descending spiral folds—don't ask me how, it must have been ballooning out. I sidestep like a drunken Roman staggering around his toga, pulling half the curtain down behind me while the pins holding it to the rod about tinkle like little finger cymbals, dragging part of it with me over one shoulder, while I bend over the basin to drink.

No time to rummage for a tumbler. It's not there anyway—I'd been using it for the rye. So I use the hollow of one hand for a scoop, pumping it up and down to my open mouth and alternating with one of the nuggets from the little plastic container I'm holding uncapped in my other hand. I've been called a fast drinker at times. Johnny used to say—never mind that now.

I only miss one—that falls down in the gap between me and the basin to the floor. That's a damned good average.

There were twelve of them in there, and I remember the label read: *Not more than three to be taken during any twenty-four-hour period*. In other words, I've just killed myself three times, with a down payment on a fourth time for good measure.

I grab the sides of the basin suddenly and bend over it, on the point of getting them all out of me again in rebellious upheaval. *I* don't want to, but they do. I fold both arms around my middle, hugging myself, squeezing myself, to hold them down. They stay put. They've caught on, taken hold. Only a pump can get them out now. And after a certain point of no return (I don't know how long that is), once they start being assimilated into the bloodstream, not even a pump can get them out.

Only a little brine taste shows up in my mouth, and gagging a little, still holding my middle, I go back into the other room. Then I sit down to wait. To see which of them gets to me first.

It goes fast now, like a drumbeat quickening to a climax. An upended foot kicks at the door, and it suddenly spanks inward with a firecracker sound. The light comes fizzing through the empty oblong like gushing carbonation, too sudden against the dark to ray clearly at first.

They rush in like the splash of a wave that suddenly has splattered itself all around the room. Then the lights are on, and they're on all four sides of me, and they're holding me hard and fast, quicker than one eyelid can touch the other in a blink.

My arms go behind me into the cuffless convolutions of a strait jacket. Then as though unconvinced that this is enough precaution, someone standing back there has looped the curve of his arm around my throat and the back of the chair, and holds it there in tight restraint. Not choking-tight as in a mugging, but ready to pin me back if I should try to heave out of the chair.

Although the room is blazing-bright, several of them are holding flashlights, all lit and centered inward on my face from the perimeter around me, like the spokes of a blinding wheel. Probably to disable me still further by their dazzle. One beam, more skeptical than the others, travels slowly up and down my length, seeking out any bulges that might possibly spell a concealed offensive weapon. My only weapon is already used, and it was a defensive one.

I roll my eyes toward the ceiling to try and get away from the lights, and one by one they blink and go out.

There they stand. The assignment is over, completed. To me it's my life, to them just another incident. I don't know how many there are. The man in the coffin doesn't count the number who have come to the funeral. But as I look at them, as my eyes go from face to face, on each one I read the key to what the man is thinking.

One face, soft with compunction: Poor guy, I might have been him, he might have been me.

One, hard with contempt: Just another of those creeps something went wrong with along the way.

Another, flexing with hate: I wish he'd shown some fight; I'd like an excuse to—

Still another, rueful with impatience: I'd like to get this over so I could call her unexpectedly and catch her in a lie; I bet she never stayed home tonight like she told me she would.

And yet another, blank with indifference, its thoughts a thousand miles away: And what's a guy like Yastrzemski got, plenty of others guy haven't got too? It's just the breaks, that's all—

And I say to my own thoughts dejectedly: Why weren't you that clear, that all-seeing, the other night, that terrible other night. It might have done you more good then.

There they stand. And there I am, seemingly in their hands but slowly slipping away from them.

They don’t say anything. I’m not aware of any of them saying anything. They’re waiting for someone to give them further orders. Or maybe waiting for something to come and take me away.

One of them hasn’t got a uniform on or plainsclothes either like the rest. He has on the white coat that is my nightmare and my horror. And in the crotch of one arm he is upending two long poles intertwined with canvas.

The long-drawn-out death within life. The burial-alive of the mind, covering it over with fresh graveyard earth each time it tries to struggle through to the light. In this kind of death you never finish dying.

In back of them, over by the door, I see the top of someone’s head appear, then come forward, slowly, fearfully forward. Different from their short-clipped, starkly outlined heads, soft and rippling in contour, and gentle. And as she comes forward into fullface view, I see who she is.

She comes up close to me, stops, and looks at me.

“Then it wasn’t—you?” I whisper.

She shakes her head slightly with a mournful trace of smile. “It wasn’t me,” she whispers back, without taking them into it, just between the two of us, as in the days before. “I didn’t go there to meet you. I didn’t like the way you sounded.” But someone was there, I came across someone there. Someone whose face became hers in my waking dream. The scarf, the blood on the scarf. It’s not my blood, it’s not my scarf. It must belong to someone else. Someone they haven’t even found yet, don’t even know about yet.

The preventive has come too late.

She moves a step closer and bends toward me.

“Careful—watch it,” a voice warns her.

“He won’t hurt me,” she answers understandingly without taking her eyes from mine. “We used to be in love.”

Used to? Then that’s why I’m dying. Because I still am. And you aren’t anymore.

She bends and kisses me, on the forehead, between the eyes. Like a sort of last rite.

And in that last moment, as I’m straining upward to find her lips, as the light is leaving my eyes, the whole night passes before my mind, the way they say your past life does when you’re drowning: the waiter, the night maid, the taxi argument, the call girl, Johnny—it all meshes into start-to-finish continuity. Just like in a story. An organized, step-by-step, timetabled story.

This story.

LIFE IS WEIRD SOMETIMES . . .

Have you ever seen a woman die? I hope you never have to, never do. I mean in violence, at your own hands. It isn't a good thing to see. When you see a man die, you see only yourself not someone apart whom you once knelt to in your heart and offered up your love to. Revered and dwelt-on in your reveries. Or if not, some other man did.

She falls from higher than a man, from over the heads of men, whether they're lovers or husbands or brothers. And whether she was good or she was evil, whatever evil is, she falls with a flash and a fiery trace, like a disintegrating star plunging into the water. A man just falls like a clod; clay back to the clay he came from. That is why judiciaries and law-enforcers so seldom kill women by law, no matter what their crime.

And when it is done by one man alone, personally and individually acting as his own sentencer and his own executioner, as you do now, think how much more affecting and impactbearing it is.

That face you see before you that has just finished dying will come back palely haunting into every night's sleep for the rest of your life, no matter how much she deserved it, no matter how tough your mind. You know it will, you know. That scene you saw before you that has just ended will come back meshed into every dream you ever dream again, so that you don't just kill her once, you kill her a thousand

and one times, and she never stays quite dead. And all the brandy and all the barbiturates can't make it go away.

Those lips that pressed against yours like warm velvet and clung there in soft adhesion, look at them now, twisted into an ellipse, a crevice for a surprise that never finishes coming out. Those eyes that glittered with love and hate and laughter and hate and doubt and hate, and hate and hate and hate, they don't hate now any more. Those arms that gestured so gracefully in the light, and wound around you so importunately in the dark, paid out on the floor now limp and curlycued, like lengths of wide ribbon that have slipped off their spools. The polish on the fingertips of the one lying face-down looking strangely like five little red seeds burst out of some pod and lying there scattered. A polish that claimed proudly to be long-lasting. I know; I used to see the bottle. This will prove it now: it will outlast her.

The hair your hand strayed through over and over, and found so soft and responsive each time; lying there fanned out and flotsam like a mess of seaweed washed up on the shore.

The body that once was the goal, and the striving, and the will-o'-the-wisp of the act of love . . .

All of this now devastated, distorted, and in death.

No, it isn't good to see a woman . . .

I did a number of banal things that struck me strange, although I had never done this thing before and had no way of knowing whether they were banal or not, strangely out of key or not, or were to be expected to follow anything like that.

I smoothed down the sleeves of my shirt, first of all. They hadn't been rolled up, but I kept smoothing and straightening them down as though they had been. Then I shot my cuffs back into more conforming place, and felt for their fastenings. One had come open in the swift arm-play that had occurred, and I refastened it.

Then I looked at the watch on my wrist, not to tell the time, but to see if it had suffered any surface-harm. I prized it a great deal; some men do. It showed no signs of any harm, but to guard doubly against that, I stem-wound it briefly but briskly. You weren't supposed to have to, it was self-winding. But I figured the little added fillip would benefit it. I'd bought it in 1957 at Lambert Brothers for $150, and I'd never regretted it since.

Meanwhile she was dying there on the floor.

I went into the bathroom, and ran a little warm water, and washed off my hands. (Just like you do after you do almost anything.) Then I changed it to cold and smoothed a little of it on my hair. I don't like warm water on my hair, it opens the pores, I think you catch cold quicker that way.

I was going to use the john, but somehow it seemed indecent, disrespectful, I don't know how to say it. I didn't have to very badly anyway, so I didn't. It had only been a nervous reflex from the killing.

Then I dried off my hands on one of her towels, and came outside again.

By that time she had finished dying on the floor. She was dead now.

I bent down and put my hand to her forehead. It was the last time I ever touched her, out of all the many times I'd touched her before.

Put my hand to her forehead, and said out loud: "You can't think any more now in back of there, can you? It's quiet in back of there now, isn't it?"

What a mysterious thing that is, I thought. How it stops. And once it does, never comes on again.

When I came out into the outside room again, I saw her shoe still lying there, where it had come off in the course of our brief wrestle. It looked so pathetic there by itself without an owner, it looked so lonely, it looked so empty. Something made me pick it up and take it in to her. Like when someone's going away, you help them on with their

coat, or their jackboots, or whatever it is they need for going away.

I didn't try to put it back on her, I just set itdown there beside her close at hand. You're going to need this, I said to her in my mind. You're starting on a long walk. You're going to keep walking from now on, looking for your home.

I stopped and wondered for a minute if that was what happened to all of us when we crossed over. Just keep walking, keep on walking, with no ahead and no in-back-of; tramps, vagrants in eternity. With our last hope and horizon —death—already taken away.

In the Middle Ages they had lurid colors, a bright red hell, an azure heaven shot with gold stars. They knew where they were, at least. They could tell the difference. We, in the Twentieth, we just have the long walk, the long walk through the wispy backward-stringing mists of eternity, from nowhere to nowhere, never getting there, until you're so tired you almost wish you were—alive again.

The gun I picked up and looked around with, not knowing what to do with it, and finally put it into my own pocket. I don't know why, don't know what made me. It had been hers in the first place. Just some kind of a tidying-up reflex, I guess. Don't leave things lying around. You learn that in your boyhood.

Then I opened the door and went out. And it was over.

Standing outside the reclosed door, I lowered my head thoughtfully for a moment and spit on the floor at my feet. Not the way you spit in anger or in insult, or even in disgust. But simply the way you would spit to rid your mouth of a bad aftertaste, to clear it out.

That television that I had noticed the first time, when I crossed the hall on my way in, was still raging away from behind a door at the far end, set at right- (or left-) angles to all the rest of them, depending on which side they were on. No wonder the shot hadn't been heard around. It would

have been drowned in the torrent of noise like a raindrop falling in an ocean.

The only thing I could figure was that whoever was in there with it had it turned or slanted in such a way that the full impact was away from them and toward the door and the hail beyond it, and they didn't realize what it was doing themselves. Some people are insensitive to television noise anyway; ask a cross-section of average neighbors, they'll always point one out.

It was belting the hall like a hurricane, only its waves were audial instead of wind and water. "What happened to me," it bragged at the top of its thundering tubes, "was a simple little pill called Compoz. Now I work relaxed and I sleep relaxed—"

And no one else does, I thought inattentively with a stray lobe of my mind.

I brought the car up to me—it was an automatic—and on the short, sleek glide down, a momentary impulse occurred to me to go up to Charlie when I got down below. He was the doorman. Go up to Charlie, hand him the gun, and say: "Better ring in to the police. I just killed her up there. I just killed twelve-ten."

But it had started to fade even before I got all the way down. Then when I got out and didn't see him around anywhere, that scotched it entirely. You don't hang around waiting to report you've killed someone. You do it with your throttle wide open or not at all.

Then when I emerged into the street, I saw where he was. He was one house length down, in front of the next building, helping some people get into a taxi *there*. It must have dropped a fare off there, and couldn't roll back to his stop-whistle because of the traffic coming on behind, so he and his party had had to go down there after it. They were bulky, and the furs on the women made them even bulkier, and they took a great deal of handling to shoe-horn in. His attention was fully occupied, and his back was to me.

He hadn’t seen me going in either. Must have gone around the corner for a quick coffee break.

How strange, I thought, he didn’t see me at either of the two points that count. But in between I bet he was killing time hanging around here in front of the entrance with nothing to do. That’s the way those things go sometimes: try not to be seen, and everybody spots you; don’t give a good damn whether or not you are, and everybody looks right through you just as though you weren’t there.

I turned away from him and went on my way, up the street and about my business. The past was dead. The future was resignation, fatality, and could only end one way now. The present was numbness, that could feel nothing. Like Novocaine needled into your heart. What was there in all the dimensions of time for me?

I turned left at the first up-and-down transverse I came to, and went down it for a block, and stopped in for a drink at a place. I needed one bad, I was beginning to feel shaky inside now. I’d been in this place before. It was called Felix’s (a close enough approximation, with a change of just one letter). It was three or four steps down, what you might call semi-belowsidewalk-level. It was kept in a state of chronic dimness, a sort of half-light. Some said so you couldn’t see how cut and watered your drinks were.

It was just the place for me though. I didn’t want a bright light shining on me. That would come quick enough, in some precinct back room.

My invisibility had run out though. I had no sooner sat down than, before my drink had even had time to get in front of me, a girl came over to me. From behind, naturally; that was the only way she could. She tapped me on the shoulder with two fingers.

I didn’t know her, but she knew me, at second hand, it seemed. I leaned my ear toward her a little, so if she said anything I could hear what it was.

“Your friend wants to know why you don’t recognize him any more,” was what she said, reproachfully. And with that prim propriety that sometimes comes with a certain amount of alcohol—and almost invariably when a feeling of social unsurety goes with it—she added, “You shouldn’t be that way. He only wanted you to come over and join us.”

“What friend? Where?” I said grudgingly.

She pointed with the hand that was holding the change left over from the record player she’d just been to, which impeded the accuracy of her point somewhat because she had to keep three fingers bunched over in order to hang onto the coins. “In the booth. Don’t you see him?”

“How can I see anybody from here?” I asked her sullenly. “They’re all wearing shadow masks halfway up their faces. All I can see is their foreheads.” (The edge of the bar drew a line at about that height all around the room; the lights were below it, on the inside.)

“But he could see *you*,” she challenged. “And so could I.”

“Well, he’s been in here longer than me. I only just now walked in through the door.” I thought that would get rid of her and break it up. Instead it brought on a controversy.

She gave the sort of little-girl grimace that goes with the expression “Oo, what you just said,” or “Oo, I’m going to tell on you.” Rounded her mouth to a big 0, and her eyes to match. Which sat strangely on her along with the come-on makeup and the Martinis or whatever they had been.

“You’ve been buzzing around up here for the better part of an hour. First you were sitting in one place, then in another, then you went over to the cigarette machine. Then you were gone for a while—I guess to the telephone or the men’s room—and then you came back again. We had our eyes on you the whole time. Every time he hollered your name out, you’d look and then you’d look away again. So it wasn’t that you didn’t hear, it was you didn’t want to h—”

“What is my name then, if he hollered it so many times?”

I nearly fell over. She gave me my name; both of them in fact. Not quite accurately, but close enough to do.

Still unconvinced, but willing to be, I went over with her to take a look at him. He was in a sour mood by now over the fancied slight. He wouldn't get up. He wouldn't smile. He wouldn't shake hands. He was also more than a little smashed. His head kept going around on his shoulders; the shoulders didn't, just the head.

I didn't know him well at all, but I did know him. But this wasn't the night nor the particular segment of it to become enmeshed with stray one- or two-time acquaintances. All I kept thinking, with inwardly raised eyes, was: Why did I pick this particular place? There's a line of bars all along this avenue. Why did I have to come in here and run into these two?

"I appreciate this no end," he said sarcastically.

"You got your wires crossed," I told him briefly. "I just came in."

"You tell him," he said to the girl.

"Look," she catalogued, "we saw everything you got on. Just like you have it on you now."

("But not on me, on someone else," I put in.)

"This same light-gray shortie coat—" She plucked it with her fingers.

("There's been a rash of them all over New York this season.")

"And a shave-head haircut?"

("Who hasn't one?")

"And even a shiny tie clip that flashed in my eyes from the light every time you turned a certain way?"

("Everyone carries some kind of hardware across the front.")

"But *all three* of them match up," she expostulated. "You're wearing them all."

"So was somebody else. Half an hour ago, or maybe twenty minutes, sitting on the same stool I was, that's all. It

was a double-take." And I omitted to add: You're both blurry with booze, anyway.

He turned to address the girl, as a way of showing me what his feelings toward me were. "He's copping a plea. You think you know a guy, and then you're not good enough for him."

"Your knowing me ended right now," I said tersely.

He pushed his underlip out in hostility. "Then stand away from my table. Don't crowd us like that."

He got up in his seat and gave me a stiff-arm back, hand against chest.

I shoved him in return, also hand against chest, and he sat down again.

This time he got up and came out and around from behind the table and swung a roundhouse at me. I can't remember whether it clipped or not. Probably not or I'd be able to.

I swung back at him and could feel it land, but he only gave a little. Maybe a step back with one foot.

His second swing, and the third of the whole capsule fight, and I went sprawling back on my shoulders across the floor. He was springier than he looked in his liquored condition.

The whole thing didn't take a half-minute, but already everyone in the place was around us in a tight little circle, the way they always are at such a time. The bartender came running out from behind, cautioning, "All right, all right," in an excited voice. All-right what he didn't specify.

He helped me up, and then continued the process by arming me all the way over to the door and just beyond it, before I knew what was happening. He didn't throw me out, simply sort of *urged* me out by one arm. There he let go my arm, told me, "Now go away from here. Go someplace else and do that." And closed the door in my face.

I guess I was the one selected to be evicted because the other fellow had had a girl with him, and from where the

bartender stood it looked as if I had gone o.ver and accosted them, said something out of the way to her. The pantomime of what he had witnessed alone would have been enough to suggest that to him, without the need of an accompanying sound track.

He had turned his back to me, and was walking away from the door, when I reopened it wide enough to insert my head, one foot and one shoulder past it, and to protest indignantly: “I still have a drink coming to me. I paid you for it, and I never got it. Now where is it?”

“You’ve had enough,” he said arbitrarily and quite inaccurately. I hadn’t had anything. “You’re cut off.”

And with that he came back toward me, and this time did push me, gave me a good hearty shove out through the partial aperture I had been standing in. So tempestuous a one in fact that I went all the way back and over, and again sprawled on my shoulder blades in a sort of arrested skid across the sidewalk.

This time he locked the door from the inside (evidently a temporary measure until I should go away) and pulled down a shade across the grimy glass portion of it in final dismissal.

It was the second time I’d been toppled in about three minutes and I blew a fuse.

I got up into a crouched-over position, like a runner on his mark just before the start of a race. I swung my head around, this way and that, looking for something to throw. There was a fire hydrant, but it was immovable. There was one of those Department of Sanitation wire-lattice litter baskets that stud the sidewalks of New York. I went over to that, still at a crouch, and looked in it for something heavy. All I could see from the top was layers of newspapers. So instead of throwing something from its contents, I threw the whole receptacle itself.

Lifted it clear, hoisted it overhead, took a few running steps with it, scraps of litter raining out of it, and let it fly.

The door responded with an ear-splitting bang like the backfire from a heavy truck's exhaust tube.

But it wasn't strong enough to break the glass, which was what I'd been trying for, or my throw wasn't strong enough, or there was a wire-mesh backing protecting the glass. It just fractured it and rolled off, leaving behind a star-shaped cicatrice that looked like it was made of powdered sugar.

The barman flew out and grabbed me. I never saw anyone come out of anywhere so fast. Everyone else came out too, and some stayed and some skipped out on their drinks.

A couple of patrol cars knifed up in pincers formation, one with the traffic, one against the traffic, dome lights dead for surprise value, and caught me in between them.

The next thing I knew I was standing in front of a police sergeant's desk.

The barkeeper said his door pane was worth fifty-five dollars. I felt like saying his whole place wasn't worth fifty-five dollars, but I wasn't in a position to submit appraisals. The desk sergeant asked him if he would be willing to drop the complaint if I made good on the fifty-five dollars. He said he would. The desk sergeant asked me if I had fifty-five dollars. I checked myself out, and said I didn't have. The desk sergeant asked me if I could *get* fifty-five dollars. I said I'd try. The desk sergeant said I could use his phone.

I called up Stewart Sutphen, my lawyer. I knew it was no use calling his office at that hour of the night, so I called his home instead. He wasn't there either. He was up in the country somewhere. He was always up in the country somewhere whenever you tried to reach him, I reflected rather disgruntledly. He had been the last time too, I remembered. He was the out-of-towningest attorney I ever heard of. He'd once told me he liked to go over his briefs up where it was quiet and peaceful and there were no distractions, at one of these little country hotels or wayside stopping-off places. I often wondered if anyone went along

to help him turn the pages, but that was a loaded question. And none of my business besides. He seemed to be happily enough married. I'd met his wife.

I left my name and where I was, and asked her to tell him to come down in the morning with the fifty-five dollars.

The fifty-five being in default, my pocket-fill was taken away from me, stacked into an oblong manila folder, the flap of this was wetly and sloppily licked by a police property clerk who seemed to be oversalivated, and it was then pummeled into adhesion, and held, to be returned to me on exit. My name and my other details were entered on the blotter, and I was booked and remanded into a cell to be held overnight on a D. and D. charge.

I'd never been in one of them before. Actually, it wasn't so bad. If you closed your eyes a minute and didn't stop to tell yourself what it was, it could have been any barren little room, except that the light was on the outside and never went off all night.

I was alone in it. There were two bunks in it, but the other one was fallow. D. and D., drunk and disorderly (conduct), must have been on the scarce side that night. There are runs on various types of charges at certain times, the cops will tell you that in their line of work. The blanket smelled of creosote, that's the part I remember most. I could hear somebody nearby snoring heavily, but I didn't mind that, it took a little of the aloneness away.

Even the breakfast wasn't too bad. No worse than you'd get in an average elbow-rest cafeteria. And of course, on the city. They passed it in about six, a little earlier than I usually had mine. Oatmeal, and white bread, and a thick mug of coffee. I skipped the first two, because I don't like soupy oatmeal and because I don't like cottony white bread, but I asked for a refill on the coffee and was given it not only willingly but even (I thought I detected) with a touch of fellow feeling by him outside there in the corridor. I guess I wasn't the usual type he got in there.

And meanwhile I kept thinking: Don’t they know yet? Don’t they know what I’ve done? Why is it taking them so long to find out? I thought they were so fast, so infallible.

Sutphen came around ten in the morning and paid out my damages, and in due course they unlocked me and indicated me out. On our way down the front steps of the detention house side by side, he shook his headful of tightly spun pepper-and-salt clinkers at me and gave me a mildly chiding: “A man your age. Breaking bar windows. Brawling. Trying to do, act like a perpetual juvenile?” Beyond that he had nothing else much to say. I suppose to him it was too trifling, and not a legal matter at all but one of loss of temper.

I didn’t tell him either what I’d done. I don’t know why; I couldn’t bring myself to. He was more the one to tell than the cops. My friend and lawyer in one. It would have given him a head start at least on figuring out what was best to do for me. But I was tired and beat. I hadn’t closed my eyes all night in the detention cell. I knew once I told I wouldn’t be left alone; I’d be dragged here and lugged there and hustled the next place. I wanted time to sleep on it and time to think it out and time to tighten my belt for what was coming to me.

He asked me if he could drop me off, in a perfunctory way. But I knew he was anxious to get back to his office routine and not play anyone’s door-to-door driver. And I wanted to be alone too. I had a lot of thinking to catch up on. I didn’t want anyone right on top of me for a while. So I told him no and I walked away from him down the street on my own and by my lonesome.

And thus the night finally came to its long-drawn-out end, the memorable unforgettable night that it had been.

I felt rotten, inside and out and all over. Like when you’ve had a tooth that hurts, and have had it taken out, and then the hole where it was hurts almost as bad as before. You can’t tell the duff.

But the paradox of the whole thing was this: on the night that I committed a murder, I was only locked up on disorderly conduct charges.

TALENT

Breathes there a man who truly understands the heart of a woman? Well . . .

“How beautiful you are!” I breathed to her. I couldn’t help it. I wouldn’t have tried.

This was when I first looked at her across the table. Candlelight. I’d seen her first in the other room in the glare of bulbs, but there’s a certain dim witchery in Dickering.

She frowned slightly. A little frown of annoyance. She drummed a couple of fingers on the table edge, as if marking time. She smiled awkwardly. Then she started to speak of something else. Her music. Or the time. Something.

“She hates that,” he said matter of factly, when she left us to prepare for the party. “Say it to me about her all you want and I’ll never fight you, but never say it directly to her. Never.” His glance was serious.

“She doesn’t want to be told she’s beautiful,” I said,

“It’s all she’s heard, all of her life,” he said, motioning above us at the sounds she made through the ceiling. “She’s heard it and heard it; do you wonder she’s taken a haired to the phrase? Sure she’s beautiful but give her a rest!

“Tell the truth,” he said, “didn’t you ever wonder how a man like me came to capture her?”

He was right. I am his friend. But he is not a handsome man.

“Sometimes,” I said.

He caught it. “I know,” he agreed. “I wasn’t a tackle like Harding. And I couldn’t talk like Blair could. And l wasn’t tall. I couldn’t even ride horses. I’ll tell you,” he said confidentially, almost paranoiacally, darting a look at the door, “no one was more surprised than I at the Him things suddenly took for me with her. It’s like shooting a gun in the night and finding a bird at your feet. What I did was to say the wrong thing at the right time.”

He enjoyed my puzzlement. “I’d met her half-a-dozen times,” he said unhurriedly, “but I don’t think we said anything to each other at all, not even sounds. To find myself in the room with her was a total loss. Took root in the Door and froze and all that business. And then, this one night I’m speaking of, my luck changed, I was torn from the others, prized like a jewel, and I never understood how it came about myself.”

“The thing yon said,” I reminded him. “You said it was something you said.”

“Yeah,” he replied. “It wasn’t even to her; she wasn’t supposed to hear it at all. This was a party one night, given by Blair’s sister. I would have liked to have taken her there. But every other man in the room say twenty of them was taking her instead. I got there and she was surrounded, and I was paralyzed, as usual. Taxidermy, you know. I moped around there on the edges, wondering why I was there at all and why I didn’t find an ugly girl and take her home,

“Then, the resentment came over me. The unfairness of fate, and all that. I got mad at my own fear. And I got angry at *her.* It was the sulks sour grapes. I shoved my hands in my pockets, and I turned my back on all of it.”

“The remark, now. It must have been something.’’

“No. That’s the whole point. It wasn’t. It was uncalled for, ungallant, and a perfect lie, but”—he rapped the table with his fist—“it did the trick. What l said, loud and disparaging, to another outcast next to me was, ‘Ah, what’s so wonderful about her? I’ve seen better looks on rag dolls!’

“There was a silence. He didn’t believe me. Suddenly, *she* had thrust her way through all of them and was coming toward me. She was coming to *me.* Smiling like an angel,

“ ‘You interest me.’ she said. ‘We should know each other.’

“Four months later, we were married.”

But how long. I wondered, could the glamor of insult last? One insult in a lifetime of adoration. They had been married over four years. “And now?”

“The smart man makes his courtship the bedrock of his marriage. If the coinage has been flattery, then he must never falter. If, in my case it happens to be the opposite, so then I must never lose interest; never fail her with some caustic little comment that will reach her heart. It is one’s duty as the man who loves her.

“So, now, even when my knees are weak at her sight. I manage to say, ‘You’ll do, but then you cannot be expected to look much better than that, the weather is so miserable tonight.” Or, ‘Yes, it *is* a pretty dress but I’ve seen others in it I like better.’ I shrug. I scratch my nose, I turn away indifferently. And then she comes quickly after me and kisses me in sheer delight. ’Oh, how original you are.’ she says, ‘how unique, how different from all the others I used to know. I have the one husband in the world who can make me truly happy!’

“You have to keep them interested. You must remember the little things they like so well.”

And he solemnly dropped one eyelid at me in the wink of a knowledgeable husband.

“It’s hopeless. Christine,” he called up to her. “The material isn’t there. So just come on down, will you? You’re making us late.”

And he winked and winked again.

MORNING AFTER MURDER

The alarm smashed me wide open, like a hand grenade exploding against my solar plexus. I was already into my shoes and pants before my eyes were even open. Funny, I thought dazedly, when I looked down and saw them on me, how you do things like that automatically, without knowing anything about it, just from long force of habit.

The tin clock went into another tantrum, so I chopped my arm at it and clicked it off. “All right, so I’m up!” I groaned. “What more do you want?” I went into the bathroom and shaved. I looked like the morning after a hard night, eyes all bleary and with ridges under them, and I couldn’t understand it. Eight hours’ sleep ought to be enough for anyone, and I’d gone to bed at eleven. The mattress must be no good, I decided, and I’d better tackle the landlady for a new one. Or maybe I’d been working too hard; I ought to ask the captain for a leave of absence. Of the two of them, I would have much rather tackled him than her.

She was going off like a Roman candle, at Ephie, the colored maid, when I stepped out of my room into the hall. “Wide open!” she was complaining. “I tell you it was standing wide open, anyone could have walked in! You better count the silverware right away, Ephie—and ask the roomers if any of them are missing anything from their rooms. We could have all been murdered in our beds!” Then

she saw me and added with a sniff, “Even though there *is* a detective lodging on the ground floor!”

“I’m off-duty when I come back here at nights,” I let her know. I took a look on both sides of the lock of the front door, which was what was causing all the commotion. “It hasn’t been jimmied or tampered with in any way. Somebody in the house came in or went out, and forgot to close it tight behind them; the draft blew it open again.”

“It’s probably that no-account little showgirl who has the third-floor-back, traipsing in all hours of the morning!” she decided instantly. “Just let me get my hands on her!”

I took a deep breath to get my courage up, and made the plunge. “Wonder if you could change my mattress. It must be lumpy or something; I don’t seem to be getting my right rest.”

This time she went into vocal pyrotechnics that would have put a Fourth of July at Palisades Park to shame. It was the newest mattress in her house; she’d bought it only two years ago last fall; nobody else in the house seemed to find anything wrong with their mattresses; funny that a husky young man like me should. She didn’t like single young men in her house, anyway, never had; she’d only made an exception in my case. (“It’s not my fault if I’m not married,” I protested mildly. “Girls have something to say about that, too.”) She liked detectives even less; always cleaning their guns in their rooms. (“I don’t clean my gun in my room,” I contradicted a little more heatedly, “I clean it down at headquarters.”) She was still going strong by the time I was all the way down at the corner, flagging the bus for headquarters. I had sort of waived my request, so to speak, by withdrawing under fire.

A call came in only about an hour after I got in, sent in by a cop on the beat. The captain sent Beecher and me over. “Man found dead under suspicious circumstances. Go to 25 Donnelly Avenue, you two. Second floor, front.”

Riding over in the car Beecher remarked, “You look like hell, Mark. Losing your grip?”

I said, “I feel like I’ve been dragged through a knothole. I’m going to ask the Old Man for a leave of absence. Know what’s been happening to me lately? I go home and I dream about this stuff. It must be starting to get me. You ever have dreams like that?”

“No,” he said. “It’s like a faucet with me, I turn it off and forget about it till the next day. You used to be that way too. Remember when we were both second-graders, the night that messy Scallopini case finally broke, how we both went to see a Donald Duck flicker, and you fell off your seat into the aisle just from laughing so hard? That’s the only way to be in this racket. It’s just a job like any other, look at it that way. Why don’t you slow up a little, take it easy? No use punishing yourself too hard.”

I nodded and opened the door as we swerved in to the curb. “Just as soon as we find out what this thing is.”

Number 25 Donnelly Avenue was a cheap yellow-brick flat. The patrolman at the door said, “Now, get away from here, you people. Move on. There’s nothing to see.” There wasn’t, either. Not from down there. “Them are the windows, up there,” he said to us. Beecher went straight in without bothering. I hung back a minute and looked up at them. Just two milky-glass panes that needed washing pretty badly.

Then I turned and looked across at the opposite side of the street, without exactly knowing why. There was a gimcrack one-story taxpayer on the whole block-front over there, that looked as if it had been put up within the last year or so, much newer than this flat.

“Coming?” Beecher was waiting for me in the automatic elevator. “What were you staring at out there?”

“Search me,” I shrugged. I’d expected to see a row of old-fashioned brownstone houses with high stoops, and then when I turned I saw a cheap row of modern shops instead.

But I couldn’t have told him why. I didn’t know why myself. Maybe the neighborhood seemed to call for them; there were so many other rows of brownstone fronts scattered about here and there. Just some sort of optical illusion on my part, I guess. Or rather, to be more exact, some sort of illusory optical expectancy that had been disappointed. There was almost a sense of *loss* derived from that particular facade, as though it had flattened to one-story height, cheated me of extra height (as I had turned to glance).

A second patrolman outside the flat-door let us in. The first room was a living room. Nothing in it seemed to have been disturbed. Yesterday evening’s paper was spread out on the sofa, where somebody had last been reading it; yesterday evening’s headline was as dead as the reader who had bought it. Beyond was the bedroom. A man lay dead on the bed, in the most grotesque position imaginable.

He was half-in and half-out of it. He died either getting into it or getting out of it. I looked at the pillow; that answered it for me. He’d died getting out of it. The indentation made by his head overlapped a little on one side. Therefore he’d reared his head, been struck, and his head had fallen back again onto the pillow; but not exactly into the same indentation it had been lying in before.

One whole leg was still under the covers, the other was touching the floor, toes stuck into a bedroom-slipper. The covers had been pitched triangularly off him, up at the right shoulder and side; that was the side the leg was out of bed on. The leg that had never carried him again, never walked again. The window was open about an inch from the bottom, and the shade was down half way.

Apart from the fact that he was half-in, half-out of bed (and that did not constitute a sign of struggle, but only of interruption) there were no noticeable signs of a struggle whatever, in here any more than in the outer room.

The man’s clothes were draped neatly across a chair, and his shoes were standing under it side by side. There were three one-dollar bills and a palmful of change standing untouched on the dresser, the way most men leave their money when they empty their pockets just before retiring at night. I say “untouched” because the three bills were consecutively atop one another, and the change was atop the topmost one of them in turn, to hold them down as a weight. And although the continuing presence of money does not always obviate a robbery-motive (it may be too small an amount to interest the killer) the presence of money in that formalized position did proclaim it to be untouched; no intruder would have taken the trouble to replace the coins atop the bills, after having dislodged them to examine the small fund.

I’d worked on Homicide five years to be able to tell small things like that. Only, in murder cases, there are no small things. There are only things.

We were in the bedroom one minute and fifty seconds, by my watch, the first time. We would be in there again, and longer, of course; but that was all, the first time. We’d gotten this from it: It was just like a room with somebody sleeping in it, apart from the distorted position of the dead man’s right leg and the scowlingly violent look on his face.

The examiner showed up several minutes after we had got there, and while he was busy in the bedroom we questioned the superintendent and a couple of the neighbors in the outside room. The dead man’s name was Fairbanks, he clerked in a United Cigar store, and he was a hardworking respectable man as far as they knew, never drank, never chased women, never played the horses. He had a wife and a little girl in the country, and while they were away for a two-weeks’ rest he’d kept his nose to the grindstone, had gone ahead batching it here in the flat.

The couple in the flat across the hall had known him and his wife, and while she was away they’d been neighborly

enough to have him in for coffee with them each morning, so he wouldn't have to stop for it on his way to work. In the evenings, of course, he shifted for himself.

They were the ones had first found him dead. The woman had sent her husband over to knock on Fairbanks's door and find out why he hadn't shown up for his morning's coffee yet; they knew he opened his store at seven and it was nearly that already. Her husband rang the bell and pounded for fully five minutes and couldn't get an answer. He tried the door and it was locked on the inside. He got worried, and went down and got the superintendent, and the latter opened it up with his passkey. And there he was, just as he was now.

Beecher said, "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Last night," the neighbor said. "We all went to the movies together. We came back at eleven, and we left him outside of his door. He went in, and we went in our own place."

I said, "Sure he didn't go out again afterwards?"

"Pretty sure. We didn't hear his door open anymore, at least not while we were still awake, and that was until after twelve. And it started teeming not long after we got in. I don't think he'd have gone out in that downpour."

I went in the other room and picked up the shoes and looked closely at them. "No," I said when I came back, "he didn't go out, the soles of his shoes are powder-dry with dust. I blew on them and a haze came off." I looked in the hall-closet and he didn't own a pair of rubbers. "If he was murdered—and we'll know for sure in a few minutes—somebody came in here after you people left him outside his door. The position of the body shows he didn't get up to let them in, they got in without his knowledge."

And they hadn't forced their way in, either. The flat-door hadn't been tampered with in any way, the living-room window was latched on the inside, the bedroom window was only open an inch and there was a safety-lock on it—

besides there was no fire-escape nor ledge outside of it. A quick survey, quick but not sketchy, had been enough to establish all these points.

"Maybe a master-key was used," Beecher suggested.

I asked the superintendent, "How many keys do you give your tenants, just one or a pair of duplicates?"

"Only one to a flat," he said. "We used to hand out two where there was more than one person to a family but so many of them moved away without returning them that we quit that."

"Then Fairbanks and his wife only had one, is that right?" I went in and looked; I finally found it. It was in a key case, along with the keys to his store. And this key case was still in his clothing, from the night before. Just to make sure we tried the key on the door, and it was the right key. So he hadn't lost it or mislaid it, and it hadn't been picked up by anybody and made unwarranted use of.

The examiner came out, about now, and we shipped our witnesses outside for the present. "Compound fracture of the skull," he said. "He was hit a terrific blow with some blunt object or instrument. Sometime between midnight and morning. He had an unusually thin skull, and a fragment of it must have pierced his brain, because hardly any blood was shed. A little in each ear, and a slight matting of the hair, that's all."

"Die right away?"

"Not more than a minute or two after. Goodbye."

I called the captain. "All right, you're both on it," he said. "Stay with it."

A minute later the phone rang and it was Fairbanks's company, wanting to know why he hadn't opened his branch store on time.

That saved me the trouble of calling them. "This is Police; he's dead," I said. I asked about his record with them.

"Excellent. He's been working for us the past seven years. He is—I mean he was—a good man."

I asked if any report had ever reached them on his having trouble with anyone, customers or co-workers.

Never, the man on the wire said. Not once. He was well liked by everyone. As a matter of fact he was known by name to a great many customers of that particular store. A couple of years ago they had shifted him to another location, and got so many inquiries for him afterward, that they'd put him right back again where he'd been. "Sounds funny in a chain-store business, but everybody missed him, they wanted him back."

I hung up and turned to Beecher. "Can you get a motive out of this?"

"About as little as you can. No money taken—in fact no money *to* take—no enemies, no bad habits."

"Mistaken identity?"

"Mistaken for who?" he said disgustedly. "Somebody else with no money, no enemies, no had habits?"

"Don't ask me questions on my questions," I pleaded abjectly. "We have to start somewhere. What do you suppose happened to the blunt instrument Doc mentioned?"

"Carried it out with him, I guess."

Fairbanks had been carried out, meanwhile. I'd seen so many of them go, I didn't even turn my head. After all, where they ended, we began. The fingerprint men had powdered everything they could, which wasn't much, and packed up to go, too. I said, "Wait a minute!" and motioned them back in. I pointed to the ceiling.

"You don't want us to go up *there,* do you?" they jeered.

"The lights are lit, aren't they?" I said. "And they have been ever since it happened. I've established that. And the switch is over by the door, and he was killed with only one leg out of his bed. Now tell me you took prints on that little mother-of-pearl push-button over there."

Their faces told they hadn't, only too plainly. "We'll change jobs with you," one of them offered lamely.

“Not until you know how to do your own right,” I said, unnecessarily cuttingly.

They left in silent offense.

We continued working. My back ached from that damned mattress at the rooming-house, and my eyelids felt as if they were lined with lead.

“I’ve got something,” Beecher called to me finally. I went out to him. “What time did it rain last night? It ought to be in here.” He picked up the morning paper, the one outside the door that Fairbanks had never lived to read. What we wanted took finding. We found it finally by indirection, in connection with something else. “Started at eleven forty-five and continued until after two.” He spanked the item with his fingernail. “Whoever it was, came in here between two-thirty and dawn.”

“Why not right during the rain?”

“For Pete’s sake, use your eyes, Mark. Don’t you see the little dab of dried mud here on the carpet? Came off his shoes, of course. Well, do you see any blurs from drops of water around it? No. This nap is a cross between felt and cheap velour; it would show them up in a minute. His clothes were dry; just his soles had mud on them, probably under the arches. So he came in after the rain, but before the ground had fully dried.”

“I’ve got some more mud,” I said finally, crouching down chin to my knees. It was right beside the bed, showing where he’d stood when he struck Fairbanks. The pillows were still in position, even though Fairbanks was gone, one showing a little rusty-brown swirl. Much like a knothole in wood-grain. I stood over the tiny dirt-streak on the floor, and swung my arm stiffly in an arc, down on top of the pillow. It landed too far out, made no allowance for the weapon. No matter how stubby that had been, it would have hit him down near the shoulder instead of on top of the head. Then I remembered that he hadn’t been flat on

his back but had already struggled up to a sitting position, feeling for his slippers with one foot, when he'd been hit.

I kept my eye on an imaginary point where his head would have been, sitting up, and then swung—and there was a space of about only two or three inches left between my clenched fist and the imaginary point. That space stood for the implement that had been used. What, I wondered, could be that short and still do such damage?

I heard Beecher whistling up for me from down below the windows and chased down. "I've got a print, a whole print!" he yelled jubilantly. "A honey. Perfect from heel to toe! Just look at it! I can't swear yet it was made by the same guy that went into the flat, but I'm certainly not passing it up." I phoned in for him and told them to send somebody over with paraffin and take it, while he carefully covered it over with his own pocket-handkerchief to protect it from harm. Then we stood around it guarding it.

It was a peach, all right. There was a cement sidewalk along the whole length of the flat, but between it and the building-line there was a strip of unpaved earth about three yards wide, for decorative purposes originally, although now it didn't even bear grass. The sidewalk bridged this sod across to the front door, and it was in one of the two right-angles thus formed that the footprint was set obliquely, pointed in toward the building.

"He came along the sidewalk," Beecher reconstructed, somewhat obviously, "and turned in toward the door, but instead of staying on the cement he cut the corner short, and one whole foot landed on the soggy ground. Left foot. It wasn't made by any milkman, either; this man was making a half-turn around to go in, a milkman would have come up straight from the curb. I'd like to bet this is for us!"

"I'm with you," I nodded.

"It's got everything but the guy's initials. Rubber heel worn down in a semicircle at the back, steel cleat across the toe."

We hung around until they'd greased it and filled it with paraffin, and we were sure we had it. They also took microscopic specimens of the dried mud from the room upstairs, and some of the soil down here around the print, for the laboratory to work over.

"Tall guy and pretty husky, too," Beecher decided. "It's a ten-and-a-half." He rolled up the tape-measure. "And pushed down good and hard by his weight, even though the ground *was* wet."

"About my height and build, then," I suggested. "I take a ten-and-a-half myself." I started to lift my foot off the cement, to match it against the impression, but he'd gone in without waiting, and there was a straggling line of onlookers strung along the opposite side of the street taking it all in, so I turned and went in after him. After all, I didn't have to make sure at this late day what size shoe I wore.

"Well, we've got a little something, anyway," he said sanguinely on the way back upstairs. "We've got it narrowed to a guy approximately six-one or over and between one-eighty and two-twenty. At least we can skip all shrimps and skinny guys. As soon as the mold's hardened enough to get a cast from it, we can start tracking down those shoes to some repair-shop."

"And then like in the story-books," I said morbidly, "they got their man."

"I don't think you're eating right," he grinned.

I told him about the arm-measurement I'd taken beside the head of the bed. I repeated it for him; he couldn't try it for himself because his arms weren't long enough. "With just two, three inches to spare, what else could it have been but the butt of a gun? Held right up close to the handle."

"Let's go over the place; we haven't half-started yet." He began yanking open drawers in the dresser; I went out into the other room again, suddenly turned off to one side and

went toward the steam-radiator. I put my whole arm down between it and the wall and pulled up a wrench.

“Here it is,” I called. “You can stop looking.”

He came in and saw what it was, and, by my stance, where it had come from. He took it and looked at it. We could both see the tiny tuft of hair imbedded between its tightly clamped jaws, the bone splinters—or were they minute particles of scalp?—adhering to the rough edge of it.

“You’re right, Mark, this is it,” he said in a low voice. Suddenly he wasn’t looking at it anymore but at me. “How did you know it was there? You couldn’t have seen it through the radiator. You went straight toward it; I didn’t hear your step stop a minute.”

I just stared at him helplessly. “I don’t know,” I said. “I wasn’t thinking what I was doing. I just, I just went over to the radiator unconsciously and put down my arm behind it—and there it was.” It slipped out of my hand, the wrench, and hit the carpet with a dull thud. I passed the back of my hand across my forehead, dazedly. “I don’t know,” I mumbled half to myself.

“Mark, you’re all in. For pete’s sake, why don’t you ask to be relieved of duty, go home, and catch some sleep. The hell with how you happened to find it, you found it, that’s all that matters!”

“I’ve been put on here,” I said groggily, “and I stay on here until it’s over.”

The superintendent unhesitatingly identified the wrench as his own. He had a straightforward enough story to tell, as far as that went. He’d been in here with it one day tinkering with the radiator—that had been months ago, in the spring, before they turned the heat off—and had evidently left it behind and forgotten about it.

“Does that make it look bad for me, gents?” he wanted to know anxiously. When they’re scared, they always call you “gents”; I don’t know why.

“It could,” Beecher said gruffly, “but we’re not going to let it.” The superintendent was a scrawny little fellow, weighed about a hundred-thirty. Small feet. “Don’t worry about it.” Beecher jerked his thumb at the door for him to go.

“Wait a minute,” I said, stopping him, “I’d like to ask you a question—that has nothing to do with this.” I took him over by the window with me and squinted out. “Didn’t there used to be a row of old-fashioned brownstone houses with high stoops across the way from here?”

“Yeah, sure, that’s right!” he nodded, delighted at the harmless turn the questioning had taken. “They pulled them down about a year ago and put up that taxpayer. You remembered them?”

“No,” I said slowly, very slowly. I kept shaking my head from side to side, staring sightlessly out. I could sense, rather than see, Beecher’s eyes fastened anxiously on the back of my head. I brushed my hand across my forehead again. “I don’t know what made me ask you that,” I said sort of helplessly, “How could I remember them, if I never saw them be—?” I broke off suddenly and turned to him. “Was this place, this street out here, always called Donnelly Avenue?”

“No,” he said, “you’re right about that, too. It used to be Kingsberry Road; they changed the name about five years ago; why I don’t know.”

The name clicked, burst inside my head like a star-shell, lighting everything up. I hit myself on the crown with my open hand, turned to Beecher across the superintendent’s shoulder, let out my breath in relief. “No wonder! I used to live here, right in this same building, right in this same flat—25 Kingsberry Road. Ten years ago, when my mother and dad were still alive, rest their souls, when I was going to training school. It’s been bothering me ever since we got out of the car an hour ago. I knew there was something familiar about the place, and yet I couldn’t put my finger on

it—what with their changing the street-name and tearing down those landmarks across the way."

"They remodeled this building some, too," the superintendent put in sagely. "Took down the outside fire-escapes and modernized the front of it. It don't look the same like it used to."

Beecher didn't act particularly interested in all this side-talk; it had nothing to do with what had brought us here today. He shifted a little to close the subject, and then said, "I suppose this thing's spoiled as far as prints go," indicating the wrench. "You wrapped your hand around it when you hauled it up."

"Yes, but I grabbed it down at the end, not all the way up near the head the way he held it. He must have held it up there, foreshortened; the mud shows where he stood."

"We'll send it over to them anyway. Peculiar coincidence. Fairbanks must have come across it behind there and taken it out, then left it lying around, out in the open intending to return it to our friend here. Then this intruder comes in, whacks him with it, and on his way out drops it right back where it had been originally. Funny place to drop it."

"Funny thing to do altogether," I said. "Walk into a place, strike a man dead, turn around and walk out again without touching a thing. Absolutely no motive that I can make out."

"I'm going to run this wrench over to the print-men," he said. "Come on, there's nothing more we can do around here right now." In the car he noticed the dismal face I was putting on. "Don't let it get you," he said. "We're coming along beautifully. Like a timetable, almost. Got a complete, intact print. Now the weapon. And it's not even twelve hours yet."

"Also got a headache," I said under my breath, wincing.

"We might get something out of his wife; she'll be in from the country this evening. Everyone I've spoken to so far has praised her to the skies, but there might be some man in the background had his eye on her. That's always an angle.

Depends how pretty she is; I'll be able to tell you better after I get a look at her."

"I don't agree," I said. "If it were a triangle motive, the man would have tried to cloak it with a fake robbery motive, anything at all, to throw us off the track. He'd know that leaving it blank this way would point twice as quickly—" I broke off short. "What's the idea?"

We'd pulled up in front of my rooming house.

"Go on, get out and get in there," he said gruffly, unlatching the door and giving me a push. "You've been dead on your feet all day! Grab a half-hour's sleep, and then maybe we'll be able to get someplace on this case. I'll start in on the shoeprint-mold, meanwhile. See you over at headquarters later."

"Won't that look great when the captain hears about it!" I protested. "Going home to sleep right in the middle of a job."

"The case'll still be there, I'm not swiping it from you behind your back. This way you're just holding the two of us up. They'll probably have the prints and the mud-analysis ready for us by the time you come down; we can start out from there."

He drove off and cut my halfhearted arguments short. I turned and went up to the door, fumbled for my key, stuck it wearily in the lock—and the door wouldn't open. I jiggled it and wiggled it and prodded it, and no use, it wouldn't work. "What'd the old girl do," I wondered resentfully, "change the lock without telling anybody, because she found it standing open this morning?" I had to ring the bell, and I knew that meant a run-in with her.

It did. The scene darkened and there was her face in the open doorway. "Well, Mr. Marquis! What did you do, lose your door-key? I haven't got a thing to do, you know, except chase up and down stairs all day opening the door for people when they have perfectly good latchkeys to use!"

“Aw, pipe down,” I said irritably. “You went and changed the lock.”

“I did no such thing.”

“Well, you try this, then, if you think it’s perfectly good.”

She did and got the same result I had. Then she took it out, looked at it. Then she glared at me, banged it down into my palm. “*This* isn’t the key I gave you. How do you expect to open the door when you’re not using the right key at all? I don’t know where you got this from, but it’s not one of the keys to my house. They’re all brand-new, shiny; look how tarnished this is.”

I looked at it more closely, and I saw that she was right. If I hadn’t been half-asleep just now, I would have noticed the difference myself in the first place.

I started going through my pockets then and there, under her watchful eye, feeling—and looking—very foolish. The right one turned up in one of my vest-pockets. I stuck it in the door and it worked.

My landlady, however, wasn’t one to let an advantage like this pass without making the most of it. Not that she needed much encouragement at any time. She closed the front door and trailed me into the hall, while I was still wondering where the devil that strange key had come from. “And—ahem—I believe you had a complaint to make about your mattress this morning. Well, I have one to make to you, young man, that’s far more important.”

“What is it?” I asked.

She parked a defiant elbow akimbo. “Is it absolutely necessary for you to go to bed with your shoes on? Especially after you’ve been walking around out in the mud I’m trying to keep my laundry bills down, and Ephie tells me the bottom sheet on your bed was a sight this morning, all streaked with dried mud. If it happens again, Mr. Marquis, I’m going to charge you for it. And then you wonder why you don’t sleep well. If you’d only take the trouble of undressing the way people are supposed to—”

“She’s crazy.” I said hotly. “I never in my life—What are you trying to tell me, I’m not housebroken or something?”

Her reaction, of course, was instantaneous—and loud. “Ephie.” she squalled up the stairs. “Ephie! Would you mind bringing down that soiled sheet you took off Mr. Marquis’s bed this morning? I’d like to show it to him. It hasn’t gone out yet, has it?”

“No, ma’m,” came back from upstairs.

I kept giving her the oddest kind of look while we stood there waiting. I could tell from her own expression, she couldn’t make out what it was. No wonder she couldn’t. It was the kind of look you give a person when you’re floundering around out of your depth, and you want them to give you a helping hand, and yet you know somehow they can’t. You want *them* to give *you* a word of explanation, instead of your giving it to them. You need it badly, even if it’s just a single word.

I distinctly recalled pulling off my shoes the night before when I was turning in. I remembered sitting on the edge of the bed, dog-tired and grunting, and doing it. Remembered how a momentarily formed knot in the lace of one had held me up, remembered how I’d struggled with it, remembered how I’d sworn at it while I was struggling (aloud, yet, and extremely bitterly); and then how I’d finally eradicated it, and given the freed shoe a violent fling off my foot. Remembered how the impetus had thrown it a short distance away and it had fallen over on its side and I’d left it there. All that had been real, not imaginary; all that had happened; all that came back clear as a snapshot.

That peculiar feeling I’d had all morning over at Fairbanks’s flat returned to me, redoubled. As though there were some kind of knowledge hidden just around the corner from me, waiting to be exposed. And yet I couldn’t seem to turn that corner. It kept pivoting out of reach. Or like a revolving door that keeps taking you past the point where you should step out and you miss it each time.

Buildings that suddenly flattened from second to first-story level. Monkey wrenches that come up to meet your hand from behind a radiator. Shoes that find their way back onto your feet without your hand touching them, like magic, like with wings, like in a Disney cartoon. Tired nerves, blurred reflexes, a sick detective trying to catch a healthy murderer.

Ephie and the old girl spread out the sheet foursquare between them, as if they were going to catch someone jumping down from upstairs. “Just look at that.” she declaimed. “That was a clean sheet, put on fresh yesterday morning. I suppose you’ll stand there and try to tell me—”

I didn’t try to tell her anything. What was there to tell her? There were the sidewise-prints of muddied shoes all over it, like elongated horseshoes, and that was that. But I wasn’t listening, anyway. I’d just remembered something else, that had nothing to do with this sheet business. Something that hit me sickeningly like that wrench must have hit poor Fairbanks.

I had a flash of myself the previous Sunday night, that was the night before last, rummaging through an old valise for something, finding a lot of junk that had accumulated in my possession for years, discarding most of it, but saving a tarnished door-key, because I couldn’t remember where or what it was from, and therefore I figured I’d better hang onto it. I’d slipped it into my vest-pocket, because I’d had that on me at the time, unbuttoned and without any coat over it.

They must have seen my face get deathly white; I could see a little of the fright reflected in both of theirs, like in a couple of mirrors. Or like when you point a pocket-light at a wall, and it gives you back a pale cast of the original.

“I’ll be right back,” I said, and left the house abruptly, left the street door standing wide open behind me. I sliced my arm at the first cab that came along and got in.

He took me back to 25 Donnelly Avenue. It was still light out, light enough to see by. I got out and went slowly across

the sidewalk, as slowly and rigidly as a man walking to his own doom. I stopped there by that footprint Beecher had found. It was pretty well effaced as far as details went, but the proportions were still there, the length and width of it if nothing else. I raised my left foot slowly from the cement and brought it down on top of it.

It matched like a print can only match the foot that originally made it. After a while I turned the bottom of my own foot up toward me and studied it dazedly. The cleat across the toe, the rubber-heel worn down in a semicircle at the back.

The driver must have thought I was going to topple, the way I stood there rocking, and then the way I put out my hand gropingly and tried to find the doorway for support. He made a move to get out and come over to me, but saw that I'd steadied and was starting to go in the house.

I went upstairs to the locked Fairbanks flat and took out the key that I'd found in my valise two nights ago that I'd mistakenly used on the rooming house door a little while ago. It opened the flat; the door fell back without a squeak in front of me.

"Pop's key," came to me then, sadly, "or maybe Mom's from the long ago and far away." I pulled the door toward me, closing it again, without going in. And as it came back close against my eyes, the door's shiny green coat dimmed off it and it became an old-fashioned walnut dye. "This used to be my door," I said to myself. "I used to come in here. On the other side of it was where I came—when I came home." I let my forehead lean against it, and I felt sort of sick all over. Fright-sick, if there is such a thing.

After a while I went downstairs again, still without having gone into the flat. I phoned Beecher from a pay station, on the outside. "Come over to my place," I said, and I hung up again. Just those few words.

"I should never have been a detective," I said out loud, without noticing I was back within earshot of the cabman

again.

“What, are you a detective?” he said immediately. “You look awful sick right now. You guys get sick too? I didn’t think you ever did.”

“Do we,” I moaned expressively.

I was waiting for Beecher in my room when he showed up. I had the muddied sheet in there with me (evidence; detective to the bitter end). He found me sitting there staring at the wall, as though I saw things on it. “Was that you?” he said incredulously. “You sounded like the chief mourner at somebody’s funer—”

“Beecher,” I said hollowly, “I know who killed that guy Fairbanks. It was me.”

He nearly yelped with fright. “I knew this was coming! You’ve finally cracked from overwork, you’ve gone haywire. I’m going out and get a doctor!”

I showed him the sheet. I told him about the key, about measuring the footprint. My teeth started chattering. “I woke up halfdead this morning and couldn’t remember putting my pants on. And they were all wrinkled. I know now that *I’d been sleeping in them.* The street-door here in this house was found standing wide open first thing this morning before anyone was up yet. It was me went out, came in again, in the early hours.

“I used to live in that same flat he did. I went back there last night. Didn’t you notice how I found that wrench, went straight toward it without knowing why myself, this morning?” I ducked my face down, away from him. “Poor devil. With a wife and kid. He’s never harmed me. I’d never even seen him before. I told you I’ve been dreaming lately about the cases we’ve worked on. And this dream *got up and walked.*

“I must have found my way there in my sleep, with crime and criminals on my mind, all because I used to live there long ago. Put on the light in what I thought was my own room, found him there, mistook him for an intruder, and

slugged him with a monkey-wrench right in his own bed—all without waking up." I shivered. "I'm the guy we've both been looking for all day. I'm the guy—and I didn't even know it!" I couldn't stop shaking. "I've been chasing myself. I've been on both ends of the case at once!" I covered up my eyes. "I think I'm going crazy."

I had a small-sized bottle there. It was a Christmas gift; I don't use the stuff worth mentioning. He broke the seal and poured me a short drink. He put it away again without taking one himself. On duty, I suppose. He opened the door and looked out into the hall, to see if anyone was around. No one was; he closed it and came back in again.

"Mark," he said gloomily, "I'm not going to tell you to forget it, that you're crazy, that you're talking through your hat. I wish I could; I'd give my eye-teeth if I could. But from me, you're entitled to it straight from the shoulder."

And then he made a face, like every word he was about to say tasted rotten, tasted moldy, ahead of time.

"You did. I think you did. I think you must have."

I didn't answer. I already knew that myself, was sure of it; he wasn't telling *me* anything.

"Here are the findings, as of now. The only prints that would come off the wrench were yours—yours and Fairbanks's. (And he obviously didn't swing it at himself. His were on the mid-section of the stem, where he lifted it from a horizontal position behind the radiator, when he first found it back there.) The ones near the head of the wrench, where by your own calculations the killer actually held it, matched the ones down at the opposite end of the handle. Both yours. From the light push-button, they got one entire thumbprint. Yours. And those lights were already on when we first arrived this morning, I was a witness to that myself.

"Finally, I've already located the shoe repair-shop which did the cleat job matching up with the mold. It wasn't hard; there aren't many people use them; there are even fewer use them on that particular size shoe." He said this slowly,

like he hated to have to, “It wasn’t hard to find. It was the first shop I walked into, *right on the comer below headquarters.* I didn’t expect to find out anything there. I only went in to get an opinion from him. He recognized it at sight. He said, ‘That’s *my* job.’ He said he’d only done one job like that in the past six months. He said, ‘I did that for your buddy, you know the one you call Mark, from headquarters.’ He even remembered how you had to sit waiting in one of the little stalls in your socks, because you told him you only own one pair of shoes at a time.

“Until I came over here just now, and you told me what you just did, none of this added up. I even cursed you out a little at first, I remember, because I thought you’d simply fouled up the job *after* we got over there this morning, being half-awake like you were all day. Left the footprint *then*, smudged up the wrench and pushbutton *then.* In spite of the fact that with my own eyes I saw that the lights were already on, that your fingers didn’t go near the handle of the wrench, that the ground was too hard and dry to take a footprint anymore by the time we got here.”

I held myself by my own throat. “You see how your side of it fits with my side. You see how it must be, *has to be,* the only possible thing that could have happened. You see how we’ve solved it between us, the way we’re paid to, the way we’re trained to, and come out with the right answer. I don’t remember it even yet, but I have proof now that I did. I walked over there and back in my sleep—with my eyes wide open. What am I going to do?”

“I’ll tell you what you’re going to do,” he suggested in a rough-edged undertone, leaning over toward me and putting his hand down on my shoulder. “You’re going to shut up and forget the whole thing. Forget every word you’ve said to me in here. Get me? I don’t know anything, and you haven’t told me anything. Case unsolved.”

I shifted away from him. “That’s what you’re trying to talk me into doing because I’m your partner and because it’s

me. Now tell me what you'd do if it was *you"*

He sighed. Then he smiled halfheartedly, and turned away, and gave up trying. "Just about what you're going to do anyway, yourself, so why ask?"

He stood there looking out the window of my room at nothing, brooding, feeling bad. I sat there looking down at the floor, hands pressed to my face, feeling worse.

Finally I got up quietly and put on my hat. "Coming?" I said. "I'll ride over with you," he agreed. "I've got to go back anyway." In the car he said, "It's not the first man you've killed"; hesitantly, as though realizing it was a rough thing to say to me, especially right then.

"Yes, but they were criminals, and they were trying to kill me at the time. This man wasn't. He had the law on his side. I killed him in his bed."

"It'll be all right. The Old Man'll know what to do. An inquiry. Sick-leave, maybe, for a while."

"That won't bring him back. I have to sleep with this for the rest of life."

"Nothing lasts that long. The very mayor of New York himself, once—Memory wears out. Sound sleep comes back, one night. A year from now you'll be chasing assignments in the car with me again, and looking at mud and looking at light-switches."

I knew somehow, deep in my heart, that he was right. But that didn't make tonight any easier on me. Tonight was tonight, and a year from now was a year from now, and never the two could meet. It's the year between you have to pay for, each time, and I was ready to do my paying.

He didn't offer to shake hands with me, when he left me outside the Old Man's door, that would have been too theatrical. Just—

"I'll see you, Mark."

"I'll see you, Beecher."

It must be hell not to have a partner, no matter what your job is.

I opened the door and went in. I didn’t say anything; I went all the way over to his desk and just stood there.

The captain looked up finally. He said, “Well, Marquis?”

I said, “I’ve brought the man who killed Fairbanks in to you, Captain.”

He looked around, on this side of me and on that, and there was no one standing there but me.

THE NIGHT OF FEBRUARY 17, 1924

Three women came first. One was a blonde, one a redhead, one a brunette. As though exemplifying the differing tastes of that many unseen men. They all had one thing in common: They were all extremely tall. As though that, too, had been a determining factor in their present status. Among others. They were dressed as the mode of the moment dictated: shorn hair (in the case of one, it was even shingled at the back of the neck like a man's); cocoon-like wraps, held closed by being interfolded across the body, with the arms kept on the inside; and pencil-straight skirts that fell almost to the tops of their shoes.[*]

Behind them walked a man. Very close behind them. Almost giving the impression of a watchful sheep dog, guiding his charges in his master's absence. Although his arms weren't extended out from his body that was the feeling one had: that if these girls should stray a little too far over, either to one side or the other, he would corral them back to dead-center again.

Unlike women walking together as a rule, no matter how short the distance, they moved in prudent silence. As if having learned that the slightest word, no matter how harmlessly said, might be misconstrued and turned against

the speaker at some later summing-up or betrayal, and it was safer therefore not to speak at all.

Close together and yet in this lonely sort of silence, they entered the elevator with their guard and were carried up from sight. It came down again presently, but the girls were no longer on it, only the man was. He was dancing a key up and down in his hand. The sheep were in the fold, and the shepherd's loyal helper had them safely locked in. He went out to the entrance and stood there on the topmost step, as if watching for someone's arrival.

Within moments after, the arrival had occurred. It was the looked-for event. The way the man blocking the entrance quickly took his hand from the doorway, stepped back to give clearance, showed that. It was both multiple and yet strangely compact. It was that of a phalanx of men. One man in the center, one at each side of him, one at his back. Their bodies all swung to the same walking-rhythm: brisk, staccato, purposeful.

The one in the center was rather short. The rest were all a halfhead taller. Perhaps because of his shorter height, he gave an impression of plumpness that was not justified by his actual girth. Padding in the shoulders of his coat, almost as oblique as epaulettes, did its part as well.

He was surprisingly young-looking, thirty-three or -four at most. But even here there were qualifying factors. It was not the youthfulness of pre-maturity, when character lines have not yet become deeply enough indented to be permanent attributes of the countenance; it was rather a reverse process, an erasure, of lines and traces that had already *been* there. The face was becoming vapid, a cipher, and tricked the eye at first into mistaking this for juvenility. It wasn't; it was decay, an immeasurably hastened senility. It was erosion, leading toward an ultimate idiocy.

The group compressed itself into the elevator. The man who had been waiting at the doorway entered last and took over the controls, motioning the regular operator out. The

latter, taken by surprise, just stood there with his mouth open as the car went up. The impromptu operator overshot the correct floor. He had to check the car jarringly, reverse it with a jerk, and then again he overshot the mark slightly in the opposite direction. He finally adjusted the car-level to the correct height.

When they stepped off, one of them dropped behind long enough to warn the recent operator in an undertone: “What’s the matter, you nervous? He didn’t like that; I saw him look at you.”

“I never drove one of them before,” protested the unhappy amateur.

“Well, you shoulda practiced. He likes everything to run smooth. Now take it down back where it come from.”

Meanwhile, ghostly music that had been whispering along the corridor suddenly blared out as a door opened to admit them, and the blonde one of the three girls stood by it waiting to receive them. The hindmost one chucked her under the chin as they entered, and an incandescent smile immediately flashed on, as though he’d turned a switch just below her jaw.

The door was closed, but one of them remained by it, immovable. “Augie’s still coming up,” he explained. “I sent him down with the car.”

Within a few moments a low-pitched voice said, “Augie,” just outside; it was reopened briefly, and then it was closed and locked with a finality that meant all further ingress was at an end.

Nobody said anything for several minutes, although there were now eight people in the room. The short man who had been in the center of all of them spoke first. It was as though they had all been waiting to take their cue from him.

A baleful expression flickered across his face. “Who would’ve ever thought that Abbazzia would find himself holed up in a fleabag hotel like this with the last few of his

guys?” he said, as though speaking about some third person of great consequence.

“It’ll blow over,” the one they called Carmine said.

Abbazzia went over and sank into an easy chair. “My mistake was waiting too long,” he said. “I got careless. Now he’s taken the town away from me.”

“He won’t have it long,” Sal promised.

Abbazzia looked at him bleakly. “He’s got it now, Salvatore, and it’s the now that counts, in this deal. There ain’t no more than now. There ain’t no next time. Every speak from Tenth Avenue over to Third is paying its protection to him now, not us anymore. Every truck that comes down from the border—” He put his hand to his eyes, shading them for a minute.

The redhead began sidling over on a careful diagonal, like someone who watches where she puts her foot at every step, her object evidently consolatory.

Augie caught sight of her and tactfully motioned her back. “He’ll call you over when he wants you.”

Abbazzia continued to direct his remarks to the men in the room, ignoring the girls. He showed them his open hand, to show them that it was empty. “Seven,” he whined in lamentation. “Seven all at one time. Who’ve I got left? Where’m I gonna get that kind again? They don’t come like them anymore. Guys that started out with me in the old days.”

“Did you read the papers, about how they found Ruffo?” Sal asked him, with a peculiar glitter in his coffee-bean eyes that might have been latent sadism as much as vengeful group-loyalty.

“How’m I gonna read the papers?” Abbazzia answered impatiently. “I come away from there so fast, when the word come the heat was up—”

Sal moistened his lips. “He was on the top floor of this garage, when they found him. Him, he was the only one didn’t have no shoes or socks on. So first they couldn’t

figure it. Then they noticed these razor blades lying there. The skin on the bottom of his feet was peeled off, real thin, like when you buy ham in a delicatessen. And then on the sea-ment floor was this big burnt place; you know, like when you pour a big puddle of crankcase oil and put a match to it. And then bloody footprints that kept going back and forth, back and forth, over it. I guess they held onto him tight and made him keep walking across it, over and over—maybe with a couple of car engines turning over downstairs, to drown out his screams."

Abbazzia's expression didn't falter, his contemplative eyes never once left the speaker's face as he listened. "That's one I never thought of myself," he mused wistfully when it was over. "I wonder who got it up?"

"I wonder how long he lasted?" Carmine remarked idly.

Sal turned toward him scornfully. "What's the difference how long? He didn't make it, did he?"

"A lot of difference to *him,* I bet," Carmine pointed out, "if it was long or short." A chuckle clucked in his throat.

Abbazzia yawned, hitched his elbows back, straddled his legs still further apart. "I'm tired," he droned languidly. "Getting out of there in such a hurry, like that. My feet cramp me."

At once, as though an esoteric signal had been given her, the redhead sluiced forward from her position in the background, dropped deftly to her knees directly before his chair, began to pick busily at the lace of his shoe with her long magenta-lacquered nails. In a moment she had eased the shoe off. He lordily crossed one leg over the other, so that she could more easily reach the second one. Having taken off the second shoe, she steadied his foot by placing her hand under the arch, lowered her head, and pressed her lips warmly to his instep.

"That's what I think of my Jakie!" she proclaimed, rearing her head again.

Abbazzia reached out and roughed her hair slightly, as one would playfully disarrange a dog's coat. "You stay with me tonight," he vouchsafed indulgently.

The two remaining girls exchanged a quick look of chagrin and frustration.

Whether due to the preceding little by-play or not, Abbazzia had now mellowed into a better humor. "Come on." he ordered. "What're you guys standing around looking so glum about? There ain't nobody dead here. And when there is, it ain't going to be any of us. Let's liven it up a little." He turned to Augie. "Got anything on you?"

"Sure, never travel without it." Augie produced a bottle.

"That ain't our own, is it?" Abbazzia cautioned mistrustfully.

"Naw. This is the regular stuff, uncut," was the answer.

The blonde was busily cranking the handle of a little flat-topped portable phonograph. She put a record on the mildly stirring turntable, lowered the needle-arm, and after a brief series of thin, piping discords, a tinny smothered voice began to whine:

"Whaddya do Sunday, Whaddya do Monday, Mai——ry?"

"Dance with Augie," Abbazzia commanded, giving the nestling redhead a slight push to dislodge her from the chair-arm.

The redhead pouted. "I'd rather dance with you."

"Who're you that he should dance with you?" one of the men reminded her.

Abbazzia's eyelids lowered a trifle, dangerously. "I said dance with Augie. And you know how I mean. I get a kick just watching the two of you."

At the repetition of the order, the redhead rose to her feet with a swift immediacy that left no doubt of her intention to fully obey, gave her dress a downward pull, and opened her arms statically toward her enjoined partner.

He remained fixed where he was. “Well, come over where I am, if you want to danst with me,” he said churlishly. “I ain’t going to you.”

She had to cross the better part of the room, until she was standing right up against him. Only then did he exert himself enough to put an arm about her waist.

They began to move together with tiny, almost minuscule steps that barely took them anywhere.

Abbazzia watched for a moment with eye-bulging intentness. Then, with querulous dissatisfaction, “That ain’t hotsy enough. Do it like you did it up in my place the other night.”

“It takes ’em a minute or two, they gotta get warmed up.” Sal chuckled obscenely.

“The music’s too slow,” the redhead protested defensively, her voice smothered against her partner’s shoulder. “You can’t do anything with it.”

“Here’s a better one,” the self-appointed custodian of the small phonograph announced, having shuffled a number of records hastily through her hands.

She interrupted the bleats coming from it, and after a brief hiatus, it resumed at a quicker tempo, with a sound like twigs being snapped coursing rhythmically through it.

“Doo wacka-doo, doo wacka-doo,
Doo wacka-doo-wacka-doo-wacka-doo.”

The redhead’s convolutions became almost serpentine. Her partner remained more rigid, though only by a matter of degrees. She was like a wind-walloping pennant flickering and buffeting back against its flagstaff. Neither moved their feet, except to shift weight upon them. Now Sal, crouching on his haunches, beat his hands together in accompaniment low above the floor, as if fanning the music underneath their feet. The blonde snapped her fingers in time, throwing her hand out first to one side of her, then to

the other. She called out, “Hey-hey! Hey-hey!” while she did so.

Abbazzia picked up a shaded reading lamp standing on a small table near him, held it aloft, and tipped the shade, so that all the light flooded out at one side, none at the other. He aimed it so that it fell upon the girl’s frenzied figure, making a luminous oval across the mid-section, striking her directly in the posterior.

Apprised of this, perhaps from former occasions, the girl accommodatingly hiked her skirt up to a point at which it revealed the undersides of her thighs.

“Back up more,” Abbazzia instructed the pair. “You’re getting out of range.” He adjusted the lamp meticulously as they did so, like a surveyor correcting his sights.

The girl, who had been snapping her fingers in time during the earlier stages, changed her jargon-calls now that a climax was being reached. She called out at intervals: “Charles-burg! Charles-burg!”

“Where’d you get that one?” the brunette squealed delightedly. “There was an out-of-town guy at the club the other night,” the other explained. “Every time he got up, he wanted to say ‘Charleston!’ and he couldn’t get it straight, it wouldn’t come out right.”

“I like that,” her companion proclaimed zestfully. “It’s good.”

“Help yourself,” the first invited drily. “It’s free.”

They both chimed in together, parroting “Charles-burg! Charles-burg!” Then doubled over in risible appreciation of this newly coined *bon mot.*

The male participant in the exhibition, meanwhile, had suddenly begun to flag; moisture bedewed his pale face. His partner’s gyrations continued without inhibition.

“Hold it a minute,” he panted in an urgent, suppressed voice. “Get back from me, will ya?” He wrenched his companion’s clutching hands off and thrust her back away

from him, so that there was clearance between them for the first time.

He stood as though unable or unwilling to move for a moment, exactly as the last paroxysm of the dance had left him.

The other four men watching gave vent to a roar of spontaneous delight that had something as unclean about it as a geyser of mud.

The brunette commented in an undertone: “Get that. He wore out before she did.”

The blonde said something to her in explanation behind the back of her hand.

“Oh,” said the first one knowingly, now that she was enlightened. “I forgot to think about that.”

“You *what*?” was the tart rebuttal. “How old are you anyway?” The dancers separated and went their ways. Each in his own manner. She, to throw herself down in a chair, with head lolling

back and fanning herself with one hand held limply, but otherwise composed, unconcerned. But he, slinking off with a suggestion of crouched maladroitness in his carriage, as though he were undergoing a private imbalance that she could not by nature be subject to. To seek a corner by himself, hook his fingers into his shirt collar, as if to ease an intolerable constriction, and sit there, head bowed, in a sort of male loneliness.

“That was good,” Abbazzia summed it up. “That was the best yet. He ain’t got no sense of humor, though,” he regretted, dismissing the whole episode.

He yawned cavernously. “I’m beat,” he said.

There were immediate preparations for departure by everyone in the room except the redhead. The brunette knuckled the closed bath-door glancingly in passing. “Come on,” she said possessively over her shoulder. “Jake’s getting sleepy.”

Carmine turned and asked Sal, “Which side of him you taking?”

“I’ll go over here,” Sal decided with a pitch of his thumb at the blank wall behind him. “You get in there. Augie can go downstairs and stick by the switchboard, Nick can go out in the hall and keep the elevator covered.”

“Go in there next door first and see if you can hear me,” Abbazzia ordered, eyes glittering alertly with the instinct for selfpreservation. “We don’t want no slips. Both of you. Then come back and let me know.”

They nodded, opened the door, went out into the hall, and closed it after them.

Abbazzia got up from the chair, rammed one fist deep down into his pocket, arm held stiffly at his side in tension. “They gotta get in here fast, in case I need them,” he explained to the respectfully watching girls. He went over toward the wall on the left-hand side first, coiled his free hand, drew it back, and thumped loudly three times, at spaced intervals.

Within a matter of seconds, not minutes but seconds, the room-door burst backward and Carmine strode in, a snub-nosed revolver held springily down beside his hip-joint.

“Heard je,” he said triumphantly. “How was that for speed?”

Abbazzia narrowed his eyes mistrustfully. “How many knocks ’dl give it?” he catechized.

“Three,” Carmine answered. He reinserted his gun under his left armpit.

Abbazzia nodded approvingly. “You heard me,” he admitted.

He turned to face the other way. “Now we’ll try Sal’s side.” He pummeled the wall heavily. Then a second time. Then a third. “I’ll give it four this time,” he said, jaw clenched with effort. The impact of the blow coincided with the flaring-open of the door, with the latter just preceding it by some instants.

Sal's revolver was bedded within the side pocket of his coat, but reared perpendicularly so that the whole coat hem rose with it to a squat-nosed projection. "Clear as a belli" he reported sanguinely.

Again Abbazzia's eyes squinted. "How many times 'dl sound off?" he growled truculently.

Sal looked slightly taken back. "I only caught two," he admitted.

Abbazzia's face twisted into a violent blob of rage, like unbaked dough squeezed between the hands of a pastry cook. "You lyin'——!" he exploded virulently. "I done it four times! You're going to tell me it's twice, haa?"

He coiled a forearm far back of his own shoulder, swung rabidly with it, caught the bodyguard flat-handed on the side of the face with a sound like wet linen being pounded on a clothesline. Then again on a pendulum-like reverse swing. The third slap only missed contact because Sal veered his head acutely aside, without however moving his body back.

Hand poulticing his stricken cheek, his attitude was one of rueful, misunderstood loyalty. "Hold it, boss," he protested virtuously. "Hold it a minute."

"I don't like for nobody to lie to me, see?" Abbazzia shrilled.

"I caught the first one sitting in the chair, waiting for it to come. By the time the second one come, I was halfway through the door already. Naturally, I missed the last two because I wasn't in the room no more by that time. What should I do, sit there counting 'em off on my fingers? If them things was wrong-way bullets, four would be too many to wait for. While I'm waiting to count, you're—" He left it eloquently unfinished.

Abbazzia took a moment to consider this, crinkling his eyes speculatively first, then widening them in elated appreciation. "Yeah!" he concurred with enthusiasm. "That was the smart thing to do! It's the speed what counts when

I’m sending for you, not the arithmetic.” He turned his head a moment in oblique disparagement. “Whyd’n’t you think of that, Carmine?” And to the rest of them, as though he had been the one taking Sal’s part all along and they had been in opposite judgment: “See what a smart boy I got here? What’re you trying to tell me, he ain’t smart?” Again his hand went out toward Sal, but this time to clap him on the shoulder rewardingly, to squeeze his biceps affectionately. Even to pinch the point of his chin and wag it playfully to and fro.

He reached into his pocket, took out a billfold, took something out of that, prodded it down into Sal’s breast pocket like a handkerchief. “Blow your nose on that,” he instructed jovially.

“Now clear out and lemme get some sleep.” He crossed his forearms, fanned them apart, in general room-wide dismissal. They went in pairs for the most part, Carmine with the blonde, Sal with the brunette, the other two to do night-long sentinel duty, one downstairs, one in the hall. No good nights were said. Perhaps good-nights were for people who lived less dangerously; just to survive the night itself, that alone was sufficient well-being.

“Take good care of him for us,” the blonde warned, with an undertone of jealousy.

“And I’m the girl that can do it,” was the pert answer.

The door closed.

“Lock it up on the inside,” Abbazzia ordered.

He looked at her from where he lay sprawled out in the chair. His look was lethargic, even somnolent. Not the somnolence caused by sleep, but the somnolence caused by the dregs of a spent passion that can no longer stir or vivify. His arms and legs seemed to fall away from him of their own accord, so that his sprawl became even looser.

“Undress me,” he commanded in a monotone.

The girl quickly advanced, a smile starched on her face. She slid downward onto her knees before him, reached

gingerly forward toward the topmost button of his jacket, as quiveringly as though she were afraid of getting an electric shock.

He allowed the lids to close over his eyes, the better to retain whatever distorted images this was about to bring him.

Just as her fingertips touched the button, and almost as though it were an effect generated by her touching of it, there was a single, low knock on the outside of the door.

Her hands scampered back to her own person, like two ashamed things seeking refuge. They all but tried to burrow inside her clothing and hide themselves.

His eyelids went up, furrowed with annoyance. “Go see what they want now,” he told her. “One of ’em must have forgot something.”

She unlocked the door, but her arm held out across it still blocked the way. A hand flung the arm contemptuously aside.

An old, old woman all in black was standing there. Short and stocky, like he was. Her face long-dead; only the eyes still alive. Bitterly alive.

This black wasn’t the black of fashion, the black of Rome and New York, trim and just-so. This was the black the women of Catania wore, in the after-years of their lives, after they had lost their men. Homespun and shapeless, and with no intent to please. To show life was through, and that the wearer was through with life.

“Get out!” she commanded the girl stonily.

Stunned into alertness, his back reared from its supine position against the chair. “How’dyow get here?” he breathed in amazement.

He became aware of the girl, still cringing there to one side of the two of them. “You heard her. Get out,” he repeated. “Wait outside. I’ll let you know when I want you back.”

She slipped around one side of the door-frame and was gone from sight, as furtively as though she were afraid to come into line with those terrible eyes staring so fixedly into the room at him, like messengers of denunciation.

"Rifiuto!" the old woman said balefully. Garbage.

He demanded: "Whaddya doin' here like this? Don'tcha know it's risky to come here?"

She pitched her head interrogatively. *"Che signified,* 'risky' ?"

"Pericobso," he translated unwillingly, as though averse to following her into the language of his former days, the one learned at her lips.

"Pericobso per chi?" She gave a snort of scorn-curdled laughter.

Risky for whom? Risky for you, maybe. Not for me. I have killed no one. I have robbed no one. I go unafraid.

"Now that you're here, whaddya want? Whadja come for? To say good-bye to me?"

She tossed her head impatiently, as when one is bored by having to return to an old subject that was closed long ago. *"Ti dissi addio . . ."*

I said good-bye to you ten long years ago, night after night in the dark, on my knees before the blessed image of Our Lady, drops of water falling from my eyes, drops of blood falling from my heart. She did not smile on me. It was too late then already for anything except good-bye. Then, it was finished. That was my good-bye.

"You're talkin' crazy," he said uncomfortably. He got up from the chair. "Then whaddya here for, to preach to me?"

She grappled beneath the seedy black garb that encased her. A sheaf of banded currency was in her hand when she brought it out again.

"A ridarti . . ."

To give back this . . .

She showed it to him first, lying in her palm. Then she spat violently into the middle of it, and flung it away from her. It landed anywhere, she did not look to see, she did not want to know.

"Danaro insanguinato . . ."

Money with blood on it. The dead cry out from this kind of money. Their voices are within it.

"You're a fool," he sneered. "You could have had everything in the world, and you live like a rat in a hole—"

"No, sei tu Vidiota . . ."

No, you are the fool, not II She struck her hand sharply against her chest.

"Io sono onesta . . ."

I am honest. I am a poor woman, but I am honest, clean. My husband worked hard all his life until he died worn-out, but he too was clean. We were not like you.

He strode toward her furiously, backed his arm in threat.

She didn't flinch. *"Colpiscimi . . ."* Hit me. It will not be the first time.

"You lying old bat!" This time his arm completed the threat, he struck her across the face.

She tottered, regained her balance, only smiled sleepily. The eyes that looked at him held no pity, no softness, not any kind of feeling at all. They were eyes of glass, of agate in a statue.

"Questo e' il momenta . . ."

This is the hour I knew would come. I have waited for it many years. Now it is here. In my village there was a saying when I was a young girl. "God punishes without having to use hands or feet." I see the punishment before me now. I feel no pity for you. My heart is as dead as a stone. For *I am one of those you have killed.* The first, perhaps. More slowly than some of the others, but just as completely. I walk around in the grave you have put me in. And in the grave there are not mothers, only corpses.

She turned away abruptly, in leave-taking without farewell.

“It will be finished soon, anyway,” he heard her say stonily.

“They’ll never get me!” he shouted toward her. “D’ye hear what I’m saying? They’ll never—”

She looked back briefly, nearer the door now. “They do not have to. You will go just as surely, without them. Your years are already days, your days are minutes. You have the Bad Sickness in you. The sickness that creeps like a worm, and once it is in, cannot be got out again. No man’s hand needs to be raised against you . . .”

He stared at her in almost superstitious fright. “Even that you know—” he breathed in awe. “Who told you? Nobody knows that about me!” Mechanically, as if from some long-forgotten habit interred for years and now brought to the surface again by sudden instinctive fear, he made a sneaking, furtive sign of the cross. “What are you, a witch or something?”

She slitted her eyes at him in contempt. *“Non v’era bisogno di dirlo . . .”*

One does not have to be told. One knows. One sees the signs. This is nothing new. I saw it in my village, small as it was, when I was young. Even there it was not new. One crossed to the other side of the road in passing it by, that was all. I knew it had come into my house already when you were still only a boy of sixteen.

His breath hissed in stunned intake.

“La tazza, laforchetta . . .”

The cup you drank from, the fork you ate with, kept apart, hidden from the rest. They were always missing when I washed the things. Those were the signs that told me. You did not come to me for help. You went to the streets for help, instead. The streets where you already robbed the storekeepers, and roamed at night the leader of a pack,

marauding with knives. And the streets gave you back what you had given to them. Now the mark is on you, and it is too late for help anymore.

The arms and the legs die, and you cannot move anymore. Then the tongue dies, and there are no more words, only sounds like the animals make. Childhood comes back, but going the other way, rushing toward you from the grave.

“Shut up!” he squalled, and cupped the heels of his hands tight against his ears.

She turned away with a flick of disgust. The door opened at her grip. He was watching her now with a mixture of disbelief and defiant bravado.

“You walking out on me this way? You too? My own mother? All right, go ahead! Who needs you? *Vecchia.* Just an old woman. You shut up all these years, though, didn’t you, when things were going good?” he railed. “And now cuz you think they’re going bad, you turn on me like all the rest.”

She released a scoffing breath.

He changed suddenly, softened for a moment. “Close the door,” he coaxed. “Come on back in. Stay with me awhile. I’m lonely. I ain’t got nobody of my own. These others—D’you remember when I was a kid, and you used to make lasagne for Vito and me, and bring ’em hot to the table—?”

“Quetta non ero io . . .”

That was not I, that was another woman, long gone now. A woman whose prayers were not answered.

“You’re my mother, you can’t change that,” he told her, between a snicker and a derisive grin, like one who is certain he holds the upper hand.

“Io non sono piu tua madre . . .” she whispered smolderingly.

Mother, no. Just a woman who bore a devil. The woman who once bore you says good-bye to you.

The door clapped closed and she was gone.

His mouth opened in a gape of disbelief, a disbelief such as one might feel if one stood back and watched one's own self betray one.

Then it clicked shut, and defiance spread over his face once more. He swept his arm out and around before him in contemptuous dismissal. "All right, let 'em all go." he bellowed. "All of 'em. I don't need nobody! I'll make it alone! I come up by myself, and I'll stay up by myself!"

He went over and looked into the mirror, and straightened the hug of the padding that sloped upon his shoulders.

"It's me for me, all by myself, just like it's always been," he said aloud to the scowling reflection facing him. "If God ain't going to forgive you, if God ain't going to give you a break, then what good is God? They can have God. I'll take Abbazzia. What good is being good? You stay poor all your life, like her and eighty million others. You get run over by a car like my brother Vito did, and they let you lie there in the rain, newspapers from a trash-can spread over you. Then 'cause a priest comes and mumbles over you, that means you're going to heaven. Who wants to go to heaven in the rain, on an empty stomach, soaking newspapers thrown over you, without a dime in your pocket? The hell with heaven. He worked hard, he never stole, he never scrapped, he never pulled a knife on no one. *He* was good, and look what he got. I was smart, and look what *I* got—"

He flourished his own hand toward his reflection's hand, so that his reflection's eyes could see the explosively brilliant diamond on the little finger.

He picked up the money she had flung on the floor. "There ain't no good or bad, anyway," he grunted. "They just tell you that in the church when you're a kid, to keep you from getting wise that everyone else has something, and you ain't got nothing. There's only dumb and smart.

And if you don't want to be the one, then you gotta be the other."

He riffled the money back into orderly shape, tucked it into his billfold, put it away.

He summed up his life, content with it, proud of it.

"Abbazzia picked smart for his."

Then he went over to the door, and opened it. He gave a curt summons, without looking. "Hey, you! You can come in now. Whaddya waiting for? Didn't you see her go?"

He turned away without waiting, and took out a cigarette and a pocket lighter. Then before he had brought the two of them together, he stopped again and glanced back at the door in angered disbelief. It was still open just as he had left it. No one had come in through it.

He flung the cigarette down, went over to it a second time, and looked out.

There was no one in sight. The hall was empty.

He stalked across the room to the telephone, wrenched the earpiece off the crotch that held it, and shouted harshly, "Hey, down there! Is that bi—Is that girl around? Tell her to get back up here, and make it snappy, or I'll—"

A man's voice, subdued, almost faint by comparison to the violence in his own, intercepted: "Yes, sir?"

"That girl—" he fairly shrieked. "I want her up here! I don't let nobody make me wait like this!"

"A—a red-headed young lady?" the man at the other end finally hazarded.

"Who remembers what they look like!" thundered Abbazzia. "Yeah! Red-headed."

"I'm sorry sir. She left the building."

There was a moment of sudden stunned silence. "She *what?* What'd you just say?"

"She's not in the building any longer," the voice repeated. "I saw her leave by the front entrance."

A sudden blue bead of flame winked up from the incessantly manipulated pocket lighter in his free hand, and

noticing for the first time what he had been doing with it, he flung it violently away from him, as though it, somehow, were to blame for this unprecedented affront, this laceration to his dignity, offered to boot not even by a subordinate but by a lower form of life altogether.

He picked up at long last the remaining part of the phone, the stem part. His voice was less raucous now, more bated. “That man I left down there. Put him on. Tell him I want to talk to him a minute.”

“The man that was posted here by the switchboard?” the voice inquired, to make sure of correct identification.

“Him! Get a move on!”

“I’m sorry. He left with her.”

The stunning impact of the news made Abbazzia take a step back on one leg, as though the telephone had suddenly pushed him away.

He was having trouble with his breathing now; it came too full one moment, too scant the next. He didn’t answer; he closed off the connection almost furtively. As though afraid to leave even that small orifice leading into his room: an electrical impulse within a sheathed wire.

The pupils of his eyes moved too far over into one corner, then too far back into the opposite corner, then all the way back to the first again, never remaining at calm center. Like pools of quicksilver clinging to a ledge.

He darted a look at the lateral wall. “Wait’ll I get Sal in here! Gotta get Sal in here—!”

He scurried toward it on the bias, giving a heedless shove to a chair that nearly overturned it, to get it out of the way rather than go around it, so intent was he on getting over there fast.

He struck at the wall, and it gave back a loud but flat-sounding throbbing, that raced around the room and died again into silence. Then he struck once more, and then once more. Silence came back again each time. He even turned around to face the door, waiting to witness Sal’s headlong

rush across the threshold, as at the rehearsal. He even took a precautionary step out of the way, to allow him plenty of clearance, so that they wouldn't collide.

Nothing occurred. The door remained lifeless.

This time his arm moved like a triphammer. Its motions blurred, they could no longer be identified individually, so fast it struck, so incessantly. So frightenedly, so despairingly. He even cried out his name: "Sal." And then again: "Sal. Why don't you come in here?"

His arm suddenly dropped, and swung there fallow.

"Gone," he panted. "Him too."

Then he laced around with the swiftness of a top when a child whisks the wound-up guide cord out from under it, and flung himself at the opposite wall, across from the first. Both his arms were out, as when one runs forward to embrace someone or something, enclose it, draw it to you. Thus his whole body careened into the wall in that position, arms akimbo, hands overhead, chest pressed flat against it.

For a moment he lay that way, like a cardboard cutout of a man pasted flat against a wall-surface; every inert turn of his body expressing the one word "despair." Then his hands began to ripple, beating tattoo with their palms, like a drummer using the plaster for his drumhead. Faster and faster they went, frenzied, battering. And his voice-box, partly stopped up by the wall and made hollow-sounding against it, kept calling out in agonized repetition the second one's name, the one who was supposed to be behind there on this side. And broke and crumbled at last into pleadings and sobbings that could not have carried through to the other side even *had* somebody been there. "Carmine, come in, I need you.

Carmine, you're there, ain't you? Carmine, I'll give you anything you want, only come in! It's empty all around me, I'm by myself in here!"

No one, nothing; no sign, no sound. The door stayed mute.

His hands fell still at last, couldn’t strike any more. For a moment they stayed in place against the wall, then like fivepronged stains first one and then the other slowly coursed down it and dropped off.

His cheek remained flat against it, nuzzling it, as if he held it in some kind of crazed affection, because it had once meant protection, even if it didn’t anymore.

Then his head turned slowly, and he looked across his shoulder at the door, bulge-eyed, fearful.

Panic. Agoraphobia, with its limitless black horizons and chill, unimpeded death-winds. Nothing at hand to shield, to shelter, to cover one over. His voice whispered its terror. “I’m wide open. They can walk right in off the street and get me! There’s nobody in-between anymore!”

He flung himself against it, as he had the two walls, and the impact of his body tossed it closed with a violent clout. His hands, trembling, groped for and turned the lock. And then a last slap against the center of the panel, to hold that fast.

He turned and looked and saw the door of the clothes closet. He opened it, and backed in, and half-crouched there. And drew the door partly to in front of him. For a moment only the four tight-pressed tips of his fingers studded along its edge could be seen, and the brightness of his recessed eyes, glistening with watery animalistic sparkle. And his breath could be heard, against the cavernous echo-chamber that the closet became for it.

Briefly only, he stayed like this. It brought no palliation. Unreasoning agoraphobia wanted more: a hole in the ground, a burrow. Something tighter, closer overhead.

He came out again. And like a naked man who plunges into icy water, the open room caused him to draw shivering breaths.

He made for the bed, and dropped down against the edge of it, the way children do when they’re about to say their prayers. But he had no gods; he was his own god, and

therefore he had nothing to pray to. Then he lowered himself to the floor from there, all but his rump, and padding on the flats of his hands, like some odd, ungainly animal, drew his head and shoulders in under the bed. Then lolled over on his side, and switched his legs in after him, and then drew his knees up close against his stomach. And lay coiled like that, like some unborn foetus pulsing with premature breath.

His dilated eyes were sighted out along a two-dimensional garden patch of scuffed beige carpet-flowers that seemed to climb upward in their symmetrical rows, shutting out the whole rest of the world. Their perfume was dust, and they lay like dead, unstirring. The edge of the bed came down and cut them off short. They had no sedative effect for terror; they were the flowers of delirium, that come back at night in dreams if looked at too closely and too long.

Now swiftly, within the space of breath-choked minutes, his mania blew inside-out, like an umbrella in a gale. Or like a sleight-of-hand performer who draws a length of gauze through his fingers and causes it to change magically from one hue to the next. Confinement, craved just now, suddenly became the form of terror itself. Agoraphobia turned into claustrophobia. Both were still the same terror, with another name.

His hand pounded the floor beside him, “I can’t stay here like a rat in a trap, waiting for ’em to come and get me! I gotta get out of here! Gotta get out of here fast!” He lashed his legs out into the open, then padded backward on the flats of his hands until his head was in the clear.

“Gotta get on the outside!” he kept muttering. “Gotta lose myself on the outside! That’s the only thing’ll save me.”

He ran to where the suitcase was standing, tossed the lid up and over. His ravening fingers disemboweled its contents; neckties of tropical brilliance splashed up, like a neon-geyser, to fall back around him and stay that way, in

static ripples. Shirts threw up their empty sleeves like struggling ghosts and expired lifeless on the floor.

He was still talking brokenly to his unseen companion: selfpreservation. “Who needs neckties, when it’s your neck itself you gotta save?”

Then a gun, bedded in layers of undergarments. He inserted it underneath his coat somewhere. “The only one you can trust, anyway; the one that’s right on you.” Then more money went into the already sausage-plump billfold.

He stood up and turned to go. “That’s all you need,” he said. “That’s all, in this-here world. Money and a gun. A gun and money. Everything else you can get with one or the other of them two.” And leered with his own wisdom.

He went over to the closed door once more—for the last time, this was to be—and opened it sparingly to look out.

A man was standing down the hall, where the elevator-shaft door was. Not moving, not doing anything. Just standing motionless, head lowered attentively, newspaper spread open just across his breastbone. The brim of his hat kept the light from the upper part of his face, as though he were wearing an eyeshade.

He didn’t turn at the sound of Abbazzia opening his door, though he must have heard it in all that stillness. He didn’t even seem to be breathing, he was so still.

Abbazzia’s fear-sensitized nerves jerked and recoiled throughout the length and width of his body. He knew. These were the lookouts, these who stood like this. He knew the ways of those who stalk to kill, he knew them well, they’d done his own errands for him too many a time. Sometimes he’d even watched them at a distance, from within the safe anonymity of a parked car. That rigor-mortis-immobility, the down-held head so that the eyes could not be seen to move, the sheltering hat-brim, the newspaper that provided the excuse. Then when the quarry had passed, they made the signal that doomed him. In many ways, in many different ways, they made it. They lowered

the newspaper, or blew their nose on a handkerchief, or threw a cigarette away, so that it made a momentary red streak across the dark. All these were the messages of death. Who should know them better than he, he had prearranged so many of them himself.

The ribbon's-width of door-opening had already been effaced, instantly, at first glance. "The window—" came racing down the millway of his thoughts like a bright pebble. "There may be a fire ex-cape—get out through there." He'd first used the word at seven with an *x;* he'd used it that way ever since, and never known in all that time that it was wrong; no one had ever told him so. A wrong word used many times throughout a life; a wrong deed done many times throughout a life; wherein lies the difference?

He didn't draw the shade up, he simply slanted it aside, making a crevice to look through. He saw at once that under the ledge there was nothing, only a sheer drop all the way down to the street.

He was cut off, sealed up in here. The room that had been chosen for a sanctuary because of its inaccessibility, had turned for that very same reason into a tomb.

He lurched with sagging knee-joints back deeper into the room, pushing away an impeding table, propping himself in passing against the top of a chair. Then he stood there a moment, both hands inter-crossed and pressed flat against the center of his forehead. As if there were a pasty-colored star affixed there, with spreading fingers for its many rays.

"I'm finished." he shuddered deeply. "I'll never get out of here by myself, alive."

Silence at first, both of voice and of thought. Then that "by myself" began coming back, like an echo, like an afterthought. Louder, more insistent each time, as though he had shouted it out at the top of his voice just now (and he had barely given it breath).

"By myself—" "*By myself*—""BY MYSELF—"

Ricocheting, playing back to him, glancing off the walls themselves in eerie polyphonic impetus.

His hand dropped from his forehead, suddenly tightened, as if it were grasping an idea, holding onto it for dear life.

“By myself, not a chance. But with somebody else I could make it!”

Then his hand opened a little, almost let the idea go. “Where’s the somebody else for me, though? They’ve all run out. And it would have to be somebody that they’re afraid of. Somebody bigger than them. Bigger than them and bigger than me, both—”

His hand tightened again. Far tighter than it had been the time before. The idea was caught fast now, had taken form, had taken body.

“Them!” he breathed, as if in amazement at the idea’s simplicity, its logic; in fact, that it had not occurred any sooner than it had. He drove the clenched hand into its opposite now, like a mallet. “Sure! Them! Why not them? I’ve always laughed at them—They were for the chumps—For the little guys, not the big guys like me—They were for decoration. They turned their backs, when I passed the word. But always with a hand sticking up behind them, like a tail. All I had to do was put something in it, and then they were never around where I didn’t want them to be at a certain time. Now I *want* them to be around, that’s all. It worked that way, why shouldn’t it work this way just as good?”

He hastened to the phone, caught it up.

“I got no bodyguard left?” he breathed above an hysterical, abortive chuckle. “I’ll make a bodyguard out of *them*!’ ”

Then he talked into the phone.

“Gimme the police,” he ordered.

It was a commanding knock. A double one first, then a single one after. Urgent, demanding. As if to say: “We are the police, and we don’t like being kept waiting.”

He turned with a grin on his face. “Coming, boys!” he hallelujahed. “Ri-i-ight with you!”

The brassware under his fingers was like a caress, as he unfastened it. It was like gold, and he had always loved to touch gold. Just for its own sake alone.

This door that had kept death out all the long night through—he opened it now to let life in.

He saw their faces first. Life had three faces. There were three of them, one on each side of the opening, the third in mid-center. Oh, what beautiful faces they had; oh, what handsome guys they were; never such good-looking faces before. Next his eyes feasted on their uniforms, like moths that gorge themselves on fabric. The blue service-garb of the Police Department of the City of New York. The brass buttons, the visored caps, the pewter-looking badges affixed over the heart.

Their eyes regarded him, and that was all. Eyes that revealed nothing, other than that they saw him. They didn’t speak; he was the one did.

“Gee, am I glad to see you fellows! I never was so glad to see anyone in my life before—!”

“You are?” one said, and that was all.

Beside himself, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, he even tried to press the hand of one of them. The man passively let him do so, without making any move of his own. His hand did not return the pressure, and when Abbazzia let it go, it fell back lifeless, boneless, to where it had been before. Thus, there was no handclasp exchanged, for it takes two to produce one.

Two of them came forward now into the room, one turning to the third as they did so and instructing, quiet-voiced: “You wait outside here by the door. We’ll be right out.”

The door was closed again, locked on the inside, crisply.

Abbazzia had been made almost antic by happiness. He cupped his hands together, leaving an orifice. He blew into it zestfully. He rubbed them together, in anticipation of imminent welcome activity.

“Now I’ll get what I’m taking with me,” he told them. “Won’t take no time at all.”

The second officer had crossed to the window, as if to draw the shade. Then seeing that Abbazzia already had it down, he modified his intention, simply stood there with his back to it, in a waiting attitude, hands behind him.

“You won’t need that,” the other one suggested helpfully to Abbazzia.

“No, I guess you’re right,” Abbazzia conceded. He cast aside the rejected garment, stooped again to his task.

“Y’got a gun?” the man asked him matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Better let us take it,” the patrolman said quietly.

“Okay, if you think it’s better that way,” Abbazzia assented accommodatingly. He drew it out, offered it to him grip-first.

“Take his gun for him, Charlie,” the first one instructed his fellow-patrolman without offering to touch it himself.

The second one uncoupled his hands, came over, accepted it from Abbazzia, and disposed of it somewhere within his uniform jacket, unbuttoning it, rebuttoning it again.

“Thanks a lot,” said Abbazzia absently, bending once more.

“You’re welcome,” answered the first one tonelessly.

Abbazzia straightened again, about to insert something within his own clothing this time.

“You won’t need that,” he was told, as tonelessly as ever.

Abbazzia stopped long enough to give him a blank look. “Oh, this I will,” he contradicted. “This time you’re wrong. This is dough. You need that every place you go.”

“There’s one place you don’t,” the policeman said expressionlessly. “Not where you’re going.”

Abbazzia stopped to look at him more fully, more uncomprehendingly than the first time. His look became a stare. “What d’ya mean? I don’t get you—”

The other one spoke unexpectedly, from behind them. “Let’s get finished, shall we, Mike? This is no fun anymore.”

Abbazzia turned sharply to look at him. He had a gun held in his hand. Not the one Abbazzia had just handed over to him, but one that must have come out of his police-holster. He wasn’t aiming it, it just lay idle in his hand, sidewise, as if he were testing its weight.

Abbazzia turned back in consternation to the first one. “What does he need that for?” he asked with quickening tension.

“I don’t know,” was the dispassionate answer. “Ask him.”

But even as he answered, he was unlimbering one of his own.

Abbazzia’s voice was beginning to throb. “Wait a minute—I don’t get it—”

“You don’t get it?” said the one before him, meticulously repetitive. “He don’t get it,” he said to the one behind.

“Something’s wrong here—”

This time the policeman gave a slight head-shake. “Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s just the way it should be.”

“No, it isn’t! I feel peculiar. You’re making me feel peculiar—the way you’re looking at me—something about the way you’re looking at me—” He could hardly breathe. Suddenly suspicion, seeping into the overheated crannies of his mind all this while like a combustible gas, ignited, exploded into a ghastly white flash of certainty.

“You ain’t real cops—” His lower jaw dangled loosely, as though the mental detonation just now had unhinged it. He got it to cleave to its upper part long enough for utterance. “Barney—Maxwell—didn’t—send you!”

“What d’ya know?” the one in front of him apprised the one behind him. “Barney Maxwell didn’t send us.”

The voice in back of Abbazzia said, “Who’s Barney Maxwell?”

“Crooked police captain,” the first one explained. “Must’ve been trying to make a deal with him, to get in out of the open.”

At this, Abbazzia’s eyes flickered closed in expiring confirmation.

The patrolman plucked briefly at his own coat sleeve to indicate it. “So the cop suits worked?” he leered at Abbazzia. “It’s new. First time. And when a thing’s still new, you can count on it paying off.”

Abbazzia sank downward onto his knees between the two of them, into the little cranny their bodies made for him.

(“That’s smart,” the rearward one said approvingly, “less distance for you to fall.”)

His face was turned upward. He started to talk for his life. Only, lives can’t be put into words. “Fellas. Fellas—”

“We *are* fellas,” the face bending over him said.

“Fellas, my money—All my money, fellas—Much more than is in this room—”

“What d’ya think, we came here to rob you?” the face smiled. “We ain’t thieves.”

His voice came straight from his heart now. Every heartbeat swelled it, thinned it, and they were dynamo-quick. “Two minutes. Just give me two minutes. Two minutes, that ain’t long to ask for. Just one minute. Don’t give it to me cold. Just let me pull myself together, just let me get ready.”

“You’re ready now,” the overhanging face said. And it said crisply to the other one, “Get a pillow. Use one of them.”

He put his hand downward onto Abbazzia’s shoulder; not heavily, but lightly, as if just to balance him there in place. As you hold some inanimate thing steady, keep it from

toppling over, until you are ready to have to do with it—whatever it is you have to do with it.

Abbazzia made an infantile puking sound, as when a suckling infant regurgitates upon its mother's milk, and lurched sideward onto his shoulder and hip. Then like a bisected snake that still has reflexes of motion left to it, he tried to writhe in underneath the bed, to gain the shelter of its iron frame.

The man in the police uniform made a wide scooping motion with his foot, as when you sweep something back toward you that has eluded you, whether inert refuse or scurrying vermin it matters not; and Abbazzia had to avert his face from the scraping shoe. Then the man recoiled his foot and drove his shoe into Abbazzia's lower face, along the floor.

There was dental pain, and bone pain, and a pale-blue flash, like shattered starlight on a disrupted mill-pond. Sluggish warmth backed against the seams of Abbazzia's mouth, and peered forth, emulsion-thick, a laggard bead at a time.

"Hang onto him a minute, be right with you," one of the voices recommended belatedly, as though its owner had only then just glanced around at what was taking place.

"Got him," the other assured.

Abbazzia's eyes, like circular mosaics embedded in the floor, stared upward, could see only the ceiling now: an edgeless expanse of white. It was like a burial ground suspended upside-down over him, a potter's field with a fill of white clay.

"A minute—Only a minute—" he whispered.

The sole of a shoe came down across his throat, full stamping-power withheld though, and kept him pinned there. He could not raise his head at the one side of it, he could not raise his trunk at the other. His fingers scratched the empty air, his arms jittered upward and back in opposing directions like someone flat on his back playing

the strings of an invisible harp. Once his flexing fingertips caught onto trouser-leg fabric, at sheer random, and pulled it back, revealing gnarled pebble-white shank and a triangular banding of elastic garter.

Someone chuckled.

Now from opposite sides of the white ceiling-expanse their faces curved over toward him. There was a gusty impact, as when someone drives a blow into the plumpness of a pillow.

Abbazzia gave a choking whinny, and striving mortally managed to tilt the back of his head a little bit off the floor. At once the entire length of body under one of the faces came into perspective. The man was holding a pillow before his own mid-section, the curve of one arm supporting it. With the other hand, clenched into a fist, he kept walloping the pillow, driving each successive blow deeper into it. Until he had driven a deep hollow into the inner side of it, opposite his own abdomen.

Then neatly and economically he inserted the gun into the pit he had punched within the pillow. His eyes scanned Abbazzia's form steadily for a moment, as though he were taking aim sight-unseen, by dint of finger-feeling alone. Without raising them, he remarked to his fellow-killer, "Get your foot outta the way, I don't want to nick you."

The waist of the shoe suddenly left Abbazzia's throat. His windpipe seemed to unfold, like a rubber tube that has been trodden flat and slowly fills out again.

The shots followed immediately afterward, without any further preliminary.

The pain came first, then the throbbing drumbeats of the sound. There were many pains, and many drumbeats, but they all came unvaryingly in that order. The pain, and then the stifled thumping sound, and then the pain again, and then the sound. Twice, thrice, four times, five, six.

The pain, each time, was like a rabid needle going into him, drawing after it a scarlet thread of fire. The

withdrawal-stitch that followed each plunge of the needle into the fabric of his life was equally excruciating. And then it would plunge in again in a new place, to depths he'd never known he'd had until now, drawing its flaming, snaking thread after it, in sutures that never were over and done with. For the old place continued to hurt no less, while the new place quickly matched it in height of agony.

He moved very little, just rocked a little from side to side, with an ebbing motion, like something settling to rest. He didn't cry out. This pain was too deep to be voiced. It lacked the breathing spells in-between, in which to gather voice and eject it.

His eyesight fogged, as when someone breathes too closely on a glass, and then cleared again momentarily, but not to the full expanse it had had before, just a small clear patch in the center, with mist all around its edges.

He saw a feather come wafting sluggishly down, in zigzag graduated volplane glides from side to side, like something suspended on a hidden thread. It looked so enormous, like the lush tail-plume of an ostrich. It landed on his chest someplace, was lost to sight.

High up above he saw a trace of smoke-haze. This went up the other way, as slowly as the feather had come down, erasing itself to nothingness as it went. First it was there, then it was gone.

His eyesight dimmed again, and was no more.

His hearing lingered on, futile, moribund.

An inquiring tap on wood sounded, and a voice answered it, "Yeah, we're through. We're coming."

The hard hub of a shoe pounded against his ribs, like a mallet swung underhand seeking to drive them apart. The pain this time was not of needles, but of splinters. They did not course in and out as the needles had, they remained in his side, crushed, fragmented. As though a huge burr were being held pressed tight up against him.

“Take that with you,” a voice said way off in the distance. “That’s Big Matt’s regards.”

A door-latch clicked, many rooms away it seemed.

And in that other, far-off room, that was the world now, that was life now, men exchanged a brief remark or two in passing one another, as he had once himself when he was still among them.

“How’d it sound?”

“Like a guy snapping his fingers at a crap game, that’s about all.”

And then someone laughed. That was the last time he heard laughter. Only the living can laugh, only the living can hear it. “That was the crap game of death, buster. We cleaned up in there.”

Then momentarily a voice came again. “Close the door,” it jeered. “Let him die in privacy.”

A latch gave a single clocklike tick, and then there was nothing more of other men, their voices nor their stirrings nor the pain they gave. He was alone in a world of his own, a world between two other worlds, a blend of each: one of which he had always known, one of which he was still to know.

It was twilight in this world. A peculiar India-ink sort of twilight, in which long horizontal bands of dark, like brush-strokes on a Japanese print, kept ebbing slowly downward, with alternate bands of light between each one. As though somebody were endlessly unfolding a Venetian blind, a blind which never found bottom.

It was *un dormetto,* but a particular moment of *un dormetto* caught and held static, prolonged beyond time-reckoning. The moment just before full sleep comes, the moment just before awakening sets in. An empty echo-chamber of the things that were, or the things that were about to be. In each sleeping-time, passed through at a single moment; but in this death-sleep, stretched out into a lifetime of nothingness, the nothingness of a lifetime.

Because it was twilight, and once long ago she had used to call him at twilight, a memory came back from somewhere, and found its way into the emptiness.

She was calling him, from the high window of a six-story tenement. Patiently calling, over and over. Never answered, never even acknowledged by an upward turn of the head. Until at last the calling faltered, and wore out, and was gone, defeated until the next time, the next twilight, when it would be defeated again.

"GiacopoJ Giacoppinol vieni a mangiare . . ."

Jake. Jakie. Come in and eat.

Over and over again, each twilight. Never answered, never obeyed. Until twilight ended, and it was night, and it was too late. Tired, defeated, the call came no more. Until all the twilights ended, and it was too late. Until boyhood ended, and it was forever night, the long dark night of wayward manhood, and it was too late.

"Giacopo. Giacoppino . . .!" Fainter and fainter, going away now. Just a memory now, just an echo drifting through eternity.

He stirred restlessly, and his heart answered, muted, twenty years too late. His lips struggled to pronounce the answer, the answer she had waited for so long and never had. His tongue peered forth, drew back. His whole head moved with striving. And then a sighing word stole forth. A single word.

"Vengo . . ."

One word, that would have changed his life, and changed his death, had it been given then instead of now.

And then the effort to obey set in, coursing slowly through him like some hypodermically introduced plasma. His struggles now were terrible to watch, they were so very small. A finger quirked, a foot twitched, an eyelid flickered as if the light of life still shone too strongly on it. In a moment, or in forty, one knee had switched up toward his

body like a piston-rod and then gone down again; switched up, and then at last stayed up. And then his trunk gave a half-turn over, and his hand caught in the bed-stuff above him, and clawed, and stayed.

Then in a little while the other hand was up there with it. But his head hung down between them of its own weight. He'd raise it, but it would go down again. Until a time came, in the blank space that now was time, when it too stayed up.

The night was getting late, and the supper was getting old, but he'd get there if it took him all eternity. For a spark within him said to heed her call.

The tenement stairs were steep and hard to climb—they always had been, even in those days—and he kept slipping back and slipping back, sometimes only a floor or two, sometimes all the way to the bottom, but without hurt, without bruising hardness.

Until at last he breasted them, he reached the top. There only remained the door now, the door to their tenement flat. He could see it over there from where he was, here.

He picked up his coat. He knew where to go for it. Strange, but he knew where to go for it. The sleeves were white-satin lined, but only before his arms had introduced themselves.

He'd been hurt in some kind of a street fight. It must have been a bad fight. It was starting to run down, now that he was perpendicular. He looked down at the floor, and there were dark polka dots all around him. Like splashes of Marsala wine.

Everything was so hard, even to get the buttons through the buttonholes. The buttons turned sticky after a while, and that made it even harder.

He even took the hat by the brim and gropingly settled it on his head. He had always been nattily dressed, impeccably so, these latter times of affluence and power. He still was, this last time of all. He didn't look in the mirror, though; that was the one thing he didn't do now.

He had difficulty with the door. Getting it open. His own leaning body kept pushing it back again each time. At last he got it to scrape past him all along one side, and that gave it clearance to swing free.

He saw it no more, knew of it no more; he was out in the hall now, up against the wall in the hall, standing very still, face inward, like a pupil being punished by being made to stand there face to wall. On the threshold where he'd just been lay a moistly glittering star, still pulsing with his life-force. Then the pulsing went out of it. A swirl of ruddy shellac remained, like a brush-stroke left by a careless painter.

He began to inch along the wall now, the flats of his hands patting each new place to see if it was there first, then his feet shifting over with a dragging scrape.

Death, pretending to be alive.

Then after a while he'd reached the point at which he'd have to cross in openness, because the elevator was on the other side. Three times he tried it, and three times he came right back to the wall again, to stay up on his feet. And once he kissed it with his lips, as if pleading with it not to abandon him. It seemed to shed a garnet tear over his predicament, which ran down slowly right where he was standing, and then thickened to a stop.

At last he pushed rudely at it, cast it away from him, and on jumbled, stiffly scissoring legs tottered head-low, to come against the matching wall on the opposite side. Journey's end; no more groping, no more staggering, no more fears of leaving the wall. Thick satiny glass was there beside him, and a nubby little push-button, easy to find. He pressed it with his thumb. Within moments warm yellow light climbed behind the glass, filled it to its top like a tank. There was a muffled unlatching, and the glass slid away and there was open space before Abbazzia's penitently down-hanging face.

A man was standing at the back of the car, his face down-turned, too, a newspaper held open just below it as if to catch it should it fall off out of sheer weariness. And midway between the two of them, a youth with a pillbox cap, too somnolent to look closely at Abbazzia.

Three vagrant people, as unaware of each other as a moment before birth, or a moment after death. Or for that matter, a moment in mid-life.

“Going up?” the boy asked sleepily.

“No,” Abbazzia whispered, “going down.”

The panel slid closed, and darkness slowly came up in it, pushing the light up out of it.

And as it did so, Abbazzia in turn slowly went down, his palms trailing the glass, lingeringly, to the last.

Then he rolled over very briefly just once on the floor.

Then the spark went out.

And then there was death, the great know-nothing part of life. Or had life perhaps been only the brief know-something part of an endless all-encompassing death?

[*] N.B.—For a short period during the highly stylized twenties, a fact which is not generally recalled, women wore skirts almost to the insteps. This was a brief intermission, a sort of breathing spell, between the first onset of knee-length dresses, which had occurred in 1920, and the final capitulation to them, which rode the rest of the decade out. It coincided, roughly, with the years 1923-24.

MURDER, OBLIQUELY

The other night at a party I met my last love again. By last, I don't mean latest, I mean my first and yet my final one. We said the things you say, holding tall glasses in our hands to keep us company.

"Where've you been?"

"Around. And you?"

"Here and there."

Then there wasn't anything more to say. Love is bad for conversation; dead love, I mean. We drifted on. In opposite directions, not together.

It isn't often that I see him anymore. But when I do, I wonder whatever really *did* become of her.

I first met him through Jean. Jean collects people, as a velvet evening wrap collects lint. People she has no emotional need for. She is very happily married. In an insulting, slurring way. I've never heard her speak a civil word to, or of, him. Example: "Oh, I don't know why." (shrug) "I had a spare twin bed and it seemed a shame to let it go to waste." She is the most gregarious one-man woman I know. Or else she keeps going through brambles, I can't say. Possibly it has to do with her face. She is not beautiful by wide-screen standards. But there is a winsome,

elfin quality to her expression of face. I am not beautiful, either. The similarity ends there, right there.

Even when I was young, I was always the fifth wheel on the wagon. The other girl they had to ring in an extra man for, on dates. She never brought one of her own along. Never had one to bring. And these telephone-directory swains never repeated themselves. It was always someone else, the next time around. Once had been enough, for the one before.

Jean and her husband, the Cipher, stopped by for me in a cab at six-thirty, and the three of us went on together from there. The Cipher wore glasses, was beginning to show baldness, and grew on you slowly. You found yourself beginning to like him after a time lag of about six months. The nickname, Jean's creation, was not inappropriate at that. The Cipher was singularly uncommunicative, on any and all subjects, after five o'clock in the afternoon. He was resting from business, she and I supposed. "He *has* a voice," she had once assured me. "I called for him one day, and I heard it through the office door. I wasn't at all certain until then."

He said, on the present occasion, " 'Lo, Annie," in a taciturn growl as I joined them in the cab, and that, we knew, was all we were likely to get for the next hour to come, so it had to do. But " 'Lo, Annie," when it's sincere and sturdy and reliable, isn't bad, either. In fact, it may be better than a lot of facile patter. Jean had settled for it, and Jean was smarter when it came to men than I could ever hope to be.

Number 657 was one of the tall monoliths that run along Park Avenue like a picket fence from 45th to 96th, but a picket fence that doesn't do its job. It doesn't seem to keep anyone out; everyone gets in.

“Mr. Dwight Billings,” Jean said to the braided receptionist.

“Sixth floor,” he said.

We entered an elevator that was a trifle small. Space, presumably, was so expensive in this building that only a minimum could be spared for its utilities. We stepped out into a foyer, and there was only a single door facing us. A colored man opened it. His accent was pure university. “Good evening, Mrs. Medill, Miss Ainsley, Sir. If you’ll allow me.” He took the Cipher’s hat. “If you ladies would care—” He indicated a feminine guest room to one side.

Jean and I went in and left our wraps there, and looked at our faces in a wide, triple-winged vanity mirror. She unlidded a cut-crystal powder receptacle, being Jean, and sniffed at it. “Quite good,” she said. “Coty’s, unless I’m slipping. Rachel for brunettes, and”—she unlidded a second one on the opposite side—“flesh for blondes. Evidently there are no redheads on his list.”

I didn’t answer. I’ve been red-headed since I was twenty.

We rejoined the Cipher in the central gallery. It ran on for a length of about three rooms, cutting a wide swath through the apartment, and then you stopped, and turned to your left, and came down two steps onto the floor of the drawing room. It was artfully constructed for dramatic entrances, that room.

Overhead hung two rock-crystal chandeliers. One was lighted and sparkled like a rhinestone hornet’s nest inhabited by fireflies. The other was unlighted, and showed cool blue with frosty crystalline shadow. A man was sitting behind the upturned ebony lid of a grand piano. Desultory notes of “None but the Lonely Heart,” played with one hand alone, stopped short at the bustle of our coming down the two steps. Then he stood up and came forward, one hand out for Jean.

I like to study people. Even people that I think I’m going to see only once.

He was tall, and he was thirty-five; brown eyes and lightish hair, blonde when he was still a boy. He was like—how shall I say it? Everyone's glimpsed someone, just once in her life, that she thought would've been just the right one for her. I say would've, because it always works out the same way. Either it's too late and he's already married, or if he isn't, some other girl gets across the room to him first. But it's a kindly arrangement, because if you *had* got across the room to him first yourself, then you would have found that he wasn't just the right one for you after all. This way, the other girl is the one finds it out, and you yourself don't get any of the pain.

What's the good of trying to describe him? He was—well, how *was* that man that you didn't quite get over to in time?

I like to study people. People that I know I'm going to see lots more than just once. That I want to, that I've got to.

"This is Annie," Jean was saying in that careless way of hers. Nothing could be done about that. I'd given up trying. All the "Anyas" and "Annettes" when I was seventeen and eighteen hadn't helped any. I was back to plain Annie again, this time to stay. Good old Annie, there's a good girl.

We all sat down. He looked well sitting: not too far forward, not too far back. Not too straight, not too sunken. Couldn't he do anything wrong? He should do something wrong. This wasn't good for me.

We talked for a while, as people do, entering on the preliminaries of social intercourse. We said a lot of things; we said nothing. His man brought in a frost-clouded shaker and poured bacardis and offered them to us. The talk that was talk for the sake of making talk went on, at quickened pace now, lubricated by the cocktails.

"How did you happen to get hold of all this?" Jean blurted out in that pseudonaïve way of hers. We were at the table now.

"An aunt," he smiled. "The right kind."

"Old and rich," she quickly supplied.

“Fond of me,” he contributed.

“Dead,” she topped him.

“It’s a co-operative, she owned it, and when she died two years ago, I found it on my hands.”

“Why don’t I find things like that on my hands?” Jean wondered innocently.

“I didn’t know what to do about it, so I moved in here, along with Luthe. He’s my man. The estate takes care of the upkeep, so that what it amounts to practically is I’m living here rent-free.”

I kept wondering what he did. I didn’t know how to go about asking, though. Jean did. It was a great convenience having her along, I couldn’t help reflecting.

“Well, what do you do?” she pressed him.

“Nothing,” he said bluntly. “Simply—nothing.”

She burst out with enthusiasm. “Now, there’s a man after my own heart. Let me shake hands with you.” And she proceeded vigorously to do so.

“I did have a job until this—this windfall descended upon me,” he said. “I even kept it up for a while afterwards—at first. And then I got up too late for work one day after a party, and it felt good not to go to work, so I said to myself, ‘Why haven’t I done this before?’ and I never did go back from then on.”

The Cipher made his hourly utterance at this point. “I admire you,” he stated emphatically. “That’s the way all of us have felt at one time or another. Only, you had spunk enough to go ahead and carry it out.”

“Do you always carry out the things you feel like doing, stray impulses that come along?” Jean asked him mischievously. “If you do, I’d hate to be the lady in front of you in a theater seat wearing one of those tall, obliterating hats.”

“Pretty nearly always,” he said with grim determination. “Pretty nearly always.”

And you could tell he wasn’t joking.

We left early. He closed the door, and we could hear his step going away down the corridor inside. He had a fine, firm, crisp tread: clean-cut, without any slurring. He even walked right.

She stood there looking at me with her brows raised.

“Why are your brows up?” I asked, finally.

“Are they up?”

“Well, they don’t grow that way.”

She let them down at length. Presently she remarked, as if to herself, “He’s unhappy.” She turned back to me for corroboration. “Don’t you think so? Couldn’t you notice?”

“Women,” observed the Cipher, eying the cab ceiling light.

She ignored him. “Some girl, probably.” She pondered the matter. Then she nodded confirmation of her own line of reasoning. “He’s the broody type, would let it get him.”

“I couldn’t see anything the matter with him,” the Cipher put in. “What did you expect the poor fellow to do, stand on his hands?”

“Men,” she said crushingly.

“I think I saw her,” I told her.

“What was she like?” she wanted to know eagerly.

“Not good for him,” I said somberly. “Or anyone else. She was inside a frame in one of the rooms there. He had the door closed, I guess so we wouldn’t look in, but the key was still in it on the outside. It said To my Dwight,’ down in a lower corner, but her own name wasn’t signed. As though,” I went on resentfully, “there could be no possible danger of confusion, there was only one of her in his life.”

“Ho, you were busy!” she reveled.

“She must use the room sometimes. Stay over,” I said bitterly. “It was all in peach and marabou.”

“He’s a big boy now,” Jean drawled extenuatingly. “And he is a bachelor. And they do say there’s an awful lot of it going on.”

“That will do,” said the Cipher with mock primness.

And so we began to know him, the little that you could. The little that he would let you. Or perhaps I should say, the little that we were capable of.

I had him at my place, and then Jean had him at hers. It went better there. Anything always did at Jean's place. Even a funeral would have been lively. We were all even now. I don't know why you have to be, but you have to be. Then he called, in about a week, and invited us to dine with him again, starting the thing over.

Jean, it was obvious, already didn't view the prospect with any great enthusiasm. "I'm not going to stay too late," she remarked. "You come away blue. I don't mind anyone being lovesick, but not if I have to sit and watch it."

I didn't answer. I was trying to decide what I was going to wear.

The dinner was just as good as the first time. He was just as hard to get to know as ever.

After we'd left the table, Luthe kept coming to the door with telephone calls. Effect without cause: you never heard it ring. Dwight just shook his head in refusal each time. I counted about five or six times it happened. It got on Dwight's nerves finally.

"Not anyone, understand?" he said sharply. "Not anyone at all."

Jean looked into her drink as though she were wondering whether it were big enough to drown herself in.

The next thing, Luthe had come back to the door again, in spite of the recent blanket injunction he'd been given.

Dwight turned his head abruptly. "I thought I told you—"

Luthe beamed at him. Wordlessly a message passed between them. I don't know how they did it, but it was sent and it was understood.

“No!” Dwight gasped incredulously. And then I saw his face light up as I’d never seen it light up yet. There was only one way to describe it. It was the face of a man deliriously in love. The face of a man who had thought all along he’d lost something, and now found it was being returned to him. That it was his once more.

It hurt me a little to see that light on his face. Second-degree burns, most likely, from foolishly trying to get too near.

The telepathic currents continued t6 flow back and forth between the two of them. Luthe was all white teeth. “Sure enough,” he grinned.

Dwight choked on some sort of too-turgid happiness brimming up all over him. “Luthe, you’re not fooling me? Don’t do that.”

“Don’t I know the right voice?”

“When did she get back?”

“You better find that out for yourself.”

He went into a sudden flurry of—I don’t know what you’d call it—altruistic ecstasy “More drinks for everybody! Annie, Jean, another. Champagne this time, Luthe. I’ll join you in it, be right back!” And as he zigzagged to get out of the room in the shortest time possible, he passed close by where I was sitting, and in a sudden blind effusion—it must have been blind, it must have been—he bent and elatedly kissed the top of my head.

He didn’t walk down the gallery out there. You could hear him running. It was a long thing, and he ran the whole length of it; then his footsteps stopped, and he’d arrived; he was there, he was talking to her.

I sat very still, as though I were afraid of spilling a drop of the champagne Luthe had just poured for me.

Nothing was said.

There was a muffled thud, outside there, about where the footsteps had ended. As when a chair goes over, perhaps. A little less sharply defined than that. Or when you sway

unexpectedly and bump your head upon a table or against a doorframe.

Luthe looked up sharply. Then he hastened over and looked out, down the gallery. He hurried from sight, in that direction.

We waited there, holding our champagne.

He took a long time to come back to us.

Jean got up and wandered over to the radio console, and studied it. But then she didn't turn it on. There was more and better drama here, on the outside of it. I'd been hoping she wouldn't. She came back again presently and reseated herself about where she'd been before.

It must have been about ten minutes. Then he came walking in again. A little tiredly, a little inertly. There was a neat little patch of adhesive up on his temple, back from the eye.

"I got a little bump on the head," he smiled. "Luthe insisted on giving me first aid. Sorry I was so long."

His face was too white for that. It was drawn, it was sick. You don't get that look on your face even when you half knock yourself out. It was behind the eyes, mostly inside them.

"She's said good-bye—whoever she is," I said to myself.

I took a sip of champagne. Funny how quickly it worked through you, making you glow, making you feel happy, even such a small sip.

Luthe had come in with a drink for him. It was straight brandy. It was a giant. It wasn't a drink for conviviality; it was a restorative.

He looked at it dubiously while Luthe stood there holding it for him. Then he looked up into Luthe's face, as though appealing to some superior wisdom, more than he himself had at the moment. "That won't help much, will it?" I heard him say almost inaudibly.

"No, that won't help much," Luthe agreed ruefully.

Luthe turned away with it, set it aside someplace, went out without it.

We tried to pick up the pieces of the conversation. Even Jean chipped in now, her humanitarian instincts aroused.

I kept watching his flayed face. I wondered if we were being cruel or kind.

“Don’t you think we’d better be getting along?” I suggested.

“No, don’t go yet,” he said, almost alarmedly. “Wait a little while longer, can’t you? It’s good to have you here. I feel sort of—”

He didn’t finish it, but I knew the word: lonely.

We stayed on, by common consent. Even the Cipher forbore looking at his watch, that gesture with which he had a habit of harrying Jean, any evening, anywhere—but home.

It would have been a case of leaving just as the curtain was about to go up, though we didn’t know it.

Suddenly drama had come fuming in around us, like a flash flood.

Luthe reappeared, went to him, bent down and said something. This time wholly inaudibly.

Dwight looked up at him, first in complete disbelief. Then in consternation. Then he pointed to the floor. I caught the word. *“Here?”*

Luthe nodded.

I caught the next two words too. *“With* him?” I saw him wince, as if in imminence of unendurable pain.

“All right,” he said finally, and gave his hand an abrupt little twist of permission. “All right.”

I got it then. There’s somebody else; that was her first message, the one that floored him. But not only that: She’s come right here with the somebody else.

He was a bad actor. No, I shouldn’t say that. We were in the wings, watching him; we were backstage. All actors are bad when you watch them from behind-scenes. He was a

good actor from out front. And that was from where he was meant to be seen.

He got up and he went over quickly to where Luthe had parked that brandy bombshell. And suddenly the glass was empty. I never saw a drink go down so fast. It must have flowed in a steady stream, without a stop for breath between. He did it with his back to us, but I saw him do it just the same. Then he wagged his head and coughed a little, and it was all down.

It wasn't a restorative now, it was more an anesthetic.

Then he slung himself to the arm of the settee I was on, and lighted a cigarette, not without a little digital difficulty, and he was ready for the curtain to go up. On the last act of something or other.

His timing was good, too.

Luthe showed up at the gallery opening, announced formally: "Mr. and Mrs. Stone."

She came out onto the entrance apron, two steps above the rest of us. She, and a husband tailing her. But what it amounted to was: *She* came out onto the entrance apron. He might just as well not have been there.

She was familiar with the stage management of this particular entryway, knew just how to get the most out of it. Knew just how long to stand motionless, and then resume progress down into the room. Knew how to kill him. Or, since she'd already done that pretty successfully, perhaps I'd better say, knew how to give him the shot of adrenalin that would bring him back to life, so that she could kill him all over again. To be in love with her as he was, I couldn't help thinking, must be a continuous succession of death throes. Without any final release. I imagined I could feel his wrist, hidden behind me, bounce a little, from a quickened pulse.

She stood there like a mannequin at a fashion display modeling a mink coat. Even the price tag was there in full

view, if you had keen enough eyes, and mine were. Inscribed *“To the highest bidder, anytime, anywhere “*

She had a lot of advantages over the picture I’d seen of her. She was in color: skin like the underpetals of newly opened June rosebuds, blue eyes, golden-blonde hair. And the picture, for its part, had one advantage over her, in my estimate: It couldn’t breathe.

She had on that mink she was modeling, literally. Three-quarters length, flaring, swagger. She was holding it open at just the right place, with one hand. Under it she had on an evening gown of white brocaded satin. The V-incision at the bodice went too low. But evidently not for her; after all, she had to make the most of everything she had, and not leave anything to assumption. She had a double string of pearls close around her neck, and a diamond clip at the tip of each ear.

They have the worst taste in women, all of them. Who is to explain their taste in women?

She came forward, down the steps and into the room. Perfume came with her, and the fact that she had hip sockets. The bodice incision deepened, too, if anything.

I kept protesting inwardly, But there must be something more than just what I can see. There *must* be something more. To make him fall and hit his head at the telephone, to make him down a glass of brandy straight to keep from moaning with pain. To make his pulse rivet the way it is against the back of this settee. As though he had a woodpecker hidden in it.

I kept waiting for it to come out, and it didn’t. It wasn’t there. It was all there at first glance, and beyond that there was nothing more. And most of it, at that, was the mink, the pearls, the diamonds and the incision.

She was the sort of girl who got whistled at, passing street comers.

Her two hands went out toward him, not just one. A diamond bracelet around one wrist shifted back a little

toward the elbow, as they did so.

“Billy!” she crowed. And her two hands caught hold of his two, and spread his arms out wide, then drew them close together, then spread them wide again. In a sort of horizontal handshake.

So she called him Billy. That would be about right for her, too. Probably “Billy-boy” when there were fewer than three total strangers present at one time.

“Well, Bernette!” he said in a deep, slow voice that came through hollow, as from inside a mask.

One pair of hands separated, then the other. His were the ones dropped away first, so the impulse must have come from him.

“What happened?” she said. “We were cut off.” I saw her glance at the court plaster. “Billy!” she squealed delightedly. “You didn’t *faint,* did you? Was it that much of a shock?” She glanced around toward her oncoming fellow arrival, as if to say: “See? See what an effect I still have on him?” I read the look perfectly; it was a flicker of triumphant self-esteem.

The nonentity who had come in with her was only now reaching us; he’d crossed the room more slowly.

He was a good deal younger than either one of them; particularly Dwight. Twenty-three perhaps, or -five. He had a mane of black hair, a little too oleaginous for my taste, carefully brushed upward and back. It smelled a little of cheap alcoholic tonic when he got too near you. He had thick black brows, and the sort of a beard that leaves a bluish cast on the face even when it is closely shaven. He was good-looking in a juvenile sort of way. His face needed a soda-jerk’s white cocked hat to complete it. It was crying for something like that; it was made to go under it. And something told me it had, only very recently.

Her hand slipped possessively back, and landed on his shoulder, and drew him forward the added final pace or two that he hadn’t had the social courage to navigate unaided.

“I want you to meet my very new husband. Just breaking in.” Then she said, “You two should know each other.” And she motioned imperiously. “Go on, shake hands. Don’t be bashful. Dwight. Harry. *My* Dwight. *My* Harry.”

Dwight’s crisp intelligent eyes bored into him like awls; you could almost see the look spiraling around and around and around as it penetrated into the sawdust. You could almost see the sawdust come spilling out.

It’s not the substitution itself, I thought; it’s the insult of *such* a substitution.

The wait was just long enough to have a special meaning; you could make of it what you willed. Finally Dwight shook his hand. “You’re a very lucky—young fellow, young fellow.”

I wondered what word he would have liked to use in place of “young fellow.”

“I feel like I know you already,” the husband said sheepishly. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“That’s very kind of Bernette,” Dwight said dryly.

I wondered where she’d got him. He had the dark, slicked-back good looks that would hit her type between the eyes.

Then again, why differentiate? They went well together. They belonged together.

The line of distinction didn’t run between him and her; it ran between her and Dwight. And part of her, at that, belonged on one side of the line, and part belonged on the other. The mink coat and the pearls and the diamond clips belonged on Dwight’s side of the line, and she herself belonged on the other side of it. She wasn’t even an integrated personality. The husband, with all his cheapness and callowness, at least was.

Dwight introduced the rest of us, introduced us, after I already knew her better than he ever had or ever would, with a pitiless clarity that he would never have.

Jean might have aroused her antagonistic interest, I could see that, but the married title deflected it as quickly

as the introduction was made. Then when it came to myself, one quick comprehensive look from head to foot, and she decided, you could tell, there was nothing to worry about *there*.

"Drinks for Mr. and Mrs.—" Dwight said to Luthe. He couldn't get the name yet. Or didn't want to.

"Stone," the husband supplied embarrassedly, instead of letting the embarrassment fall on Dwight, where it rightfully belonged.

She at least was perfectly self-possessed, knew her way around in this house. "My usual, Luthe. That hasn't changed. And how are you, anyway?"

Luthe bowed and said coldly that he was all right, but she hadn't waited to hear. The back of her head was to him once more.

Their drinks were brought, and there was a slow maneuvering for position. Not physical position, mental. She lounged back upon the settee as though she owned it, and the whole place with it; as she must have sat there so very many times before. Tasted her drink. Nodded patronizingly to Luthe: "As good as ever."

Dwight, for his part, singled out the husband, stalked him, so to speak, until he had him backed against a wall. You could see the process step by step. And then finally, "By the way, what line are you in, Stone?"

The husband floundered badly. "Well, right now—I'm not —"

She stepped into the breach quickly, leaving Jean, with whom she had been talking, hanging on midword. "Harry's just looking around right now. I want him to take his time." Then she added quickly, just a shade too quickly, "Oh, by the way, remind me; there's something I want to speak to you about before I leave, Billy." And then went back to Jean again.

That told me why she'd dragged him up here with her like this. Not to flaunt him; she had no thought of profitless

cruelty. The goose that had laid its golden yolks for one might lay them for two as well. Why discard it entirely?

"Where'd you go for your honeymoon, Bernette?" Dwight asked her.

She took a second, as though this required care. She was right, it did. "We took a run up to Lake Arrow."

He turned to the husband. "Beautiful, isn't it? How'd you like

it?" Then back to her again, without waiting for the answer he hadn't wanted anyway. "How *is* the old lodge? Is Emil still there?" She took a second. "Emil's still there," she said reticently.

"Did you remember me to him?"

She took two seconds this time. "No," she said reluctantly, mostly into the empty upper part of her glass, as though he were in there. "He didn't ask about you."

He shook his head and clicked with mock ruefulness, "Forgetful, isn't he? Has he done anything about changing that godawful wallpaper in the corner bedroom yet?" He explained to me, with magnificent impartiality: "He was always going to. It was yellow, and looked as though somebody had thrown up at two-second intervals all over it." He turned and flicked the punch line at her. "Remember, Bernette?"

It was now she who addressed the husband.

"We were both up there at the same time, once. I went up there on my vacation. And Billy went up there on his vacation. At the same time. And the room that Billy had, had this godawful wallpaper."

"At the same time," I thought I heard Dwight murmur, but it wasn't a general remark.

"I know, you told me," the husband said uneasily.

I saw the way his eyes shifted. It's not that he doesn't know, I translated; it's that he doesn't want to be forced into admitting publicly that he knows.

I watched them at the end, when they were about to go. Watched Dwight and her. When the good-bye had been said and the expressions of pleasure at meeting had been spoken all around—and not meant anywhere. They reversed the order of their entry into the room. The husband left first, and passed from sight down the gallery, like a well-rehearsed actor who clears the stage for a key speech he knows is to be made at this point. While she lingered behind a moment in studied dilatoriness, picking up her twinkling little pouch from where she had left it, pausing an instant to see if her face was right in a mirror on the way.

Then all at once, as if at random afterthought: “Could I see you for a minute, Billy?”

They went over to the side of the room together, and their voices faded from sound. It became a pantomime. You had to read between the attitudes.

I didn’t watch. I began talking animatedly to Jean. I didn’t miss a gesture, an expression of their faces, a flicker of their eyes. I got everything but the words. I didn’t need the words.

She glanced, as she spoke, toward the vacant gallery opening, just once and briefly.

Talking about the husband.

She took a button of Dwight’s jacket with her fingers, twined it a little.

Ingratiation. Asking him something, some favor.

She stopped speaking. The burden of the dialogue had been shifted to him. He began.

He shook his head almost imperceptibly. You could scarcely see him do it. But not uncertainly, definitely. Refusal. His hand had strayed toward his billfold pocket. Then it left it again still empty.

No money for the husband.

The dialogue was now dead. Both had stopped speaking. There was nothing more to be said.

She stood there at a complete loss. It was something that had never happened to her, with him, before. She didn't know how to go ahead. She didn't know how to get herself out of it.

He moved finally, and that broke the transfixion.

They came back toward us. Their voices heightened to audibility once more.

"Well—good-night, Billy," she said lamely. She was still out of breath—mentally—from the rebuff.

"You don't mind if I don't see you to the door, do you?" He wanted to avoid that unchaperoned stretch between us and it, wanted to escape having to pass along there alone with her, and being subject to a still more importunate renewal of the plea.

"I can find the way," she said wanly.

She left. I had him all to myself for a moment, at least the exterior of him.

Not for long, just between the acts. It wasn't over yet. Suddenly, over his shoulder, I saw she'd reappeared at the lower end of the room, was standing there.

"Billy, talk to Luthe, will you? What's the matter with him? Has he had a drink or something? I can't get him to give me my coat." And her whole form shook slightly with appreciative risibility.

He called and Luthe appeared almost instantly there beside her in the gallery opening, holding the mink lining-forward in both arms. Like someone who has been waiting in the wings the whole time and takes just a single step forward to appear and play his part.

"Luthe, what are you doing?" he said amiably. "Is that Mrs. Stone's coat you're holding?" And before she could interject "Of course it isl" which it was obvious she was about to do, he added: "Read the label in the pocket lining and see what it says."

Luthe dutifully peered down into the folds of satin and read, "Miss Bernette Brady."

There was a pause, while we all got it, including herself. It was Miss Brady's coat, but not—any longer—Mrs. Stone's. Dwight stepped over to a desk, lowered the slab, and hastily inked something on a card. And then he went to her with it and handed it to her. "Bernette," he said, "take this with you."

It was an ordinary visiting or name card. She held it bracketed by two corners and scanned it diagonally, puzzled.

"What's this for?"

"I'll call him and make an appointment for you," he said quietly. "Go in and talk to him. The whole thing'll be over in no time."

"What do I need a lawyer for?" she blurted out.

I understood then, without the aid of the card. An annulment.

Anger began to smolder in her eyes. She gave him warning, but a warning that was already too late to avert the brewing storm. "That isn't funny."

"I'm not trying to be funny."

Her fingers made two or three quick motions and pieces of cardboard sputtered from them.

"Think it over," he urged, a second too late.

"I just did," she blazed. "Just then." She quirked her head sideward, then back toward him again. "Is Luthe going to give me my coat?"

"Come back for it," he drawled soothingly. "It'll be here—waiting for you—any time you say . . . ."

Her voice was hoarse now, splintered. "Then let's be consistent, shall we? How about it?"

Her hands wrestled furiously at the back of her neck. The pearls sidled down the bodice incision. She trapped them there with a raging slap, balled them up, flung them. They fell short of his face, they were probably too light, but they struck the bosom of his shirt with a click and rustle.

“Bernette, I have people here. They’re not interested in our private discussions.”

“You should have thought of that sooner.” Her hands were at her earlobe now. “You want them to know you gave me things, don’t you? You don’t have to tell them! *I’ll* tell them!” The ear clips fell on the carpet at his feet, one considerably in advance of the other. “You can’t carry that out down to its ultimate . . . .”

“I can’t, hunh? You think these people being here is going to stop me, hunh? The hell with them! The hell with you yourself! I’ll show you! I’ll show you what I think of you!”

She was beside herself with rage. There was a rending of satin, and suddenly the dress peeled off spirally, like a tattered paper wrapper coming off her. Then she kicked with one long silk-cased leg, and it fluttered farther away.

She had a beautiful figure. That registered on my petrified mind, I recall. We sat there frozen.

“Keep your eyes down, ducky,” I heard Jean warn the Cipher in a sardonic undertone. “I’ll tell you when you can look up.”

For a moment she posed there, quivering, a monotoned apparition all in flesh tints, the undraped skin and the pale-pink silk of vestigial garments blending almost indistinguishably.

Then she gave a choked cry of inexpressible aversion, and darted from sight.

Dwight raised his own voice then, but not in rage, only for it to carry to a distance. “Luthe, that raincoat in the hall. Put it over her.”

A door slammed viciously somewhere far down the gallery.

None of us said anything. What is there that can be said following such a thing?

Jean was the first one to speak, after the long somewhat numbed silence that followed. And, probably unintentionally, her matter-of-fact minor-keyed remark

struck me as the most hilariously malapropos thing I had ever heard. I wanted to burst out laughing at it.

She stirred and said with mincing politeness: “I really think we should be going now.”

A six-week interval, then. It must have been fully that; I didn’t time it exactly. Oh, why lie? Why write this at all, if not truthfully? I counted every week, every day, every hour. I didn’t tally them up, that was all. At least once every day I had to remind myself, unnecessarily, “I haven’t seen him since that explosive night. That makes it a day more, that I haven’t seen him.” It worked out at something like six weeks.

Nothing happened. No word. No sight. No sign.

Was he with her once more? Was he with somebody else entirely different? Was he alone, with nobody at all? Where was he? What was he doing? Was he still in New York? Had he gone somewhere else?

I had it bad. Real bad.

Finally I sent him a little note. Just a little note. Oh, such a very little note. ” . . . *I haven’t heard anything from you in some time now—*”

A coward’s note. A liar’s note, a liar even to myself.

The phone rang the next afternoon. I made a mess of it. I dropped the phone. I burned myself on a cigarette. I had to trample the cigarette out first. Then I hung onto the phone with both hands, when I’d once retrieved it.

He said things. The words didn’t matter; it was just the voice they were pitched in.

Then he said: “I don’t dare ask you and the Medills to come up here after what happened that last time.”

“Dare,” I said faintly. “Go on, dare.”

“All right, would you?” he said. “Let’s all have dinner together and—”

When I told Jean that he had called, about fifteen minutes later, she said the strangest thing. I should have resented it, but she said it so softly, so understandingly, that it never occurred to me until later that I should have resented it.

"I know," Jean said. "I can tell."

She murmured presently, "I think we should. I think it'd be good for us."

How tactful of her, I thought gratefully, to use the plural.

So back we went, the three of us, for another glimpse at this real-life peepshow that went on and on with never an intermission, even though there was not always someone there to watch it.

He was alone. But my heart and my hopes clouded at the very first sight of him as we came in; they knew. He was too happy. His face was too bright and smooth; there was love hovering somewhere close by, even though it wasn't in sight at the moment. Its reflection was all over him. He was animated, he was engaging, he made himself pleasant to be with.

But as for the source of this felicity, the wellspring, you couldn't tell anything. If I hadn't known him as he'd been in the beginning, I might have thought that was his nature. He was alone, just with Luthe. We were only four at the table, one to each side of it, with candles and a hand-carved ship model in the center of it.

Then when we left the table, I remember, we paired off unconventionally. I don't think it was a deliberate maneuver on anyone's part, it just happened that way. Certainly, I didn't scheme it; it was not the sorting of partners I would have preferred. Nor did he. And the Cipher least of all. He never schemed anything. That left only Jean; I hadn't been watching her . . . .

I think I do recall her linking an arm to mine, which held me to her. And then she leaned back to the table a moment and reached for a final grape or mint, which resulted in reversing the order of our departure. At any rate, the two

men obliviously preceded us, deep in some weighty conversation; she and I followed after. We gave them a good headstart, too. She walked with deliberate slowness, and I perforce had to follow suit.

She stopped short midway down the gallery, well before we had emerged into view of the drawing room, which the two men had already entered.

“I have premonitions of a run,” she said. “I don’t trust these sheers.” But what she did was jog her elbow into my side, in a sort of wordless message or signal, as she turned aside and went in through the nearest doorway. *That* doorway.

I turned and followed her; that was what her nudge had summoned me to do.

Lights went on, and the big bed leaped into view in the background.

She went toward the full-length mirror in a closet door. She went through the motions of validating her excuse for stepping in here; raised her skirt, cocked her leg askew toward the mirror, dropped her skirt again. Then she reached out and purposefully took hold of the faceted glass knob of the closet door.

“Jean,” I said with chaste misgivings. “Don’t do that.”

I saw she was going to anyway.

She swept it wide, the door, with malignant efficiency, and stood back with it so that I could see, and looked at me, not it, as she did so.

Satins and silks, glistening metallic tissues, flowered prints; and in the middle of all of them, like a queen amidst her ladies in waiting, that regal mink.

Then there was a blinding silvery flash as the electric light flooded across the mirror, and the door swept back into place.

“Back again,” she said, brittly. “This time, for keeps.” And, I thought, what an apt word.

But for long moments afterward, long after the other things had faded and been effaced, it still seemed as if I could see the rich darkness of that mink, through glass and all, as if shadowed against some X-ray apparatus. Then finally it, too, dimmed and was gone, and there was just clear mirror left. With somebody's woeful, heartsick face on it. My own.

She put out the light as she shepherded me across the threshold; I remember the room was dark as we left it behind. I remember that so well. So very well.

She held her arm around me tight as we walked slowly down the remainder of the gallery.

I needed it.

"Tune in the stadium concert, Luthe," he suggested at one point. "It must be time for it."

I wondered what he wanted that for.

Some very feverish dance band drumming filtered out.

"If that's the stadium concert," Jean said, "they've certainly picked up bad habits."

"Luthe," he said good-naturedly, "what're you doing over there? I said the open-air concert, at the Lewisohn Stadium."

"I can't seem to get it. What station is it on?"

"ABC, I think."

"I'm on ABC now. Doesn't seem to be it."

"Does it?" agreed Jean, pounding her ear and giving her head a shake to clear it, as a particularly virulent trombone snarl assailed us.

"Call up the broadcasting station and find out," he suggested.

Luthe came back.

"No wonder. It's been called off on account of rain. Giving it tomorrow night instead."

"It's not raining down here," Jean said. She returned from the window. "It's bone-dry out. Do you even have

special weather arrangements for Park Avenue?” she queried.

“Look who we are,” he answered her. A little distraitly, I thought, as though he were thinking of something else. “What time is it now, Luthe?” he asked.

She arrived about an hour and a half later. Perhaps even two hours.

I don’t know; since I hadn’t been expecting her, I wasn’t clocking her exactly. If he was, he’d kept it to himself; you couldn’t notice it. No more parenthetic requests for the time, after that first one.

There was one thing noticeable about her arrival. I mean, even over and above the usual flashlight-powder brilliance of her arrival anywhere, anytime. It was that she was not announced. She simply entered, as one does where one belongs. Suddenly, from nowhere, she had taken her stance there on the auction block (as I called it after that first time). Then, after flamboyant pause and pose there, she was coming down the steps to join us.

He’d made a few improvements in her. Surface ones only; that was the only part of her he could reach, I suppose. Or maybe he needed more time. Her dress was a little higher at the neck, now, and the phantom price tag had been taken off. You got her value after a while, but not immediately, at first sight.

She’d even acquired an accent. I mean an accent of good, cultivated English; and since it was false, on her it was an accent.

When she walked, she even managed to use the soles of her feet and not her hips so much anymore. I wondered if he’d used telephone directories on her head for that, or just clouted her there each time one of them swayed, until she’d stopped it.

Or maybe she was just a good mimic, was getting it all by suction, by being dunked into the company of the right people more and more often. For my money, she'd had all the other makings of a good sponge right from the start; why not in that way, too?

"You remember Annie and Jean, and Paul," he said.

"Oh yes, of cowass; how are you?" she leered affably. She was very much the lady of the manor, making us at home in her own domain. "Sorry I'm so late. I stayed on to the very end."

"Did you?" he said.

And I thought, Where? Then, No. It can't be. This is too good to be true . . . .

But she rushed on, as though speaking the very lines I would have given her myself. She wanted to make a good impression, avoid the cardinal social sin of falling mute, not having anything to say; all those unsure of themselves are mortally afraid of it. So the fact of saying something was more important than the content of what it was she said.

"Couldn't tear myself away. You should have come with me, Billy. It was heavenly. Simply heavenly." Business of rolling the eyes upward and taking a deep, soulful breath.

"What'd they play first?" he said tightly.

"Shostakovich," she said with an air of vainglory, as when one has newly mastered a difficult word and delights in showing one's prowess with it.

You couldn't tell she'd said anything. His face was a little whiter than before, but it was a slow process; it took long minutes to complete itself Until finally he was pale, but the cause had long been left behind by that time, would not have been easy to trace anymore.

She caught something, however. She was not dense.

"Didn't I pronounce it well?" she asked, darting him a look.

"Too well," he said.

She was uneasy now.

She didn’t like us. She was hampered by our being there, couldn’t defend herself properly against whatever the threat was. And although she didn’t know what it was herself, as yet, she couldn’t even make the attempt to find out, because of our continuing presence.

She sat for a moment with the drink he’d given her, made a knot with her neck pearls about one finger, let it unravel again. Then she stood up, put her drink down over where they originally came from.

“I have a headache,” she said and touched two fingers to the side of her head. To show us, I suppose, that that was where it was, in her head.

“Shostakovich always gives me a headache, too,” Jean said sweetly to her husband.

She shot Jean a quick look of hostility, but there was nothing she could do about it. There was nothing to get her teeth into. If she’d picked it up, that would have been claiming it for her own.

“If you’ll excuse me now,” she said.

She was asking him, though, not the rest of us. She was a little bit afraid. She wanted to get out of this false situation. She didn’t know what it was, but she wanted to extricate herself.

“You don’t have to stand on ceremony with us, Bernette.” He didn’t even turn to look at her, but went ahead dabbling in drinks.

I thought of the old Spanish saying, *Aqui tiene usted su casa.* My house is yours. And it probably was as little valid in the present circumstance as in the original flowery exaggeration.

“But you just came,” the Cipher said. He was only trying to be cordial, the poor benighted soul. He hadn’t stepped aside into that room with us.

Jean and I simply looked at each other. I could almost lip-read what she was about to say before it came out. “She hasn’t far to go.” I nearly died for a minute as I saw her lips

give a preliminary flicker. Then she curbed herself. That would have been going too far. I breathed again.

She made her good nights lamely, and yet with a sort of surly defiance. As if to say, I may have lost this skirmish, but I haven't even begun to fight yet. This was on ground of your choosing; wait till he's without his allies, and must come looking for me on ground of my own choosing. We'll see whose flag runs down then.

She even reached out and shook hands with him. Or at least, sought out his, took it up, then dropped it again, all the volition coming from hers.

Oh, really, I protested inwardly. You don't do that from room to room.

She climbed the steps, she turned galleryward, she passed from view. Tall and voluptuous in her black summer dress, her head held high, her chin out. A little cigarette smoke that had emanated from her on the way lingered behind her for a moment or two. Then that dissolved, too.

And that's all the trace you leave behind in this world, sometimes: a little cigarette smoke, quickly blown away.

Presently another figure passed the gallery opening, coming from farther back in the apartment, but going the same way she had. Handsome, well-dressed, almost unrecognizable for a moment in his tactfully cut suit and snap-brim hat. There wasn't a garish detail of attire from head to foot. He would have passed without obtruding himself upon us, but Dwight turned his head.

"Going now?"

"Yes, sir. Good night." He tipped his hat to the rest of us, and left.

This time you could hear the outside apartment door close after him. Not like the time before.

"Luthe goes home out to Long Island one night a week to visit his mother, and this is his night for it." He shook his head. "He's studying law. I wish I lived as quietly and as decently as he does."

We left soon afterward ourselves.

As we moved down the gallery in leisurely deliberation, I looked ahead. That room that Jean and I had been in before was lighted now, not dark as we had left it. The door was partly ajar, and the light coming from it lay on the floor outside in a pale crosswise bar or stripe.

Then as we neared it, some unseen agency pushed it unobtrusively closed, from the inside. I could see the yellow outshine narrow and snuff out, well before we had reached it.

We were kept waiting for the elevator for some time. Finally, when it appeared, it was being run by a gnarled elderly individual in fireman's overalls, quite *declasse* for this building. There was no night doorman on duty below when we got there, either.

"What happened?" Jean asked curiously. "Where's all the brass?"

"Walked off," he said. "Wildcat strike. The management fired one of the fellows, and so they all quit. Less'n 'n hour ago. They ain't nobody at all to run the back elevator. I'm practic'ly running this whole building single-handed, right now. You'll have to get your own taxi, folks. Can't leave this car."

"She stayed," I breathed desolately, while the Cipher was off in quest of one.

"Just wait till he gets her alone, though," Jean chuckled. "She'll have a lot of explaining to do. I'd give anything to hear what's going on between the two of them right now."

He was waiting for me, the driver. I'd dropped them off first.

"I've lost something. Look, you'll have to take a run back with me a minute."

He meshed gears. "To where the other folks got out?"

“No, the first place. Where we all got in.”

I’d lost something. A door-key. Or pride. Or self-respect. Something like that.

“Want me to wait?” he said when we’d arrived.

“No, you’d better let me pay you. I don’t want you clocking me the whole time I’m in there.”

“You may have a wait for another, lady, at this hour.”

He looked me too straight in the eye, I thought. The remark didn’t warrant such a piercing gaze. And he had no need to crinkle the corners of his eyes like that; it gave his glance too familiarly knowing an aspect.

I dropped my own eyes primly. “Keep the rest.”

The same elderly pinch hitter was still servicing the building’s elevators singlehanded. “They ain’t nobody at all looking after the back one,” he complained unasked.

I felt like saying, “You said that before,” but I didn’t.

He took me up without announcing me. I got out and I knocked at Dwight’s door. The car went down and left me alone there.

No one came. I knocked again, more urgently, less tentatively. I tripped the Louis XVI gilt knocker, finally. That carried somewhat better, since it had a metal sounding board, not a wooden one.

Suddenly his voice said, “Who is it?” Too quickly for this last summons to have been the one that brought him; it must have been the first one after all, and he had been waiting there behind the door.

“Annie,” I whispered, as though there were someone else around to overhear.

The door opened, but very grudgingly. Little more than a crevice at first. Then at sight of me, it widened to more normal width. But not full width of passage, for he stood there in the way; simply full width enough to allow unhampered conversation.

He was in a lounging robe. His shirt was tieless above it, and the collar band was unfastened. It had a peculiar effect

on me: not the robe nor the lack of tie, simply the undone collar band; it made me feel like a wife.

“Don’t look so stunned. Am I that frightening?” I couldn’t resist saying. “Didn’t you hear me give you my name through the door?”

“No,” he said, “I missed it.” Then he changed that to: “I thought I heard someone whisper, but I wasn’t sure.”

I didn’t quite believe him, somehow. If he’d heard the whisper, then he’d heard the name whispered, I felt sure. I didn’t resent the implication of a fib; quite the contrary. It was complimentary. It allowed me to believe—if I chose to, and I did—that my name effected the opening of the door, that another name would not have been able to. Castles in a foyer.

“Did I get you out of bed?” I said.

He smiled. It was a sort of vacant smile. The smile with which you wait for someone to go away. The smile that you give at a door when you are waiting to close it. Waiting to be allowed to close it, and held powerless by breeding. It had no real candlepower behind it, that smile. “No,” he said, “I was just getting ready, by easy stages.” His face looked very pale, I thought, unnaturally so. I hadn’t noticed it the first moment or two, but I gradually became aware of it now. I thought it must be the wretched foyer light, and I hoped I didn’t look as pale to him as he did to me. I take pallor easily from unsatisfactory lights. The thing to do was to get inside away from it. “It’s my outside door key,” I said. “I can’t get into my house.”

“It couldn’t have been up here,” he said. “I would have—I would have found it myself right after you left.” He gestured helplessly with one hand, in a sort of rotary way. “It must have been in the taxi. Did you look in the taxi?”

The light was the most uncomplimentary thing I’d ever seen. It made him look almost ghastly.

“It wasn’t in the taxi,” I insisted. “I looked and looked. We even picked up the seat cushions.” I waited for him to shift,

but he didn’t. “Won’t you let me come in a moment and look?”

He was equally insistent. We were both strainedly civil but extremely insistent. “But it isn’t up here, I tell you. It couldn’t be, Annie, don’t you see? If it was, I would have come across it by now myself”

I sighed exasperatedly. “But did you look for it? Did you know it was lost, until I told you so myself just now, here at the door? Then if you didn’t look for it, how do you know it isn’t there?”

“Well, I—I went over the place, I—” He decided not to say that, whatever it was to have been.

“But if you didn’t know *what* it was that was lost, you couldn’t have had your eye out for it specifically,” I kept on, sugaring my stubbornness with reasonableness. “If you’d only let me step in for a moment and see for myself . . .”

I waited.

He waited, for my waiting to end.

I tried another tack. “Oh,” I murmured deprecatingly, turning my head aside, as if to myself, as if in afterthought, “you’re not alone. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to . . .”

It worked. I saw a livid flash, like the glancing reflection from a sun-blotted mirror, sweep across his face. Just for an instant. If it was fear, and it must have been of a kind, it was a new fear at this point: fear of being misunderstood, and no longer fear of my entering. He stepped back like magic, drawing the door with him. “You’re mistaken,” he said tersely. “Come in.”

And then as I did, and as he closed the door after me and pressed it sealed with his palm in one or two places, he added, and still quite tautly, “Whatever gave you that idea?” And turned to look the question at me, as well as ask it.

“After all,” I drawled reassuringly, “I’m not anyone’s grandmother.” This point, however, was evidently of importance to him, for some intangible reason that escaped me. Certainly I’d never detected any trait of primness in

him before. “I never was so alone in my life,” he said somewhat crossly. “Even Luthe went out home.”

“I know,” I reminded him. “He left while we were still here.”

I had been thinking mainly of somebody else, not Luthe.

We moved slowly down the gallery I preceding him.

She was gone, just as Jean had said she would be. The door that I had seen slyly closing before, shutting off its escaping beam of light, was standing starkly open now, and the room was dark. It looked gloomy in there, unutterably depressing, at that hour of the night.

“In here, maybe,” I suggested, wickedly. I wasn’t supposed to have been in there.

I heard him draw some sort of a crucial breath.

“No,” he said quite flatly. “You didn’t.”

“I may have, just the same.” I took a step as though to go in.

“No,” he said, tautly, almost shrilly, as though I were getting on his nerves. He reached out before me and drew the door closed in my face.

I glanced at him in mild surprise, at the use of such a sharp tone of voice for such a trifling matter. The look I caught on his face was even more surprising. For a moment, all his good looks were gone. He was ugly in mood and ugly of face.

Then, with an effort, he banished the puckered grimace, let his expression smooth out again. Even tried on a thin smile for size, but it didn’t fit very well and soon dropped off again.

Meanwhile, he’d withdrawn the key and the door was now locked fast.

“Why do you do that?” I asked mildly.

“I always keep it that way,” he said. “It’s not supposed to be left open. Luthe must have done that.”

But Luthe had gone home before we had.

“Well, won’t you let me go in and look at least?” I coaxed. I thought: I still love him, even when his face is all ugly and wizened like that. How strange; I thought it was largely his looks that had me smitten, and now I see that it isn’t.

“But you weren’t in there, so how could it get in there?”

“I was. I was in there once earlier tonight. I don’t know whether you knew it or not, but I strayed in there one time this evening.”

He looked at me, and he looked at the door. “Wasn’t that a breach of manners on your part?” he suggested stiffly.

“There are no manners between a man and woman,” I said. “There are only manners, good or bad, between a man and a man, or a woman and a woman.”

He gave the cryptic answer, “Oh?”

Why do I drive him like this? I wondered. To see how far I can go? To make him fully aware of my being here alone with him? I didn’t know, myself.

We stood and looked at each other for a moment, he waiting for me to make the next move.

“Well, I’ll have to get along without it,” I said. “My key, I mean.”

“Sorry.”

“He wants me to go,” I said, as though speaking ruefully to a third person. “He can’t wait until I do.”

What could he say then? What could anyone have said, except in overt offense? And that, you see, was why I’d said it. Though it was true, my saying so forced him to deny it, obliged him to act in contradiction to it. Though he didn’t want to, and I knew that he didn’t want to, and he knew that I knew that he didn’t want to.

“No,” he said deprecatingly. “No, not at all.” And then warmed gradually to his own insistence; picked up speed with it as he went along. “Come inside. Away from that door.” (As though my departure from a fixed point was now what he wanted to obtain, and if he could obtain it only by having me all the way in, rather than by having me leave,

then he'd have me all the way in.) He motioned the way with his arm and he turned to accompany me. And kept up meanwhile the running fire of his invitation at a considerably accelerated tempo, until it ended up by being almost staccato. "Come inside and we'll have a drink together. Just you and me. Just the two of us alone. As a matter of fact, I need company, this minute."

On the rebound, I thought. On the rebound; I may get him that way. They say you do. Oh, what do I care how, if only I do.

I went down the steps, and he went down close beside me. His swinging arm grazed mine as we did so, and it did something to me. It was like sticking your elbow into an electrical outlet.

That drawing room of his had never looked vaster and more somber. There was something almost funereal about it, as though there were a corpse embalmed somewhere nearby, and we were about to sit up and keep vigil over it. There was only one lamp lighted, and it was the wrong one. It made great bat-wing shadows around the walls, from the upraised piano lid and other immovables, and now added our own two long, willowy emanations.

He saw me look at it, and said, "I'll fix that."

I let him turn on one more, just to take some of the curse off the gruesomeness, but then when I saw him go for the wall switch that would have turned on a blaze overhead I quickly interposed, "Not too many." You don't make very good love under a thousand-watt current.

I sat down on the sofa. He made our drinks for us, and then came over with them, and then sat down in the next state.

"No, here," I said. "My eyesight isn't that good."

He grinned and brought his drink over, and we sat half-turned toward each other, like the arms of a parenthesis. A parenthesis that holds nothing in it but blank space.

I saw to it that it soon collapsed of its own emptiness, and one of the arms was tilted rakishly toward the other.

I tongued my drink.

“It was a pretty bad jolt,” I admitted thoughtfully.

“What was?”

“You don’t have to pretend with me.”

“Oh,” he said lamely.

“You’re still pretending,” I chided him. “You’re pretending that you haven’t thought of it, that I’m the one just now brought it back to your mind for the first time. When all along it hasn’t left your mind, not for a single moment since.”

He tried to drown his face in his drink, the way he pushed it down into it. “Please,” he said, and made a grimace. “Not now. Do we have to—? Don’t let’s talk about it now.”

“Oh, that much it hurts,” I said softly.

The parenthesis had become a double line, touching from top to bottom.

“Why don’t you put iodine on it?” I suggested.

He made a ghastly shambles of a smile. “Is there any for such things?”

“Here’s the bottle, right beside you,” I offered. “And there’s no death’s head on the label.”

That symbol seemed to frighten him for a moment, or at least be highly unwelcome. He screwed up his eyes tight, and I saw him give his head a shake, as though to rid it of that particular thought.

“It stings for a minute, and then you heal,” I purred. “You heal clean. No festering. And then you’re well again; even the mark goes away. And you have a new love.” I dropped my voice to a breath. “Won’t you try—iodine?”

So close his face was to mine, so close; all he had to do . . .

Then he turned it a little; oh, a very tactful little. The wrong way, so that the distance had widened a little. And he

could breathe without mingling his breath with mine. Which seemed to be what he wanted.

"Don't you understand me, Dwight? I'm making love to you. And if I'm awkward about it, it's because women aren't very good at it. Can't you help me out a little?"

I saw the look on his face. Sick horror. I wish I hadn't, but I did. I never thought just a look on a face could hurt so.

"Would it be that bad? Would it be that unbearable, to be married to me?"

"Married?"

His backbone gave a slight twitch, as though a pin overlooked in his shirt had just pricked him. I caught him at it, slight as it was. That was no compliment, either, any more than the look on his face before had been.

"You've just been proposed to, Dwight. That was a proposal, just then. The first I've ever made."

He tried, first, to carry it off with a sickly grin. The implication:

You're just joking, and I'm supposed to know you are, but you make me a little uncomfortable just the same.

I wouldn't let him; I wouldn't accept the premise.

"You don't laugh when a lady proposes to you," I said gently. "You don't laugh at her. You meet her on her own ground; you give her that much, at least."

He put his hand on my knee for a moment, but it was a touch of apology, of consolation; it wasn't what I wanted.

"I'm not—cut out—" He floundered. "It would be about the dirtiest trick I could play. I couldn't do *that* to you . . . ." And then finally, and more decidedly, like a snap-lock to the subject: "You'd be sorry."

"I want to be. Let me be. I'd rather be sorry—with you—than glad—with anyone else."

He looked down his nose now. He didn't say anything more. A sort of stubborn muteness had set in. That was his best defense; that was his only one. He probably knew it. Their instincts are just as valid as ours.

I had to do the talking. Someone had to. It would have been even worse to sit there in silence.

I took a sip of my drink. I sighed in feigned objectivity. “It’s unfair, isn’t it? A woman can refuse a man, and she doesn’t have to feel any compunction. He’s supposed to take it straight, and he does. But if a man refuses a woman, he has to try to spare her feelings at the same time.”

He hadn’t as a matter of fact made any such attempt until now; he did now, possibly because I had recalled his duty to him.

“You’re a swell gal, Annie. It’s you I’m thinking of. You don’t know what you’re asking. You don’t want me.”

“You’re getting your pronouns mixed,” I said sadly.

All he could repeat was: “No, I mean it, you’re a swell gal, Annie.”

“You’re a swell gal, Annie,” I echoed desolately, “but you don’t ring the bell.”

He made the mistake of putting his arm around my shoulder, in what was meant as a fraternal embrace, I suppose. He should have left his hands off me; it was hard enough without that.

I let my head go limp against him. I couldn’t have kept it up straight if I’d tried. And I didn’t try.

“Then on shorter terms,” I whispered, closing my eyes. “As short as you wish.”

He tried to jerk his arm away, as he realized this new danger, but I caught it from in front with mine, and held it there, around my shoulders, like a precious sable someone’s trying to take away from you.

“Even just—for tonight. Just for—an hour. Do I have to speak any plainer than that? *Your* terms. Any terms at all.”

He shuddered and hit himself violently in the center of the forehead. As if there were some thought lodged in there that he couldn’t bear the contemplation of. “My God,” I heard him groan. “My God! Right here and now, in this apartment . . .”

“Is there something wrong with this apartment?” I asked innocently.

“Not with the apartment, with me,” he murmured.

“I won’t dispute you there,” I said cattishly.

I let go of his arm, and he promptly called it back. I stood up. I got ready to go. I’d been rejected. To have prolonged it would have veered over into buffoonery. I had no self-respect left, but at least I still had my external dignity left. The law of diminishing returns would only have set in from this point on.

I turned and looked at him, still sitting there. “Seduction doesn’t agree with you,” I let him know. “You look positively harassed.”

I saw him wince a little, as though he agreed with me; not only looked it, but felt it. He stood now, to do the polite thing as host.

“I’ll get over it,” I said, speaking out loud to keep my own courage up. “It doesn’t kill you.”

He blinked at the word, as though it grated a little.

I was ready to go now. He came closer, to accelerate the process.

“Won’t you kiss me good-night?” I said.

He did it with his brakes on; used just one arm to support my back. Put his lips to mine, but with a time valve to them. Took them away again as soon as time was up. Mine tried to follow, and lost their way.

We straightened ourselves. “I’ll see you out,” he said.

“Never mind. Don’t rub it in.”

He took me at my word, turned back to pour himself another drink. His hand was shaking, and if that’s a sign of needing one, he needed one.

I went down the long gallery alone. So safe. Too safe. As safe as when I’d come in. My heart was blushing and my cheeks felt white.

I came opposite that door, the door to his lady-love’s room. I stopped and looked at it. And as I did, a creepy

feeling all at once came over me. Like a cold, cold wind that comes from nowhere and suddenly knifes you where you stand. As if the room were not empty. As if there were something in there, some terrible revelation, waiting, crying, to be seen. There was almost a pull to it, the feeling was so strong. It seemed to draw me, the way forbidden sights do. Evil sights, sights that are death in themselves and death to behold.

I started to put out my hand toward it. Then I felt his eyes on me, and turned, and saw him standing, watching me, at the end of the gallery, where I'd just come from myself.

"Annie," he said. "Don't." His voice was toneless, strangely quiet. He didn't offer to approach, stayed where he was, but his hands strayed to the cord of his robe and, of their own accord, without his seeming to know what they were doing, fumbled there, until suddenly the knot had disheveled, fallen open. Then each one, holding a loose end of the cord, flicked and played with it, all unconsciously. The way the two ends danced and spun and snaked, suggested the tentative twitching of a cat's tail, when it is about to spring.

He was holding it taut across his back, and out at each side, in a sort of elongated bow-shape. It was just a posture, a stance, a vagary of nervous preoccupation, I suppose. An odd one, but meaningless.

I flexed my wrist slightly, as if to complete the touching of the doorknob.

The cord tightened to almost a straight line, stopped moving.

His eyes met mine and mine met his, the length of the gallery.

The impulse to annoy him died.

Indifferently; I desisted. I dropped my hand slowly, and let the door be.

His hands dropped too. The taut pull of the cord slackened, it softened to a dangling loop.

I went on to the outside door and opened it.

"Good night, Dwight," I murmured wanly.

"Good night, Annie," he echoed.

I saw him reach out with one arm and support himself limply against the wall beside him, he was so tired of me by this time. I closed the outside door.

They tell you wrong when they tell you infatuation dies a sudden death. Infatuation dies a lingering, painful death. Even after all hope is gone the afterglow sometimes stubbornly clings on and on, kidding you, lighting the dark in which you are alone. Infatuation dies as slowly as a slower love; it comes on quicker, that is all.

Twice I went by there in a taxi, in the two weeks following that night. A taxi that didn't have to go by there, that could have taken me another way; but whose way I altered, I interfered with, so that it would take me by there. And each time it stopped a moment at the door. Not of its own accord, either. "Stop here a moment."

But then I didn't get out after all. Just sat there. Perhaps to see if I could sit there like that without getting out, I don't know. Perhaps to see if I was strong enough.

I was. I just barely made it, both times, but I made it.

"Drive on," I said heroically, when the driver turned his head around inquiringly after nothing had happened. It was like leaving your right arm behind, jammed in a door; but I left it.

One of the two times, I had been on my way to a party, and the excuse would have been to ask him if he wanted to come along with me. Had I carried the stop out to its ultimate conclusion. But I don't think we would have gone on to any party, even had I put the invitation to him. It takes two to want to go to any party, when there are two, and one of us wouldn't have wanted to go—even had he said yes.

(I didn’t, incidentally, even go on to the party myself, after I drove on from his door; I went home and took off the regalia it had taken me an hour’s solid work to array myself in. It hadn’t been meant for the general admiration of any party.)

And the second of the two times I stopped, the excuse was even more flimsy. I was supposed to be on my way somewhere else. To friends, I think, for an evening of bridge.

“Drive on,” I told the driver.

But I was convalescing; it was only like leaving your hand caught in the door, not your whole arm now.

“Your game isn’t what it used to be,” my partner told me acidulously later that evening, after we’d gone down for a grand slam.

“No,” I agreed, word for word, “my game isn’t what it used to be.” (“And I’m a dud at the new one,” I added to myself.)

But the third time, ah the third time, I stopped down there at the door, there was no excuse at all. None whatever. Not even so fragile a one as a secondhand party or a secondhand game. I did it as a sort of test, and I found out what I wanted to.

I was practically over it. I was cured. I made the discovery for myself sitting there in the taxi, taking my own blood pressure, so to speak, holding my own pulse, listening to my own heart. I could drive away now without a wrench, without feeling that I’d left a part of me behind, caught in his door.

I lighted a cigarette and thought with a sigh of relief: It’s passed. It’s finished. Now I’ve got nothing more to worry about. That was the vaccine of love. Now I’m immune. Now I can go on and just work and live and be placid.

“Y’getting out, lady, or what?” the driver asked fretfully.

“Yes,” I said coolly, “I think I will. I want to say good-bye to someone in there.”

And in perfect safety, in perfect calm, I paid him and got out and went inside to visit my recent, my last, love.

But, as I have often said, they tell you wrong when they tell you infatuation dies a sudden death. It doesn't. *I* know.

I seemed to have picked an inappropriate time for my farewell visit. Or at least, a nonexclusive one.

There'd been somebody else with him. The apartment door was already open, when I stepped off at his foyer, and he was standing there talking to some man in dilatory leave-taking.

The man was heavily built and none too young. In the milder fifties, I should judge. His hair was silvering, his complexion was florid, and there were little skeinlike red blood vessels threading the whites of his eyes. He had a hard-looking face, but he was being excessively amiable at the moment that I came upon the two of them. Almost overdoing it, almost overly amiable, for it didn't blend well with the rest of his characteristics, gave the impression of being a seldom-used, almost rusty attribute; he had to push down hard on the accelerator to get it working at all. And he was keeping his foot pressed down on it for all he was worth so that it couldn't get away from him.

"I hope I haven't troubled you, Mr. Billings," he was apologizing just as the elevator panel opened.

"Not at all," Dwight protested indulgently. There was even something patronizing in his intonation. "I know how those things are. Don't think twice about it. Glad to—" And then they both turned at the slight rustle the panel made, and saw me, and so didn't finish the mutual gallantries they were engaged upon. Or rather, postponed them for a moment.

Dwight's face lighted up at sight of me. I was welcome. There could be no doubt of it. Not like that other night. And

yet—How shall I put it? It was not a question of being relieved. I didn't detect that at all. It was rather that he was already so pleased with himself, and with everything else, this evening, that even my arrival pleased him. And I use the adverb "even" advisedly. So that I was welcome by good-humored reflection—anyone would have been at the moment—and not in my own right.

He shook my hand cordially. "Well. Nice of you. Where've you been keeping yourself?" And that sort of thing. But made no move to introduce the departing caller to me.

And his manners were too quick-witted for that to have been an oversight. So what could I infer but that there was a differentiation of status between us that would have made a social introduction inappropriate? In other words, that one call was a personal one and the other was not, so the two were not to be linked.

At the same time, he did not offer to disengage himself from his first caller, conclude the parley, and turn his attention to me. On the contrary, he postponed my playing on his attention and returned to the first matter, as if determined it should run its unhurried course and be completed without any haste, first of all. He even signaled to the car operator not to stand there waiting to take the leavetaker down, as he'd been inclined to do. "We'll ring," he said, and motioned the panel closed with his hand.

And to me: "Go in, Annie. Take your things off. I'll be right with you."

I went in. My last impression of the man standing there with him was that he was slightly ill at ease under my parting scrutiny; call it embarrassed, call it sheepish, call it what you will. He turned his head aside a moment and took a deep draught of an expensive cigar he was holding between his knuckles. As if: Don't look at me so closely. I certainly wasn't staring, so it must have been his own self-consciousness.

I went down the gallery of lost loves. The room door was open now. I went past it without stopping, and down the steps to the drawing-room arena.

I took off my “things,” as he’d put it, and primped at my hair, and moved idly around, waiting for him to join me.

I looked at things as I moved. One does, waiting in a room.

He’d left them just as they were, to take his visitor to the door. Probably I hadn’t been announced yet, at that moment. I must have been announced after they were both already at the door, and he hadn’t come all the way back in here since leaving it the first time.

There were two glasses. Both drained heartily, nothing but ice sweat left in their bottoms; the interview must have been a cordial one.

There were two strips of cellophane shorn from a couple of expensive cigars.

There was a single burned matchstick; one smoker had done that courteous service for both.

His checkbook folder was lying on the corner of the table. He must have taken it out of his pocket at one time, and then forgotten to return it again. Or perhaps thought that could wait until afterward; it was of no moment.

I didn’t go near it, or touch it, or examine it in any way. I just saw it lying there.

There was a new blotter lying near it. Almost spotless; it had only been used about once.

That I did pick up, idly, and look at. As if I were a student of Arabic or some other right-to-left scrawl. I looked at it thoughtfully.

He still didn’t come in.

Finally I took it over to the mirror with me and fronted it to that, and looked into that.

Part of his signature came out. “*-lings*” It was the thing he’d written last, so the ink was still freshest when the blotter’d been put to it. Above it were a couple of less

distinct tracings, *earer.*" And three large circles and two smaller ones. Like this: "OOOoo."

I turned swiftly, as though that had shocked me (but it hadn't; why should it?) and pitched it back onto the table from where I stood. Then I fixed my hair a little more, in places where it didn't need it.

He came in, looking sanguine, looking zestful. I don't remember that he rubbed his hands together, but that was the impression his mood conveyed: of rubbing his hands together.

"Who was that man?" I said indifferently.

"You'll laugh," he said. And he set the example by doing so himself. "That's something for you." Then he waited, as a good raconteur always does. Then he gave me the punch line. "He was a detective. A real, honest-to-goodness, life-sized detective. Badge and everything."

I stopped being indifferent, but I didn't get startled. Only politely incredulous, as a guest should be toward her host's surprise climaxes. "Here? What'd he want with you?"

"Asking if I could give him any information," he said cheerfully. Then in the same tone: "You've heard about Bernette, haven't you?"

I said I hadn't.

"I think you met her up here once."

I visioned a pink brassiere and pink drawers. "Yes," I said, "I seem to recall."

"Well, she's disappeared. Hasn't been heard of in weeks."

"Oh," I said. "Is that bad?"

He gave me a wink. "Good," he whispered, as if afraid she'd come in just then and overhear him. And he flung one hand disgustedly toward the doorway, meaning it for her invisible presence. She should stay away.

"Why do they come to you about it?" I asked him.

"Oh," he said impatiently, "some tommyrot or other about her never having been seen again after—after the last time she left here. I dunno, something like that. Just routine. This

is the third time this same fellow's been up here. I've been darn good-natured about it." Then he said, more optimistically, "He promised me just now, though, this is the last time; he won't come back anymore."

He was fixing two drinks for us, in two fresh glasses. The first two had been shunted aside. The checkbook and the blotter had both vanished, and I'd been facing him in the mirror the whole time; so maybe I'd been mistaken; they hadn't been there in the first place.

"And then there was something about some clothes of hers," he went on offhandedly. "She left some of her things here with me——"

He broke off to ask me: "Are you shocked, Annie?"

"No," I reassured him, "I knew she stopped here now and then."

"I was supposed to send them after her; she said something about letting me know where she could be reached." He shrugged. "But I never heard from her again myself. They're still waiting in there . . . ."

He finished swirling ice with a neat little tap of the glass mixer against the rim.

"Probably ran off with someone," he said contemptuously.

I nodded dispassionately.

"I know who put him up to it," he went on, with a slight tinge of resentment. I had to take it he meant the detective; he offered no explanation to cover the switch in pronouns. "That dirty little ex-husband of hers."

"Oh, is he ex?" I said. That was another thing I hadn't known.

"Certainly. They were annulled almost as soon as they came back from their wedding trip. I even helped her to do it myself, sent her to my lawyer—"

And paid for it, I knew he'd been about to add; but he didn't.

"I told this fellow tonight," he went on, still with that same tinge of vengefulness, "that they'd better look into his

motives, while they were about it. He was only out to get money out of her—”

(And she was only out to get money out of you, I thought, but tactfully didn’t say so.)

“Do they think something’s happened to her?” I asked.

He didn’t answer that directly. “She’ll probably turn up someplace. They always do.” Then he said grimly, “It won’t be here. Now let’s have one, you and me.” And he came toward me with our drinks.

We sat down on the sofa with them. He didn’t need any urging tonight.

We had another pair. Then a third. We let the third pair stand and cool off a while.

I was the upright arm of the parenthesis tonight, I noticed presently; he was the toppled-over one.

I didn’t move my head aside the way he had his; his lips just didn’t affect me. It was like being kissed by cardboard.

“I want you to marry me,” he said. “I want—what you wanted that night. I want—someone like you.”

(That’s not good enough, I thought. You should want just me myself, and not someone like me. That leaves it too wide open. This is the rebound. You want the other kind of woman now. Safety, security, tranquility; not so much fire. Something’s shaken you, and you can’t stand alone; so if there was a female statue in the room, you’d propose to that.)

“Too late,” I said. “I’ve passed that point, as you arrive at it. You got to it too late. Or I left it too soon.”

He wilted and his head went down. He had to go on alone. “I’m sorry,” he breathed.

“I am, too.” And I was. But it couldn’t be helped.

Suddenly I laughed. “Isn’t love the damnedest thing?”

He laughed, too, after a moment, ruefully. “A bitch of a thing,” he agreed.

And laughing together, we took our leave of each other, parted, never to meet in closeness again. Laughing is a

good way to part. As good a way as any.

I read an item about it in the papers a few days afterward, quite by chance. The husband had been picked up and taken in for questioning, in connection with her disappearance. Nothing more than that. There was no other name mentioned.

I read still another item about it in the papers, only a day or two following the first one. The husband had been released again, for lack of evidence.

I never read anything further about it, not another word, from that day on.

The other night at a party I met my last love again. I don't mean my latest; my last, I mean my final one. And he was as taking and as debonair as ever, but not to me anymore; a little older maybe, and we said the things you say, holding tall glasses in our hands to keep from feeling lonely, keep from feeling lost.

"Hello, Annie. How've you been?"

"Hello, Dwight. Where've you been keeping yourself lately?"

"I've been around. And you?"

"I've been around, too."

And then when there wasn't anything more to say, we moved on. In opposite directions.

It isn't often that I see him anymore. But whenever I do, I still think of her. I wonder what really did become of her.

And just the other night, suddenly, for no reason at all, out of nowhere, the strangest thought entered my head for a moment . . . .

But then I promptly dismissed it again, just as quickly as it had occurred to me, as being too fantastic, too utterly improbable. The people you know never do things like that; the people you *read* about may, but never the people you *know.*

THE NUMBER’S UP

It was a sort of car that seemed to have a faculty for motion with an absolute lack of any accompanying sound whatsoever. This was probably illusory; it must have been, internal combustion engines being what they are, tires being what they are, brakes and gears being what they are, even raspy street-surfacing being what it is. Yet the illusion outside the hotel entrance was a complete one. Just as there are silencers that, when affixed to automatic hand-weapons, deaden their reports, so it was as if this whole massive car body were encased in something of that sort. For, first, there was nothing out there, nothing in sight there. Then, as though the street-bed were water and this bulky black shape were a grotesque gondola, it came floating up out of the darkness from nowhere. And then suddenly, still with no sound whatsoever, there it was at a halt, in position.

It was like a ghost-car in every attribute but the visual one. In its trancelike approach and halt, in its lightlessness, in its enshrouded interior, which made it impossible to determine (at least without lowering one’s head directly outside the windows and peering in at nose-tip range) if it were even occupied at all, and if so by whom and by how many.

You could visualize it scuttling fleetly along some overshadowed country lane at dead of night, lightless,

inscrutable, unidentifiable, to halt perhaps beside some inky grove of trees, linger there a while undetected, then glide on again, its unaccountable errand accomplished without witness, without aftermath. A goblin-car that in an earlier age would have fed folklore and rural legend. Or, in the city, you could visualize it sliding stealthily along some warehouse-blacked back alley, curving and squirming in its terrible silence, then, as it neared the mouth and would have emerged, creeping to a stop and lying there in wait, unguessed in the gloom. Lying there in wait for long hours, like some huge metal-cased predatory animal, waiting to pounce on its prey.

Sudden, sharp yellow spurts of fangs, and then to whirl and slink back into anonymity the way it came, leaving the carcass of its prey huddled there and dead.

Who was there to know? Who was there to tell?

And even now, before this particular hotel entrance. It was already in position, it had already stopped.

Then nothing happened.

Ordinarily, when cars stop someone gets out. That is what they have stopped for. In this case it just stood there, as though there were no one in it and had been no one in it all along.

Then the pale, blurry shape of a human hand, as when seen through thick dark glass, appeared inside the window and descended slowly to the bottom, like a pale-colored mussel foundering in a murky tank of water. And with it went the invisible line of a shade. The hand stopped a little above the lower rim and faded from sight again. The shade-line remained where it had been left.

The watch had begun. The death-watch.

In a little while a young man came walking along the street, untroubled of gait, unaware of it. The particular hotel that

the ghost-car had made its rendezvous had a seamy glass canopy jutting out over the sidewalk with open bulbs set around the inside of it. But they only shone inward because its outer rim was opaque. Thus, as the young man stepped from the darkness of the street's back reaches under this pane of light it was as though a curtain had been jerked up in front of his face, and he was suddenly revealed from head to foot as in a spotlight.

In the car the darkness found breath and whispered, "That him?"

And the darkness whispered back to the darkness, "Yeah, same type build. Same light hair. Wears gray a lot. And this is the hotel that was fingered."

Then the darkness quickly stirred, but the other darkness quelled it, hissing: "Wait, he wants the girl, too. The girl, too, he said. Let him get up there to her first."

The young man had turned off and gone inside. The four glass leaves of the revolving door blurred and made him disappear.

For a moment more the evil darkness held its collective breath. Then, no longer in a whisper but sharp as the edge of a stiletto, "Now. Go in and get the number of the room. Do it smart."

The man behind the desk looked up from his racing form, and there was a jaunty young man wearing a snap-brim felt hat leaning there on one elbow. How long he'd been there it was impossible to determine. He might have just come. He might have been there three or four minutes already. Ghost-cars, ghost-arrivals, ghost-departures.

"Do something for you?" said the man behind the desk.

The leaner on his elbow nodded his head languidly, but didn't say.

"What?"

The leaner considered his bent-back fingernails, blew on them and rubbed them against his coat-lapel a little. “Guy that just came in. Got any idea what his room number would be?”

“Is he expecting—”

“No.” He opened his hand and a compressed five-dollar bill dribbled out onto the desk and slowly began to expand. “He dropped this in front of the door just now. I seen him do it. Thought he might want it back.”

“You taking it up to him?”

“No. You take care of it for me. I ain’t particular.” The elbow-leaner was fiddling with one of his cuff links now.

A conniving look appeared on the clerk’s yeast-pasty face. He said, through immobile lips that made the words sound furtive, “I’ll take it up to One-one-six for you in a little while.”

“Try Streakaway in the third race tomorrow.”

The five-dollar bill was gone now.

So was the jaunty young man in the snap-brim felt hat.

He knocked because they only had one key between them. The tarnished numerals 116 slanted inward as she opened the door for him. They kissed first, and then she said, “Oh God, I’ve been so frightened, waiting all alone here like this. I thought you’d never come back.”

She had sleek bobbed hair with a part on the side, and was wearing a waistless dress that came to her knees. The waist was down at the bottom.

“Everything’s taken care of,” he said soothingly. “The reservation’s made—”

“You don’t think anything will happen tonight, do you?” she faltered. “You don’t think anything will happen tonight?”

“Nothing will happen. Don’t be afraid. I’m right here with you.”

“We should have gone home to my mother. I would have felt safer there. When something like this comes along, a woman wants another woman to cling to, one of her own kind. A man can’t understand that.”

“Don’t be afraid,” was all he kept saying. “Don’t be afraid.”

The knock on the door was craftily casual. It wasn’t too loud, it wasn’t too long, it wasn’t too rapid. It was just like any knock on the door should be.

Their embrace split open down the middle, and they both turned their heads to look that way.

“Wonder who that is,” he said matter-of-factly.

“I can’t imagine,” she said placidly.

He went over to the door and opened it, and suddenly two men were in the room and the door was closed again. All without noise. “Come on, Jack,” one said. “Nice and easy now.”

“Nice and easy now,” the other said.

“You must have the wrong party.”

“No, we haven’t got the wrong party. We made sure of that.”

“Made sure of that,” the other one said.

“Well I don’t know you. I never saw you before in my life.”

“Same goes for us. We never saw you before neither. But we know someone that *does* know you.”

“Who?”

“We’ll tell you downstairs. Come on now. Take your hat. Looks better that way.”

The girl’s head kept turning from one to the other, like a frightened spectator watching a ball pass to and fro at a deadly tennis match that is not being played for sport.

“You’re frightening my wife. Won’t you tell us what you—”

“His wife. Did you get that? ‘The-lay-of-the-land,’ they used to call her, and now this guy claims she’s his wife. As

that Guinan dame is always saying, ‘Hello, sucker!’ ”

The girl quickly held the man back, her man. “Don’t. I don’t like their looks. Please, for my sake, don’t.”

“You got good sense, wife,” one of them told her.

“Look, if it’s money you want—we don’t have much, but—here. Now please go and leave us alone.”

One of them chopped the extended hand down viciously, and the bills sprayed like an exploded bouquet. His voice thickened to a muddy growl. “Come a-a-an,” he said threateningly. “Outside.”

He backed a forearm up over his own shoulder in menace. “Walk,” he said. “Don’tcha hear good?”

“Hear good?” said the other.

“This says you do.” And there was a gun. Not much of it showing, just a sliver of the harmless end, peering above the lip of his pocket. But with one finger hooked down below in position.

“Don’t scream,” the other one warned the girl tonelessly. “Don’t scream, or you’ll wish you hadn’t.”

She shuddered like someone dancing. “I won’t.”

“Now come on,” the first one said to the man. “You’re going to walk with me, like this. Up against me, real close and chummy. Buddy-buddies.”

They went out two by two. Slopping fondly against each other, from shoulder down to hip, like a quartet of drunks coming out of a speak at seven in the morning.

“Where you taking us?” he said in the elevator, going down.

“Just for a little ride.” The expression had no sinister meaning yet in 1929. It meant only what it seemed to say.

“But why at this hour?”

“Don’t talk.”

As they made the brief passage from elevator to street, with a minimum of conspicuousness, the desk man carefully avoided looking up. He was busy, extremely busy, looking down into his racing form at that moment.

They walked her around to the outside of the car and put her in from there, next to a man who was already at the wheel. Him they put in from the near side, and then each one got in on opposite sides of him and pinned him down between them on the back seat. It was all done with almost fluid-drive sleekness, not a hitch, not a catch, not a break in its flow.

And suddenly, like in a dream, the street outside that particular hotel entrance was empty again, as empty as it had been earlier that night. The car was gone. It had departed as soundlessly, as ghostlike, as it had first appeared. A true phantom of the night.

But it had been there. It had brought three people and taken five away. That much was no illusion.

The ride had begun.

The theater and club spectaculars seemed to stick up into the sky at all sorts of crazy angles, probably because most of them were planted diagonally on rooftops. *Follow Thru, Whoopee, Show Boat,* El Fay Club, Club Richman, Texas Guinan's. It gave the town the appearance of standing on its ear.

The car slid through rows of brownstones (each one housing a speakeasy on its lower floors) over as far as Eleventh, which had no traffic lights yet. Its only traffic was an occasional milk or railroad-yards freight truck, since no highway connected with it, and it came to a dead end at Seventy-second without even a ramp to its name. They ran down it the other way, to Canal Street and the two-year-old Holland Tunnel, engineering marvel of the decade.

The girl spoke suddenly, as they glided past endless strings of stalled New York Central freight cars. "Don't. Please don't. Please leave me alone."

"What's he doing to you?" came quickly from the back seat.

The man at the wheel answered for her. "Just straightening her skirt a little."

The other two laughed. But it wasn't even bawdy laughter. It was too cold and cruel for that.

When they reached the tunnel-mouth, the driver slowed. As he rolled the window down to pay the toll, she suddenly stripped off her wrist watch and flung it so that it struck the tunnel cop flat on the chest.

He caught it easily with one hand, so that it didn't even have a chance to fall. "Hey, what's that for?" he asked, but laughing good-naturedly.

"My girlfriend here just now said she don't want to know the time anymore from now on, and I guess that's her way of proving it."

The girl writhed a little, as though her arm were caught in a vise behind her back, but said nothing.

The cop pitched the watch lightly back into the car. "Just coming home from a party folks?"

"No, we're going to one."

"Have fun."

"That's what we intend."

As they picked up speed, and the white tiles flashed blindingly by, the driver gave her a savage backhand swipe with his knuckles across her mouth.

She cried out piercingly, but it was lost in the roar of the onrushing tunnel. The man who called himself her husband made some sort of spasmodic move on the back seat, but the two guns pressing into his intestines from opposite sides almost met inside him, they dug in so far.

They came out into the open, and it was the grimy backwaters of Jersey City now. Tall factory stacks, and fires burning, and spreads of stagnant stinking water.

On and on the ride went. On and on and on.

They turned north soon and left the big city and all its little satellites behind them, and after a while even the rusty glow on the horizon died down and was gone. Then trees began, and little lumpy hills, and there was nothing but the darkness and the night and the fear.

“Don,” she shuddered, and suddenly flung one hand up over her shoulder and back, trying to find his.

“Please let me hold her hand,” he begged. “She’s frightened.”

“Let ’em hold hands,” one of them snickered.

They held onto each other like that, in a hand-link of fear, two against the night.

“Don, she called me,” he said. “Didn’t you hear her? Don, that’s my name. Don Ackerman.”

“Yeah, and I’m Ricardo Cortez,” countered one of them, with the flipness so characteristic of the period that it even came into play on a death ride.

On went the ride.

At one point his control slipped away from him for a minute. “God,” he burst out, “how far are you taking us?”

“Don’t be in a hurry to get there,” the one on his left advised him dryly. “I wouldn’t, if I was you.”

And then again, a little later, “Won’t you tell me the name of the fellow you think I am? Can’t I convince you—”

“What’s the matter, you don’t know your own name?”

“Well, what’ve I done?”

“We don’t know from nothing. You were just marked lousy, that’s all. We only carry out the orders.”

“Yes, but what orders?” he exclaimed in his innocence.

And the answer, grim, foreboding, was: “Oh, broth-urr!”

Then without any warning the car stopped. They were there. “The ride’s over,” someone said. “End of the ride.”

For a moment nobody got out. They just sat there. The driver cut the ignition, and after that there was silence. Complete, uncanny silence, more frightening than the most threatening noise or violence could have been. Night silence. A silence that had death in it.

Then one of them opened the door, got out, and started to walk slowly away from the car, through ankle-high grass that hissed and spit as he toiled through it. The others just stayed where they were.

There was some sort of an old dilapidated farm building with a slanted roof in the middle distance. It was obviously abandoned, because its windows were black glassless gaps. Behind it was a smaller shanty looking like a tool shed or lean-to, so close to collapse it was almost down flat. He didn't approach either one of them, he went around to the rear in a big wide circle.

They sat in silence, the four of them that were left. One of them was smoking a cigarette. But that didn't make any noise, just a red blink whenever he drew on it.

Finally the driver reached out and tapped the button. A single, lonely, guttural horn-blat sounded. Briefer than a question mark in the air, staccato as the span of a second split in two, yet unfolding into a streamer of meaning through the night air: Come on, what's taking you so long, we're getting tired of waiting.

The walker-in-the-grass came back to the car again.

"Yeah, it's there," he said briefly.

"He told us it would be," was the sardonic answer. "Didn't you believe him?"

There was a general stir of activity as the other two got out, each with a prisoner.

"All right, you and me go this way," the one with the girl said.

"No! Don!" she started to scream harrowingly. "Don-n-n-n!"

His smile was thin as a knife-cut across his face. "Don'll be taken care. Don't worry about Don."

He grasped her brutally by the upper arms, tightened his hold to a crushing vise and drew his lips back whitely, as though the constrictive force came from them and not his hands. He thrust her drunkenly lurching form from side to side before him. Her hair swayed and danced with the struggle, as though it were something alive in its own right. The darkness swallowed them soon enough, but not the sounds they made.

Now Don began to shout himself, frightened, crazed, straining forward like a thing possessed. “Let her go! Let her go! Oh, if there’s a God above, why doesn’t He look down and stop this!” His voice was willowy with too much vibrancy. The movements of weeping appeared upon his face, the distortion without the delivery. Skin-weeping, without tears.

When the man who had been with her came back he was brushing twigs and leaves off his clothing, almost casually.

“Where is she?” they asked him.

“Where I left her.” Then he added, “Wanna take a look?”

“I think I will take a look,” the other assented, grinning with suggestive meaning.

But he turned up again almost at once, and his manner had changed. He acted disgruntled, like someone who’s been given a false scent and gone on a fool’s errand.

“Where is she now?”

“Still there.”

“What’s up?”

He said something low-voiced that the man she’d called Don wasn’t able to catch. His fright-soaked senses let it float past on the tide of terror submerging him.

“A kid!” the other one brayed outright in his surprise. His face flicked around for an instant toward the prisoner, then back again. “Say maybe he *was* telling the truth. Maybe she *was* his—”

“Couldn’t you tell?” the third man demanded of the girl’s original escort, a trace of contempt in his voice.

“Whaddya expect me to do, feel her pulse in the dark?”

“She gone or ain’t she?” he wanted to know bluntly, unmoved by any thought of sparing the prisoner’s sensibilities.

“Sure. What do I know about those things? I only know her eyes are wide open and she ain’t looking.”

The man who was being held thrashed rabidly until he almost seemed to oscillate like the bent wing of an electric

fan when its spin is dwindling. “Let me go to her! Let me go to her!”

“Pipe down, Jack,” one of them admonished, giving him a perfunctory slantwise clip along the jawline, but without any real heave behind it. “Nothing there to go to anymore.”

He threw his head back, stared unseeingly straight up overhead, and from the furrowed scalp, the ridged pate that his face had thus become, emitted a full-fledged scream, high-pitched as a woman’s, unreasoning as a crushed animal’s.

Then his hands rose, fingers hooked wide, and scissored in from opposite sides, clawing at his own cheeks, digging into them, as if trying to tear them off, pull them out by their very ligaments.

“No!” he shrieked, then “No!” he cried, then “No!” he moaned, on a descending tonal scale.

They had taken their hands off him, knowing he was no longer capable of much movement.

His head fell forward again, like something trying to loosen itself from his shoulders, and now he blindly, snufflingly faced the ground as if he were looking closely for something he’d dropped there. His feet carried him around in an intoxicated, reeling little half-circle, and he collapsed breast-first against the fender of the car, head burrowed down against its hood, clasped hands clamped tight across the back of it as if to keep his skull from exploding. His legs, stretched inertly outward along the ground behind him, twitched spasmodically now and then, as if trying to draw themselves in after the rest of him, and always slipped back again each time.

In his travail, words of pain filtered through, suffocated by the pressure of the car-hood against his nose and mouth.

“Mine. She was mine. Mine. Mine.” Over and endlessly over again. “My girl. She was my girl. It was going to be my little baby. I was waiting for it to be my little baby. All my

hopes and dreams are gone . . . . Oh, I want to leave this rotten world. I want to get out of this rotten world."

"You will. You're gonna." The eyes that looked down upon him held no pity, no softness, no feeling at all. They were eyes of stone. "I don't care what you do to me now," he said. "I want to die."

"That's good," they told him. "We'll oblige."

"Kill me quick," he said. "The quicker the better."

"You're going to get it how we want it, not how you want it." He wouldn't walk, or couldn't. Probably couldn't—emotional shock. Each took him by a shoulder, and his legs dragged along behind him out at full length, giving little jerks and bumps when they hit stones and other obstacles.

They brought him to the edge of a squared-off pit in the ground and let him fall flat on his face and lie there a minute. A dried-out well shaft.

"You start the digging, Playback." It was the first time a name had been exchanged between any of them.

"Yeah, I always get the hard work."

Playback brought a shovel from the toppled-down tool shed, marked off an oblong of surface soil and started to break it up into clods ready for throwing down into the well-shaft.

The other man was saying to the third one: "These pocket-flashes ain't going to be enough to see all the way down there. How about one of the heads from the car?"

"Whaddya have to have light for, anyway?"

"You want to see him die, don'tcha? That's half the kick.

Another thing, there might be space left between those chunks the air could get to him through."

"I have some extension wiring I can rig it up on."

"I don't care what you do now," the man on the ground droned. "I want to die."

'Always get the hard work," said Playback.

The detached headlight was set up on the lip of the well-shaft. The man who had brought it returned to the car to

control it from the dashboard.

"Why don't you hurry?" said the man on the ground. "For God's sake, why don't you hurry? Why can't I die, when I want to so badly?"

The one nearest aimed a kick at him along the ground. "You will," he promised.

The headlight was deflected downward into the aperture. "Give her the juice," the one beside it called back guardedly in the direction of the car.

A ghostly pallor came up from below, making the darkness aboveground seem even more impenetrable. Their faces, however, were now bathed in the reflection, like hideous devil-masks with slits for eyes and mouths.

The other one came back from the car.

"There's got to be a lot more fill than that," the one standing beside Playback criticized dissatisfiedly, measuring the results of his efforts.

"I always get the hard work."

The other one grabbed the shovel from him and went at it in his place. "If there's one thing that gets my goat," he muttered disgustedly, "it's to have a guy along on a thing like this that's always bellyaching, the way you do. Just one guy like that is enough to spoil everyone else's good time."

The man on the ground had grasped hold of a small rock lying near him. He closed his hand around it, swung his arm up, and tried to smash it into his own skull.

The nearest one of the three saw it just in time and aimed a swift kick that averted it. The rock bounced out and the hand fell down limp. It lay there, oddly twisted inside out, as though the wrist had been broken.

After that there was silence for a while, only the sound of the shovel biting into the earth and the hissing splatter of the loose dirt.

They stood him up, his back to the well.

In the dark, desperate sky, just above the scalloped line the tree-tops made, three stars formed a pleading little

constellation. No one looked at them, no one cared. This was the time for death, not the time for mercy.

The last thing he said was, “Helen, sweetheart. Wait for me. I’m coming to you.” The last thing in the whole world.

Then they pushed him down. Took their hands off him, rather, and he went down by himself, for he couldn’t stand up anymore.

He went over backward, and in, and down. The sound of the hit wasn’t too much. It was soggy at the bottom yet, from the long-ago water. Probably he didn’t feel it too much. He was all limp from lack of wanting to live, anyway.

He lay there nestled up, like in a foursquare clayey coffin.

He stirred a little, sighed a little, like someone trying to get comfortable in bed.

Playback tipped the shovel over, and a drench of earth granules spewed down on top of him.

One bent leg got covered up. But his face still breasted the terrestrial wave, like a motionless swimmer caught in the upturn stroke of the Australian crawl and held fast that way, face over shoulder.

Playback brought another shovelful, and the face was gone.

One hand crept through, tentatively, like something feeling its way in the dark.

Playback brought another shovelful and erased the hand.

Three fingers wormed through this time, like a staggered insect that has been stepped on. They only made it as far as the second joint.

“If he said he wants to die, then why does he keep trying to break through to the surface and breathe for?” Playback asked, engrossed.

“That’s nature,” the one beside him answered learnedly. “His mind wants to die, but his body don’t know any better, it wants to live no matter what he says to it.”

The stirring fill had fallen motionless at last.

“It’s got him, he’s quit now,” he decided after a further moment or two of judicious observation. “Throw her in on top of him, fill it up the rest of the way, and let’s get out of here. I haven’t had so much fresh air since—”

A girl opened the door first, looked cautiously up and down the deserted hotel corridor. Then she hitched her head at someone behind her, picked up a small valise from the floor and came on outside.

She was a blonde, good-looking and mean-looking, both at the same time.

“C’mon,” she said huskily. “Let’s go while the going’s good.”

A man came out after her. His eyes were the eyes of a poker player. A poker player in a game where the pot is life and death. He had a certain build, a certain way of walking. He was in gray.

He closed the door after him with practiced stealth. Then he stopped and raised his hand to the outside of it.

The girl looked around at him impatiently. “Can that, will you?” she snapped. “This is no time to play games. Every time you go in or out you take time off and fool with that.”

“I’m a gambler, remember?”

“You’re a gambler is right,” she agreed tartly. “That’s why the heat’s on you right now. You should pay up your losses —”

“I’m superstitious. This little number’s been awful good to me. All my big wins come from something with a six in it.”

On the 9 at the end of 119 the bottom rivet was gone; only the top one remained. He swung it around loosely upward, made it into a 6 and patted it affectionately. “Keep on bringing me good luck like you always have,” he told it softly.

“Didn’t you hear me ask for 116 when we first holed up here?” he added. “Only somebody else was already in it . . . .”

INTENT TO KILL

It started to get dark, and as nature's generator went dead, the town turned on its auxiliary ones and went ahead working on its own juice. A sort of blazing neon moon came up all around that made the real one of six hours or so before seem as if it had been dim and dingy by contrast.

I kept right on standing there where I was while the changeover took place around me. I'd been standing there like that without moving for some little time now, as if I'd taken root on the spot. As if the impulse to keep on going had run down and needed winding up again. Or as though I'd forgotten what had brought me that far. But I hadn't.

I was right at the edge of the intersection, my toes almost overlapping the curb-lip. Across the way from me, one flange of a street-directional sign spelled out "Lexington Ave." Abbreviated like that, with no room to take in the whole designation. The second wing, at right-angles, was telescoped by perspective so that it narrowed-down and couldn't be read.

But I knew which street it was. It was the right one, it was the one I wanted. It had been the street she lived on; now it was going to be the street she died on.

A pedestrian cross-walk sign facing me bloomed a warning red, but only the WALK part of it came on, in palsied letters. The wiring loose. Then DONT showed up beside it after it was nearly time for the whole thing to go

off again. But nobody had mistaken it for a go-ahead anyway. They went by the color and not the capitals. (Parenthetically the thought occurred to me: Acolor-blind person could've got knocked down right then, in those few seconds.)

Then it made the switch-back to green, and the whole process repeated itself. But I still didn't go over to the other side.

It wasn't because I was undecided; if I was undecided, I wouldn't have come this far. It wasn't because I was afraid; if I was afraid, I wouldn't have come at all. It wasn't because I wanted to back out; if I wanted to back out, all I had to do was turn around and go away.

It isn't as easy to kill someone as they tell you it is. It isn't as easy to kill someone as you think.

People were going by in droves, but none of them looked at me. They wouldn't have believed it if someone had said: See that man standing where you just went past? He's on his way right now to kill someone, someone who lives down on the next block.

Here's what they might have said, various ones of them: How can you report it *before* he's done it? You have to wait till he does it first, and *then* report it. You can't arrest him just for carrying a thought around in his head.

Or: *You* report it. I have to meet my wife and pick up my car. I'm late now.

Or: Not me. I have an appointment at the beauty-parlor. If I miss it by even ten minutes, they won't hold it for me, I might have to wait a whole week before I can get one again.

Or: I have my own troubles. I just got a ticket. Why should I cooperate with those guys? It's their baby, not mine.

If you looked straight up overhead, the buildings made a picket-fence around the sky that only left a little well of it open in the middle. The rest was all converging lines of aluminum lashed together with gleaming zircons. Like railroad-tracks tilted up into the sky, with tiers and tiers and

tiers of twinkling ties spanning them, growing smaller, smaller, smaller as they climbed . . . Until your eyes got tired and dropped off, and you lost them near that end-of-the-line called heaven. That subway-station in the sky.

This was New York, beautiful but cold.

And not for little men and little women and their grudge-matches.

Billowing life all around, and imminent death standing there, still, in the middle of all of it. Elbowed a little bit over this way, edged a little bit over that, nudged a little bit back the first way again. A bus overshot its yellow-stenciled unloading-slot, came a little too far forward, and opened its steaming door right in front of my face. A woman in rubber jack-boots got down heavily sideways, and one of them landed right on the toes of my left foot. I pulled them out from under, and she glared at me for having my toes there right where her foot was going to come down.

I reached to feel for the gun, not to use it but to see if it had become dislodged, the way you touch your hat to straighten it after a slight collision.

It was all right, it hadn't been disturbed.

The bus paled into an azure silhouette for a moment behind a parting gush of exhaust-fumes and then went on its way. CINZANO stared back from its rear end, in a diagonal, in big block-capitals. Then they contracted into lower-case. Then they contracted into italics. Then into undecipherable molecules. Then the traffic coming behind blotted them out altogether. But the world had read their message.

The deep-freeze or whatever it was that had held me, thawed and dissolved, and I'd broken stance and was starting to go across at last. I almost wouldn't have noticed it myself, but the ground seemed to be slowly moving backward under me like some sort of conveyor-belt, or a flattened-out escalator-tread going the other way. And now

that I'd started, I didn't stop anymore after that. That had been the last time.

I moved slowly, but I kept moving. Going down the street, just going down the street. Like I had no reason, had no purpose, had no thought in mind. I touched the gun once, it was still there.

It felt heavier than it had in the old days, but I'd been in the hospital meantime and had lost weight. It was Government Issue, I'd brought it back with me from Saigon. You're supposed to turn them in when you're separated, but I hadn't.

I looked up at an ascending angle and recognized the building where I'd used to live. I even saw the windows which had once been mine. I counted up to them, that's how I knew them, but I didn't use my finger, I didn't want anyone to notice me do that. I just counted with my eyes instead.

I didn't see the man on door-duty outside, when I turned and went in. Then when I entered, he was in there but he didn't see me. He had his back to me, he was on the house-phone and he was talking to someone in the building, and he seemed very engrossed. More than engrossed, he seemed very excited. Or they were, which amounted to the same. "Now take it easy," I heard him say. "Now pull yourself together and try to talk more slowly so I can understand you."

I went around the turn to the elevator-bank, off-side to the front entrance, and pushed for the car. It came gliding down silent as a pin-drop, all glossy chrome and all empty. I got in and pushed the six-button and it closed and started to take me up.

It had been so easy to get in here unobserved, I almost couldn't believe it. I'd never been able to pass him like that in the old days when I'd still lived here. But maybe it wasn't the same guy, I hadn't seen his face, and they all looked alike in the uniform.

The minute I got out, somebody unseen called it away from me, and it went on further up somewhere else, so it didn't even leave a trace of which floor I was on.

And then I came to the door, the door that had been our door, but wasn't anymore.

I remembered how many times I'd come to it before, cold from being outside, overheated from being outside, tired from being outside. Now I was bringing a gun to shoot and kill with, in from being outside.

Once we'd hung a Christmas-wreath on it.

I remembered the last time, how it had slammed. And I'd thought of a line from a song I used to know: *"And as the door of love between us closes—"*

I got out the key I'd still kept, and opened it, and went in.

I saw the chairs I knew, the lamps I knew, the windows, the walls, the doors I knew. That same water-color in its same white-leather frame, of a Montmartre street-scene signed by someone named either Cobelle or Cubelle (I'd never been able to make sure) was still on the wall up there. A book on the table said: *Tom Jones.* We'd had that one *then.* A record on the player said: *Once Upon a Time, Never Comes Again.* We hadn't had that one *then.*

She must have just come in. Her coat was over a chair-seat dribbling downward to the floor. A glass with half a highball in it that she was coming back to in a minute was on a stand beside the chair. She'd never drunk before. Not by herself I mean. At parties, out with friends. Maybe she had something now to drink by herself about.

I knew she was in the bedroom, must be, although I couldn't hear her making any sound.

I called her name, not loudly, routinely as though we both still lived there in those rooms together, and she came in to me.

She wasn't frightened. She was surprised but she wasn't frightened. She must have been changing her clothes: to rest, to be more comfortable, maybe to get ready for a bath.

When she came in she had on just a light-blue corduroy wrap-around over her foundation pieces.

I saw her pull it more closely closed across her when she looked at me. It couldn't have been modesty. We'd been married. It must have been apprehension. Must have been apprehension; she sensed.

"What'd you come back for?" she said. "You said you never were, you never would."

"For this," I said. I took out the gun. "I came back for this."

She stared at it with an odd look of fascination, as though she'd never seen one before. I knew that wasn't it, I knew that was a misreading. It was fear, but it looked like hypnotic fascination.

"Will that," she asked me vaguely, the pupils of her eyes a thousand miles away, on the gun, "undo anything that's been done? Will that rub out the past?"

"It'll rub out the future," I said, "and that's even better."

"There is no future," she said. "It doesn't need a gun to tell us both that."

"No, but it says it awful well."

"You're like all men," she said. "Like they always have been. Like they always will be. Kill, when you're hurt. Kill. Hurt someone else when you're hurt. Two hurts are better than one. Two hurts hurt more than one hurt."

She crossed her arms in front of her breast (with an odd suggestion of chastity, I don't know where I got it from) and lowered her head, waiting.

"Go ahead, kill," she said.

"Look at me then. Look up at me. I want to see your eyes."

She lifted her face. "Here are my eyes," she said.

"Traitor's eyes," I hissed, "that looked at someone else. Softened then closed, for someone else."

"Time never ended, you never came back. Then *he* came. You told me he would, you wrote me to look for him. He

came from Saigon, and brought me love from you. He brought me messages. He brought me little snapshots, of a grubby face, unshaven beard, unkempt fatigues, that filled my heart with heaven and filled my eyes with tears. You'd eaten together side by side, drunk together side by side, fought together side by side and almost died together side by side. It was the closest I could get to you. It was as much of you as I could have or hope for. He was your proxy. The kiss was still your kiss, though it came from someone else. The hug was still your hug, though it came from someone else. The possession was still your possession, though it came from someone else. How can you explain these things? I was faithful to you, to only you and only you, through someone else's body.

"It wasn't not-enough love for you that betrayed me, it was too much love for you. That one night, the only night there ever was, ask him, ask him if you ever see him again, ask him whose name he heard me whisper in the night."

"Another man's son," I said bitterly. "Not mine, but another man's. Out of my wife's body, but another man's. Another! Another! Another man's!

"I wanted to dangle him on my knee when he was five. I wanted to play baseball with him when he was fifteen. I wanted to stand beside him and drink with him when he was twenty-five and married his girl.

"Gone now, all that gone now. Another man's eyes, looking out at me from his little-boy's face. Another man's hand, holding mine when he trots along beside me. Another man's tears, when he falls and barks his knee. Another man's blood, peering through the scrape.

"And when I die, and find out all the answers that I missed along the way, another man's son will stand by the grave with his head bowed down. Another man's, not my own."

My voice cracked, forlornly.

“Thief. Give me back the son you gypped me out of. You robbed me of my little hunk of eternity. It’s like dying twice and dying for good, when you die without leaving a son.”

She kept looking at me, like I’d told her to. She kept letting me see her eyes, like I’d told her to. Her eyelids flickered, though; they kept wanting to blink, and her eyes to shrink away from me. She wasn’t brave. Her skin was whiter than the paper you write on. But, here are my eyes, she’d said. She kept letting me see them. She kept holding them as steady as she could. So she *was* brave, after all.

“I walked up the aisle with you,” I remembered in a revery. “Away from the altar and away from the priest in his lace surplice. Your wedding-veil folded back clear of your face. The marriage-kiss from me still freshly pledged on your cheek, orange-blossoms, lilies-of-the-valley spraying in your arms.”

A sob that I hadn’t known was there blurted in my throat.

“No, I can’t kill you, I can’t shoot to kill you. No matter what you’ve done to me, you were the girl in my marriage-bed.”

I looked down at the outpointed gun as my mind told my fingers to lower it, but my heart already had, and it was down.

“When we first opened our eyes and looked at each other. The self-consciousness, the concern. That first searchingly shy look. (Did I do everything right? Was I the man for her?)”

She supplemented: “(Was he disappointed in me? I wasn’t too scared, I wasn’t too dainty?)”

“I wanted you to go to the bathroom first, you wanted me to go first. In the end we compromised. Neither of us went. Neither of us spoke, because neither of us knew what way to put it in.

“I went down to a public pay-place in the lobby, when I ‘stepped out a minute to get cigarettes.’ Where you went, I don’t know—“Then the coffee came we’d asked them to

send up. Remember that first coffee together, looking at each other over the tops of our cups? Couldn't even take our eyes off long enough to swallow. Everything was so new, so first, so just-starting. Everything was ahead, nothing behind. Even the sun didn't cast us any shadows in back when we walked.

"Children, making believe they're grown-ups. Grown-ups, acting like the children they are and always will be. Children of God. Poor us."

I swung from the shoulder and flung the gun with all the force that I had in me, against the wall over to the side and back of me. It struck with such violence the impact alone should have been enough to detonate it. I don't know why it didn't. The guard must have still been on. It fell down there in the corner, black and bulky and boding ill, its ugly intention inhibited.

She walked slowly and spent toward a small table there was against the wall, and first leaned over it pressing her hands down on it as though she weighed more than she could hold up. Then sank down upon a chair beside it and let her head roll on the table and clutched her arms around it.

She didn't make much sound. Only the shaking told what it was. But how she shook. As if every hope and every happiness were coming loose.

I looked at her. What was there to say? What do you say, what can you say?

"Cry," I said with sad accord. "Cry for you, for me, for the two of us." .

"Cry," she agreed in a smothered voice, "for the whole world, and everyone that's in it."

"Cry and good-bye." I turned slowly and went to the door. There wasn't hate in my heart anymore, there wasn't wanting to get even, there wasn't will to kill.

"Good-bye," she echoed faintly after me. And she said my name, and put that with it. My private name, my given

name, my first name. Never mind what it was. It was still her right to use it, only she and no one else.

I opened the door with a strange sort of care, as when you don't want to disturb someone, and let myself out. Then I closed it and looked at it from there.

Once I'd said, this is the door that love has come away from. Once I'd said, just a little while ago, this is the door I'm bringing death into. Now death had been there and had come away again without striking. A door that doesn't hold love, and doesn't hold death either. Oh what an aching empty barren place lies behind there.

The elevator was somewhere else, so I went down the safety-stairs. It was quicker than waiting for it to come. Down and around, then down and around again, five times, from the sixth floor down, at a jogging trot that sounded a little bit like a tap-dancer's time-step, because the steps had steel rims that clicked under me. Then gave the springed end-door at the bottom a sweep aside that opened up the lobby. And as it did so, there was a sudden flare-up of excitement. It had been there all the while but the soundproof door had kept it muffled.

Outside the building-entrance were two, not one but two, police patrol-cars, sometimes called Mickey Mouses in the vernacular, their red roof-reflectors swinging away and spattering all the walls opposite with blood—or red paint or mercurochrome, as your fancy sees and calls it. A cop was posted just inside the street-door, obviously to keep anyone from leaving the building. He'd already kept two people, a man and a woman; I could tell that by the way they were standing awkwardly to one side. Whether they were together or not I couldn't make out. There was a second cop acting as a sort of liaison between the lobby and the cars outside, going back and forth all the time. In the lobby were several more nonuniformed men who were very much of the police, it stood out all over them. The doorman, on the house-phone, was saying to someone: "Keep your door

locked, please. Don’t open it.” Then he was saying it to someone else. Then to still a third.

They pounced as soon as I appeared, one of them on each side of me like magic. I never knew people could move so fast. I couldn’t use my arms anymore, before I’d even felt anything.

“Where’d you just come from? Identify yourself.”

“From 6-B. I was up there to see someone.”

“How’d you happen to use the stairs?”

“Thought I’d save time. I didn’t know there was an ordinance against it.”

I started skittishly. One of them had had his hands going up and down me without my being aware of it until it was over.

They interrupted the doorman’s relay of warning calls to ask: “He live in the house?”

“No, I never saw him before.”

He hadn’t, and I hadn’t either.

“What’s it about? I asked, not indignant—because you don’t get indignant when they mean business like they did, not if you’re sensible—as much as uncomprehending. And let’s say, resolutely clear both of eye and inner knowledge and determined to show it. “What’s up?”

They didn’t answer. The attitude: You don’t ask us questions. We do it.

When I turned to the doorman in an unvoiced repetition, he didn’t, either. Apparently unsure he had their approval and not wanting to risk disfavor.

But the man over by the door whom I have said it was my impression was being kept in on a stand-by basis, being a civilian answered as one civilian sometimes will to another, police or no police. And notably when they’re being inconvenienced.

“There’s been an armed hold-up, and the man’s still at large somewhere upstairs, he never got out. They’re combing the building for him floor by floor.”

They gave him a curt look of aside spelling: never mind talking so much) but nothing was said I noticed to contradict him. So the story stood up.

They took me back up to where I'd just come from, using the car this time.

They rang the bell, and waited, and there wasn't any answer, no one came.

"6-B'd, you say?" they asked, beetling their brows at me in menacing distrust.

"6-B's what I said," I said.

They rang again.

My God, I thought, suddenly cold and constricted at the throat, I left my gun in there. I never took it out with me again. I remember now.

One of them had his hand up pummeling now—the hand that wasn't holding my arm in a twist. And nobody answered.

"Police Department," they kept saying, taking turns at it. And still nobody answered.

Finally they sent a call down for the building-superintendent; he came up in response and he opened it up with his master pass-key.

She'd gone back again to where I'd last seen her (I say back again for she must have got up from there in the meantime, inbetween, and then gone back again; she'd have had to, there was no other way about it, no other explanation). She was lying just as before, only not shaking, not crying now. Through with crying. Her head down on the little table against the wall, one arm curved around it. The other though was hanging straight down now toward the floor, inert. Like a pendulum that has stopped.

And the gun, as if a feat of magic levitation had been performed, or as if it had been jerked by a wire suspended from a pulley, had leaped clear across the room, in a straight diagonal from the corner into which I'd thrown it

over to the side she was on, and lay under her dangling hand. Not right under, out a few inches.

All that was said was: “No wonder you took the stairs coming down.”

There might be her fingerprints on the gun now where mine had been before, but they wouldn’t matter much. (Fingerprints can be manipulated by somebody else after the fingers’ owner is already dead; they knew that, and I did, too.) Erasing them of all importance was the fact it was my gun, and I had been in there with it.

What strange turns life takes, I thought, gazing down hypnotized into the gloomy pool of my own future. I came here to kill her, I changed my mind, and now they’ve nailed me for it anyway. As though it were the intention that counted, and not the act. The thought leading up to the deed, and not the deed itself.

And maybe it does. Who can say? Maybe it does.

THE POOR GIRL

Everyone has a first-time love, and remembers it afterward, M always, forever. I had a first-time love too, and I remember mine:

There was a fellow named Frank Van Craig, a year or possibly two years older than I, who lived a few doors up the street from me. I called him Frankie, as might be expected at that time of our lives, and we were more or less inseparable, although we had only got to know each other a fairly short while before this.

His father was a retired detective of police, who lived on his pension, and the mother had died some years before, leaving this forlorn little masculine menage of three (there was a younger brother, still of school age) to get along as best they could. Frankie used to speak of his father patronizingly as “the old man.” But gruff and taciturn as the father was, embittered by his loss and withdrawn into his shell, there must have been some deep-felt if unspoken bond between the two of them, for more than once, when I’d stop by for Frankie, I used to see him kiss his father respectfully and filially on the forehead before leaving. It touched me oddly, and I used to think about it afterward each time I saw it happen, for I had no father, and even if I had had, I couldn’t visualize myself kissing him like that; it didn’t seem right between two men. But Frankie was my

friend, and I was too loyal to entertain even a secret disapproval of him.

Frankie had a job in a machine- or tool-shop, but that was merely his way of earning a living. His real avocation was amateur boxing. He spent every spare moment at it that he could: evenings after his job, Saturdays, holidays. And he was good. I used to go down with him sometimes to the gym where he trained and watch him work out: spar with partners, punch the bag, chin the parallel bars, skip rope, and all the rest. Then when we'd come away afterward, I used to walk along beside him with a feeling almost akin to adulation, proud to have him for a friend.

It was this feeling that had first brought us together, in what amounted on my part, at least in the beginning, to a mild but unmistakable case of hero-worship. He had the athletic prowess and the rough-and-readiness of disposition that I would have given anything to have had myself, and that I could tell was going to be lacking in me for the rest of my life; otherwise, it would already have appeared by this time. Then when this preliminary phase blew over as I became habituated to him, we became fast friends on a more evenly reciprocal basis, for there were things about me that I could sense he, in his turn, looked up to and wished he had.

At any rate, we were strolling along Eighth Avenue one evening side by side, under the lattice-work of the El, when a very pretty girl of about my age, who was coming from the opposite direction, gave him a smile of recognition, stopped beside us and said hello to him. She was blonde, with a fair, milk-and-roses Irish complexion and hazel eyes lively as spinning pinwheels. Her pale hair was smooth and cut evenly all around at ear-tip level, with just a clean, fresh-looking part running up one side of it to break the monotony of its evenness.

After a few words had been exchanged, he introduced us with a characteristically gruff amiability. "Con, meet Vera,"

he said. “Vera, meet Con.” But our eyes had already become very well acquainted by this time.

“Hello Con,” she said, and smiled.

“Hello Vera,” I said, and smiled back.

Now that I’d met her I remember becoming more diffident than before I’d met her, and having less to say. (I’d already been talking to her before the introduction.) But she didn’t seem to notice, and he on his part, obviously unattached, showed no constraint.

We stood and chatted for a while and then we parted and went our ways, on a note of laughter at something that he’d said at the end.

But I looked back toward her several times, and once, I saw her do it, too, and somehow I knew it was meant for me and not for him.

“You know her well?” was the first thing I asked him.

“She lives around here,” he answered indifferently, implying, I think, that she was too familiar a part of his surroundings to be of any great interest to him.

Then he turned around and pointed out the house. “Right over there. That one on the corner. See it?”

It was a six-story, old-law, tenement building, one of an almost unbroken line that stretched along both sides of Eighth, from the top of the park well up into the Hundred-and-forties. Its top-floor windows were flush with the quadruple trackbeds of the Elevated, two for locals, two for expresses—two for downtown, two for up.

“She lives on the top floor,” he went on. “I been up there. I went up and met her family once, when I first started to know her. Her family are nice ’nd friendly.”

“Didn’t you ever go back again?”

“Na,” he said, blase. “What for?”

I wondered about this. There just wasn’t any amatory attraction there, that was obvious. I couldn’t understand it, with a girl as appealing and magnetic as she’d seemed to

me. But each one to his own inclinations I suppose, even at that age.

“What’s her last name?” I asked. “You didn’t give it.”

“Her old man’s name is Gaffney,” he said. “I know, because I’ve met him.” I didn’t know what he meant by that at first. Then he went on to explain: “She likes to call herself Hamilton, though; she says it was her grandmother’s name and she’s entitled to use it if she wants.”

“Why?” I wondered.

“I dunno; maybe she thinks it’s classier.”

I could understand that discontent with a name. I’d experienced it a little myself. I’d been fiercely proud of my surname always. Only, all through my boyhood I’d kept wishing they’d given me a curt and sturdier first name, something like the other boys had, “Jim” or “Tom” or “Jack,” not “Cornell,” a family name, originally). But it was too late to do anything about it now. The only improvement possible was by abbreviation. And even there I was handicapped. “Corny” was unappealing, even though the slang descriptive for “stale” hadn’t yet come into use. “Connie” was unthinkable. All that was left was “Con,” which always sounded flat to me for some reason.

“Hey.” he jeered explosively, belatedly becoming aware, I suppose, of the number of questions I’d been asking. “What happened? Did you get stuck on her already?”

“How could I have got stuck on her?” I protested uncomfortably. “I only just now met her.”

But I knew I was lying; I knew I had.

The next evening, for the first time in a long time, I didn’t stop by Frankie’s place to have him come out with me. His company had suddenly become unwanted. Instead, I went around to Eighth Avenue by myself As if to get my courage up sufficiently, I passed and repassed the doorway I had seen her go into, and finally took up my post in a closed-up store inset, across the way, and hopefully and watchfully began my first love-wait.

The love-wait—that sweet, and sometimes bittersweet, preliminary to each new meeting, which can be sanguine, sad, jealous, impatient, hurtful, angry, or even end in a heated quarrel; and which I have sometimes thought has more in it of the true essence of the love affair—is the better part by far of the two, than the actual meeting itself that follows and ends it. For the latter is often humdrum, a let-down by comparison. Its opening remarks are certainly never brilliant, or even worth the making, most of the time. And the little things they say, and the little things they do, are quite commonplace after all, after the anticipatory reveries of the love-wait.

This love-wait can be carried out only by the boy or the man, for if the girl or the woman carries it out, she somehow detracts by just so much from it and from herself: from the desirability of meeting her, from the uncertainty as to whether she will appear or not, turning a mystic wistful expectancy, the borderline between absence and presence, into a flat, casual, commonplace meeting. Like the difference between a kiss and a handshake.

El trains would trundle by at intervals with a noise like low-volume thunder and cast strange parallelograms and Grecian-key friezes of light along the upper faces of the shrouded buildings, like the burning tatters of a kite’s tail, streaming evenly along in the breezeless night. A little more often, one of the squared-off high-topped autos of the early twenties would skirt over the gutters and through the enfilading iron girders that supported the structure above, with only an imminent collision to stop for, since there were no traffic lights yet this far uptown.

And on the sidewalks, more numerous still than either of the others, people on foot passed back and forth, as they’d always done on sidewalks, I suppose, since cities were first built, and as they’d continue to do long after the elevated trains and the high-topped cars were gone.

Once another girl showed up unexpectedly, and scurried up the few entrance-steps that led into the doorway, and I thought it was she, and almost started forward from where I was standing to sprint across the street and catch her before she went in. But then she stopped and turned for a moment, to say something to someone on the sidewalk behind her, and I saw her face and saw it wasn't, and sank back again upon my heels.

As the evening grew later, a sharp-edged wind sprang up, with the feel of cold rain in it. One of these supple, sinuous winds, able to round corners and make circles and eddies along the ground. It made me miserable, made me stamp my feet continuously and duck my chin down into the upturned collar of my coat, but I still wouldn't give up and go away. Until at last it was so late that I knew she wouldn't appear, or be able to linger with me if she did. Finally I turned and trudged off disconsolately, hands in pockets and downcast eyes on the sidewalk before me.

The following night the rain-threat of the night before had become an actuality, but that didn't keep me from my vigil. When you're eighteen and newly in love, what's rain? It didn't bother me as much as the wind had the night before, since it couldn't get into the niche of the store-entrance I had made my own, and the protective shed of the elevated-structure even kept the roadway of the street comparatively dry, though not the sidewalks, for there was an open canal above each one. The rain made the street seem gayer, not more dismal than it was at other times, for all these wet surfaces caught the lights more vividly and held them longer, as they went by. The rain was like an artist's palette, and these blobs of color, these smears of red and green and white and yellow and orange, hid the sooty grayness the street had in the light of day.

But at last I could see that, whatever the reason the night before, the weather would keep her in tonight. I had to turn and go away again, after standing a good deal less time.

The night after that, I reverted to my old habit and sought out Frankie. I wanted his advice. Or at least his reassurance that she actually did live there.

“Remember that girl you introduced me to couple days ago?” I blurted out almost as soon as we’d come out of his place.

“Vera? Sure,” he said. “What about her?”

“Does she really live there, where you showed me?”

“Of course she does,” he assured me. “Why would I lie about it?”

“Well, I hung around there all last night, and she never showed up, and I hung around all the night before—” I started to say it before I’d thought twice. I hadn’t intended to tell him that part of it, but simply to find out if he’d seen her himself or knew her whereabouts. But once it was out, it was out, and too late to do anything about it. You’re not anxious to tell even your closest friends about frustrations like that.

“In all that rain?” he chuckled, a wide grin overspreading his face.

“What’s rain?” I said negligently.

This comment struck him as very funny, for some reason that I failed to see. He began to laugh uproariously, even bending over to slap himself on the kneecap, and he kept repeating incessantly: “Holy mackerel! Are *you* stuck on her! Waiting in the rain. No, you’re not stuck on her, not much! Waiting in the rain.”

“I wasn’t *in* the rain,” I corrected with cold dignity. “Maybe it was raining, but I wasn’t *in* it.”

I waited sullenly until his fit of (what I considered) tactless amusement had passed, then I suggested: “Let’s go around there now, and see if we can see her. Maybe she’s around there now.” Why I would have been more likely to encounter her with him than alone, I wouldn’t have been able to say. I think it was a case of misery wanting company.

When we'd reached the stepped-up entrance to her flatbuilding, we slung ourselves down onto the green-painted iron railing that bordered it, and perched there. We waited there like that for a while, I uneasily, he stolidly. Finally, craning his neck and looking up the face of the building toward its topmost windows, which were impossible to make out at such a perspective, he stirred restlessly and complained: "This ain't going t' get us nowhere. She may not come down all night. Go up and knock right on the door. That's the only way you'll get her to come down." He repeated the story of having once been up there himself, and what kindly disposed people he'd found her family to be.

But this did nothing to overcome my timidity. "Not me," I kept repeating. "Nothing doing."

"Want me to come with you?" he finally offered, tired, I suppose, of being unable to get me to budge.

In one way I did, and in one way I didn't. I wanted his moral support, his backing, desperately, but I didn't want him hanging around us afterward, turning it into a walking-party of three.

"Come part of the way," I finally compromised. "But stay back; if she comes to the door, don't let her see you."

So we walked inside the ground-floor hallway and started to trudge up the stairs, I in the lead, but of necessity rather than choice. We got to the fifth floor, and started up the last flight. He stopped eight or nine steps from the top. I had to go on up the short remaining distance alone, quailingly and queasily.

When I made the turn of the landing and reached the door, I stopped, and just stood there looking at it.

"Go on, knock," he urged me in a hoarse whisper. "Don't just stand there."

I raised my hand as if measuring the distance it had to go, and then let it fall again.

“Go ahead. What’s the matter with y’?” he hissed, hoarser and fiercer than before. He flung his arm up and then down again at me in utmost deprecation.

Again I raised my hand, touched the woodwork with it, let it fall back without striking. My knuckles had stage-fright; I couldn’t get them to move.

Suddenly, before I knew what had happened, he bounded swiftly up the few remaining steps, whisked around the turn, and gave the door two heavy, massive thumps that (to my petrified ears, at least) sounded like cannon shots, the very opposite of what any signal of mine would be upon that particular door. Then he bounded back onto the stairs again, jolting down each flight with a sprightly but concussion-like jump that shook the whole stairwell. Before I had time to trace his defection (and perhaps turn around and go after him, as I was longing to do), the door had already opened and it was too late.

Vera’s father stood there. Or at least, a middle-aged man did, and I assumed he was her father. He had on a gray woolen undershirt and a pair of trousers secured over it by suspenders. He must have been relaxing in a chair *en deshabille* when the knock disturbed him, for he was reslinging one of them over his shoulder as he stood there. He had a ruddy-complexioned face, and although he was by no means a good-looking man, he was a good-natured-looking one.

If he protruded somewhat in the middle, it was not excessively so, not more than to be expected in a man of his (to my young mind) multiplicity of years. He certainly was not corpulent. I would have stood there indefinitely, without being able to open my mouth, if he hadn’t spoken first.

Frankie’s bombastic retreat was still in progress, and the sound of it reached his ears.

“What’s that going on down there?” he wanted to know. Stepping to the railing, he bent over and tried to peer down the well.

“It must be somebody on one of the lower floors in a hurry to go out,” I said meekly. It was technically the truth anyway, even if a subterfuge of it.

Then Frankie gained the street, and silence descended once more.

Coming back to the door and turning to me, the man asked, with a sort of jovial severity, “Well, young fellow, and what can I do for you?”

After a swallow to wet my throat first, I managed to get out: “Excuse me, is Vera in?” And then added, somewhat redundantly: “I’m a friend of hers.”

“Oh, are you now?” he said with a chuckle. “Well, come on in, then. Glad to see you.”

And before I realized it, I was on the inside, guided by his hand. The door had closed, and hundreds of her family seemed to be staring at me from all directions. Then the motes of momentary panic subsided in front of my eyes, and they condensed into no more than three or four people.

She wasn’t there; I found that out almost at once. For the first moment or two I kept hoping she was merely out of sight in one of the other rooms, and would come in when she heard the increased tempo of their voices, but since she didn’t, and they didn’t call in to her, I finally had to resign myself to the fact that she wasn’t in the flat at all. I’d have to face the music by myself as best I could.

In addition to her father, there were two other members of the family present; one was her mother, and the other presumably an aunt, but it took me some little time to differentiate between them. There was also a little girl in the room, of about nine or ten, whom they neglected to identify. I couldn’t make out whether she was a smaller sister of Vera’s, or the aunt’s child, or just some neighbor’s youngster given the freedom of the flat. In any case, at my advanced age I considered her beneath notice.

My impressions of her mother are not nearly as clear as they are of her father, possibly because he was the one who

came to the door and who I saw first, and without anyone else to distract my attention. I have a vague recollection of a tall but spare woman, with dark hair quite unlike Vera's, with an overtone of gray already about it at the outside, where it had a tendency to fuzz and fly up in gauzy little swatches that you could see the light through (the grayness therefore might have been only an illusion), and she would frequently put her hand to it and try to bring it back down to order, but it would never obey for long. Of the aunt, I have no surviving impressions whatever.

I sat down in the middle of all of them. They were probably actually spread about at random the way people usually are in a room, but it felt as if they were sitting around me in a complete circle, eyeing me critically and weighing me in the balance. I felt very constrained and ill at ease, and kept wishing I could sink through the floor, chair and all. It had been the worst possible timing on my part, too, I kept telling myself. If I'd just waited a few minutes longer and not listened to Frankie, I could have met Vera by herself, intercepted her when she came back and kept out of all this.

I'd already been smoking, sparingly but steadily, for some months past, and I'd already found it to be good as a bracer in moments of difficulty or stress. There was a package in my pocket right as I sat there, but I was afraid to take it out in front of them. I wanted to make a good impression, and I cannily told myself that if they thought me too knowing or advanced for my years they might discourage my trying to see any more of her.

As soon as I'd given my name, her father said: "Oh, sure. Con, is that you? We've heard about you from Veronica."

(He called her Veronica, I noticed, never Vera. I couldn't, if I'd wanted to; there was something too stiff and distant about the name.)

And her mother, nodding approvingly, added: "Yes, she told us about meeting you."

Hearing this made me feel quite good, though it did nothing to alleviate my present misery. It showed she was interested, if nothing else, and it augured well for the future.

The next and natural question from her father was, what did I do, what sort of work?

I told him, with a slight touch of contrition, that I was going to college. This seemed to impress him, to my surprise. I had thought they might turn up their noses at me for not being an honest working-man. “Are you, now?” he said. “A college sthudent.”

“I’m just a first-year man,” I explained, again a little penitently. I had had impressed on my mind only too well the low opinion held about us by upperclassmen. “Freshman class, Frosh they call us. Then after that come sophomores. Then juniors. Then you’re a senior.”

Vera’s mother clucked her tongue at this, and I wasn’t quite sure how to translate the little sound accurately. I think it was intended as sympathy for all that hard work ahead.

“And what are you taking up?” her father asked. “What are you going to be after you get out?”

“Journalism,” I said. “I want to be a writer.”

“That’s a hard job,” he said forebodingly.

I tried to explain that I meant free-lance writing and not newspaper writing, that I was just majoring in journalism because that was the closest thing to it. But he didn’t seem to follow that too well; he seemed content to remain with his original conception. And turning to Vera’s mother, he said, “I think that’s the first college sthudent Veronica’s ever known, isn’t it?”

She tactfully interposed: “Well, she’s very young yet.”

In the meantime, in spite of the conversation having been an easy one to carry on, since it had dealt exclusively with me, I kept wondering what there would be to talk about next, once this topic was over, and hoping that another

elevated train would go clattering by momentarily and bring me a brief respite. It would be impossible to continue a conversation until after the front windows had stopped rattling. But none did. It seemed as though, just when you wanted them, they became few and far between.

At this point there was a twitching-about of the doorknob from the outside, the door was pushed open, and Vera came in. She'd evidently been to the store for groceries. She hugged two very large brown paper bags in one arm, and since these came up past one side of her face and hid it, she did not see me at first.

She rounded her cheeks, blew out her breath, and said something about the stairs. That they were enough to kill you, I think it was. But in a good-natured, not ill-humored way. She closed the door by pushing a heel back against it, without turning.

I remember thinking how graceful and debonair was the little flirt and swirl this movement created in the loose-hanging checked coat she had on, as I watched her do it. Then she turned her head suddenly, so that the obscuring bags were swept to one side, and saw me.

"Coni" she said, in a high-pitched voice that was almost a little scream. She nearly dropped the columnar bags, but reclasped them just in time. "How did you get up here?"

"I walked up," I answered in perfect seriousness, without stopping to think, and they all laughed at that, herself included, as though I'd intended it to be very funny.

"I never thought I'd find *you* up here," she said next. "You're the last one!"

l wasn't sure what she meant by that; and afraid that, if I asked her, the answer might turn out to be unwelcome, I didn't ask.

"How did you know where it was?" she went on. "How did you know this was the right place?"

My instinct told me it might not be in my own best interest to bring Frankie's name into this, or recall him to

her mind any more than was strictly necessary. She'd known him before she had me, after all. So I simply and untruthfully said: "I asked somebody in the house," and that seemed to content her.

I had a fleeting impression, as I watched her expression and listened to the intonation of what she was saying to me, that she was enjoying, rather than otherwise, having her entire family as spectators to this little meeting of ours, and auditors to its accompanying dialogue, liked having their attention fixed on her the way it was. But if *she* enjoyed it, I didn't, quite the opposite, and this nerved me to summon up courage to come out with what had brought me up there in the first place.

"Vera," I said nervously, "would you like to come for a walk with me?"

She didn't answer directly, but said "Wait'll I take these back where they belong first," and picking up the two cumbersome bags, which she had set down upon a table, she left the room with them. She was gone for some time, longer than would have been necessary simply to carry them back to the kitchen and set them down there, so I began to imagine she had stopped off in her own room on the way, to tidy her hair or something of the sort. Then when she came back, I saw that she had removed both the checked coat and the tamoshanter she had been wearing, and my hopes were dashed.

After a lame pause, I finally asked her a second time: "Vera, wouldn't you like to come for a walk?"

"I don't know if I can," she said, and I saw her exchange a look with her mother.

The latter remarked cryptically, "You run along. I'll do them for you tonight, and you can do them tomorrow night instead."

Whereupon Vera hurried back inside again, throwing me an auspicious "I'll be ready in a minute, Con," over her

shoulder, and this time, when she returned, was once more in coat and tamoshanter, and ready to leave.

I said the required polite and stilted good-byes, she opened the door, and a minute later we were free and by ourselves on the other side of it.

“It was my turn to do the dishes tonight,” she told me as we went scrabbling down the stairs, she running her hand along the banister railing, I on the outside with her other hand in mine.

The moment we were by ourselves, the moment the door had closed behind us, perfect ease and naturalness came back to me again, and to Vera too, though she hadn’t felt herself to be on exhibition as I had: One didn’t have to weigh one’s words, they just came flowing out in any kind of order, and yet inevitably they were the right words, without the trouble of trying to make them so beforehand. One didn’t have to execute each smallest move or gesture twice, once in the mind and once in the actuality, they too flowed unchecked in perfect unstudiedness. There were no questions that required answers, none were put and none were given, there were just confidences streaming out and blending.

And I remember wondering at the time why this should be, for they had been amiable enough, her people, hadn’t been unfriendly, had tried to make me feel at ease, and yet they hadn’t been able to. I think I know now: It wasn’t because we were a boy and girl who were interested in each other that we felt this lack of constraint the moment we were away from them, it was because we were both of the same generation, and they were not.

There is an insurmountable wall, a barrier, between each generation, especially in the earlier stages of life. Children are so cut off from the grown-up world they are almost a species apart, a different breed of creature than the rest of the race. Very young people of our age, hers and mine, have no interests whatever in common with those who are in the

next age group. Then as we progress up through the thirties, the barrier becomes less and less, until finally it has melted away altogether, and everyone is middle-aged alike. Twenty-five and forty-five seem alike to us now. But by that time a new barrier has formed, at the back instead of the front, and new very young are once more walled off from those who, only yesterday, were the very young themselves.

I asked her if she wanted to see a movie.

“No,” she said. “Let’s just walk instead. I saw the one at the Morningside a couple of days ago, and they haven’t changed it yet.”

We stopped in first at an ice-cream parlor on the corner of 116th Street. This had little tables separated from each other by lattices, up which clambered waxed-linen leaves and cretonne flowers. It also had an electric player piano at the back, forerunner of the later jukeboxes, and arched festoons of small, gaily colored light bulbs, curved like arabesques across the ceiling. There was a marble-topped soda fountain running the length of it at one side, but we sat down opposite one another at one of the little tables.

She made a selection, and I followed suit and ordered what she had.

These were called banana splits, as far as I can recall. They were served in oblong glass receptacles with stems on them, for no ordinary-size dish could have held everything that went into them. The holder was lined first with two half bananas, sliced lengthwise. On top of these were placed three mounds of ice cream in a row, green, white, and pink. Over these in turn was poured a chocolate syrup. Next were added chunks of pineapple and a sprinkling of chopped or grated nuts. The whole thing was surmounted by a feathery puff of whipped cream, and into this was stuck a maraschino cherry, dyeing the whipped cream red around it.

Beside each of these, for obvious reasons, was placed a glass of plain water.

That we found this concoction not only edible but even immensely enjoyable is only another illustration of the differences there are between the generations.

When we got up I left a tip on the table, more to impress her than for the sake of the waiter. I saw her eyes rest on it for a moment, as I had hoped they would.

After we left there, we walked over to Morningside Park, and through it along a softly lamplit pathway. It is a long but narrow park, no more than a block in depth at any point. That part of New York is built on two levels, and Morningside Heights, which runs along the western edge of the park, is perched high above Morningside Drive, which runs along the eastern edge. From it you can overlook all that part of the city which lies to the eastward, its rooftops and its lights.

We walked along slowly, our hands lightly linked and swinging low between us. I began to whistle “Kalua,” which had just come out a little while before, and after a while she accompanied me by humming it along with me. For years, whenever I heard “Kalua,” it brought back that first walk I took with her, and I could feel her fingers lightly twined in mine again, and see the lamplight falling over us again in blurry patches like slowly sifted, softly falling cornmeal.

She asked me where I lived, myself. I told her One-hundred-thirteenth Street.

“We’re just a block apart,” she noted. “Only, on different sides of the park.”

But New York then, in its residential zoning, was a snobbish, stratified sort of town, and the park did more than divide it physically, it divided it economically as well. That, however, was of no concern to us. That applied only to our elders.

We climbed the wide, easily sloping stairs that led to the upper level and came out at 116th Street, at that little rotunda with its bas-reliefs and circular stone seat-rest, and stood there a while, taking in the spread of the city’s lights

below and outward from us, until the eye couldn't follow them anymore, and lost them in the reaches of the night. But the young haven't too much time to spend on mere inanimate beauty, they're too immediately interested in each other.

We turned away and walked down Morningside Heights a block or two, and opposite, where there was a little French church standing, called Notre Dame de Lourdes, I think. We sat down together on a bench without saying a word, and moved close.

And from that night on, whenever we met, we always met at that one particular bench and never any other. I used to wonder at times, later, who had been sitting there after we did, who had met there once we stopped going to it, and if they were young like we were, and if they were happy: what *their* stories were, and how they turned out in the end. They never knew about us, we never knew about them. For park benches can't talk.

We kissed, and nestled close, and (I suppose) laughed together about something now and then. The pattern never changes throughout time. Then presently and very tentatively I crossed the line from the innocuous to the more innate.

The first time she let it pass unnoticed, either not wanting to seem too edgy and ready to take offense, or else mistakenly thinking it had been unintentional and the wiser thing to do was not to call attention to it, and I, misconstruing, repeated it. This time she caught my hand and held it fast, but in such a minor-keyed way that it is difficult to put it into exact words. For she didn't brush it off or fling it aside peremptorily, but held it still with hers, almost where it had been but not quite, so that her gesture couldn't be mistaken for collaboration, only for the deterrent it was.

"Don't do that," she said in a low-spoken voice that was all the more inflexible for that reason. "I'll get up from here

if you do.

'And I don't want to," she went on after a moment. "I like you, and I like being here with you."

I kept quiet, feeling that it was not up to me to do the talking. And even if it had been, not knowing what there would have been to say, the thing was so self-explanatory. In my own mind I unjustly put her into the position of having to excuse or at least explain herself, when it should have been the other way around. But she seemed to accept the role without questioning its fairness.

"I know how some girls feel about it," she said thoughtfully. " 'Oh, it's just this once, with this one boy. Then it'll never happen again.' But it does happen again. If you didn't stop the first time, then you never will the second. And before you know, it's with another boy. And then another boy. And pretty soon, with *any* boy at all."

Made uncomfortable, I gave a slight pull to my hand, and she released it, and I drew it away.

"I want to get married someday," she explained. "And when I do, I don't want to have anything to hide." And tracing the point of her shoe thoughtfully along the ground in little patterns and watching it as she did so, she went on: "I wouldn't want to stand up in a church, and know that somewhere some other man was laughing at my husband behind his back. I wouldn't be entitled to wear a bridal veil, it would be a lie before God." Then she asked me point blank: "Would you want to marry somebody that had been with everybody else before that?"

She stopped and waited for my answer.

I hated to have to give her the answer, because it vindicated her own argument so.

"No," I said grudgingly, at last.

I wondered if her mother had instilled this into her, if they had had a talk about it, for it must have come from somewhere to be so strong and clear-sighted in her, but I didn't think it was right to openly ask her.

But almost as if she had read my mind, she added: “I don’t need anybody else to tell me. I’ve had it all thought out from the time I was fourteen, already. From the time I first knew about things like that. Or knew a little about them, anyway. I made up my mind that when I got older, no matter how much I cared for a fellow, it wasn’t going to be that way.

“It don’t have to be that way,” she reiterated, unshakably. “No matter how much in love a girl and a fellow are, it still don’t have to be that way.”

I remember thinking that, as she spoke, the slight dent in the grammar only added to, didn’t detract from, the beautiful sincerity of her conviction.

I looked at her in a new way now, commending her, esteeming her, for the values she adhered to. Nineteen is basically idealistic, far more than the after-years are, and in spite of its young blood would rather have an ideal it can look up to, that keeps itself just beyond reach of the everyday grubbing fingers.

She probably translated the look. I saw her smile with quiet contentment, as if that were the way she had hoped to be looked at. Then, as if to make up for any crestfallenness I might have felt, she stroked me lightly but affectionately along the side of the face with the tips of her fingers. And bunching her lips and poising them, commanded me winningly, “Now let me have a kiss.”

After I’d taken her back to her own door and then gone home myself, I thought about it. I’d been very intent in the first place: I could tell that easily enough, as I took off my clothing piece by piece to get ready for bed. But that wasn’t the important thing, that was just a reflex, little better than a muscle-spasm. I sat down in a chair first, to quiet down before I tried to sleep, and I turned the whole thing over in my mind.

The important thing about her refusal was the vastly longer term of life and the far more indelible imprint it gave

to our relationship. It changed what would have been an overnight thing into a more or less permanent affinity, at least as far as the foreseeable future was concerned. On the one hand there would have been a few short weeks of furtive, overheated meetings, and then oblivion. No name to remember, no face to recall. On the other hand, there was an uncurtailed succession of joyous, daily encounters, sprightly, open and unashamed, and though immature perhaps, in every sense a budding love affair. And an imperishable print on the memory. She stayed with me ever since. I still remember her name, and some of the things she said, and some of the clothes she wore, and some of the ways she looked. There's a sort of inverse ratio at work there.

Women, even very young girl-women (which amounts to the same thing), must walk a precarious tightrope. If they fall off, into somebody's waiting arms, they almost always lose him in the end. If they stay on, even though he's been kept at a distance, they capture some part of him.

I think I dimly sensed this to some extent, even that very first night as I sat there and thought it over. But if I didn't then, I certainly realize it now, as I look back from forty years away. For I must have had some girl fully, must have had my first girl fully, then or not long after. But not a trace of recollection remains. Yet Vera still stays in my mind. The very fact that I'm writing this is proof enough of that.

That first-night incident on the bench set the whole pattern from then on for our little sentimental interlude. (And I suppose it was little, but it was a valid one nevertheless; seventeen and nineteen can't have a bravura romance.) It was understood between us without speaking about it any further, it was crystallized, that that was the way it was going to be. And that was the way it was. And I myself wanted it that way now just as much as she did. She personified that to me now, she was its identification. She

wore a halo, as far as I was concerned. Youthful and jaunty and informal, but a halo just the same.

We met every day from then on, without missing one. But not always at the same time. For my schedule of classes was zigzag, no two days alike, and since it was all Greek to her anyway, no matter how often I tried to have her memorize it, she always got to the bench before I did in order to be sure to be on time.

I'd see her doll-sized figure from a distance. As I came closer she'd jump to her feet and fling her arms wide in pantomimic welcome, while I'd break into a headlong run, and as I reached her, I tossed my books carelessly over to the side in order to have both arms free for the hug that would follow.

There was something of the antic in this. We both recognized it and we both would have been willing to admit it. But the underlying emotion was bona fide enough; it was just that we didn't know how to handle it, so we parodied it. If we were too young to actually be in love, to know how to be in love, then we were certainly smitten with one another, infatuated with one another, that much was sure.

We'd sit there for hours sometimes, oblivious of the needling cold, huddled closely together, sometimes my coat around the two of us, our breaths forming bladder-shapes of vapor like the dialogue-balloons cartoonists draw coming out of their characters' mouths.

We talked a lot. I don't remember about what; the language of the young. You forget that language very quickly; within a few short years it's a foreign tongue, the knack for it is completely gone. Sometimes, though, we were quiet and tenderly pensive.

I used to get home at all hours. I ate alone almost every night now; everyone else had usually finished by the time I showed up. But I'd find something put aside and kept warm for me. What it was I never knew half the time, I was so wrapped up in retrospect repetitions of what had just taken

place. I don’t recall that my family ever voiced any remonstrances about it. They seem to have been very lenient in this respect. Maybe being the only male, even though a very unseasoned one, in a household of two doting women had something to do with it.

This routine went on daily for about two or three months, as the season began its final climb to the holidays at the top of the year and 1922 slowly blended into 1923. Then a fly landed in the honey, from a totally unexpected quarter. I came home one evening and my mother remarked: “Hetty Lambert called up today while you were out.”

This was a life-long friend of my mother’s. They had been schoolgirl chums, and the intimacy had continued uninterrupted into the married lives of both. Hetty had been well-to-do in her own right even as a youngster (my mother had told me), and she had married a man in the silk-import business who was in turn exceedingly well off, so she must have been a very wealthy woman.

For my part, from my pre-twenty point of view, I found her musty and dowdy. When she wasn’t spending whole mornings clipping coupons in a bank vault, she was spending afternoons visiting with her dead in the family mausoleum. Their one recreation, she and her husband, was a lifetime box at the Metropolitan Opera, but since he invariably fell asleep in it, even that was wasted. She used to do her own marketing for the table personally, squeezing produce, with an elderly chauffeur following her around with a basket to put them in, and if she thought the weight was a bit short or the price a few cents too high she would fume to the high heavens, until they let her have it her way for the sake of peace and quiet.

“What’d she have to say?” I said, totally uninterested but dutifully willing to appear to listen for the sake of the high regard my mother seemed to hold her in.

“Thursday of next week is her daughter’s birthday. Janet’s giving a little party for her friends, and she wants

you to come."

"Oh, no I'm not." I promptly burst out. "That's the last place I'm going. You don't get me there, not on your life." And so on, at great length.

"I don't see why you feel that way," my mother remonstrated mildly, when I had finally come to a stop. "You've gone every year, since you were both children. You went last year."

"Last year was different." Meaning I'd been a year younger then. And mainly, I hadn't known Vera then.

Then, perhaps thinking this might be an added inducement, she went on reassuringly: "Hetty and her husband aren't going to be there. They're going out for the evening, and turning over the whole apartment to Janet and her friends."

But this was no inducement whatever as far as I was concerned. I found Janet about as appealing—romantically speaking—as an overstuffed chair with broken-down springs, whether her mother was present or not. No mutual dislike felt by two boys toward one another (or by two girls toward one another, for that matter) can ever quite equal in wholehearted intensity the very occasional and very rare dislike felt toward one another by a boy *and* girl, when it does happen to come along. And that was the case with us. We had a beautiful, inbred ill will toward one another, due most likely to having been thrown so constantly at each other's heads when we were both small children.

There wasn't a thing about her that suited me. Her laugh resembled a sneer. Her most inconsequential remark had a cutting edge, but you only realized it sometime after the cuticle had slowly started peeling back. Her clothes were probably costly, but she always managed to do something to them that spoiled the looks of them. Just by being in them, I guess. Her manners weren't bad, for only one reason. She didn't have any at all. She was the only young girl I had ever seen who crumbled her rolls up into pieces at a

dinner-party table and then threw them at every boy around her. Not just momentarily, but throughout each and every course, until they became miserable trying to eat without getting hit.

Even the way she kissed was a form of snobbish superiority. She didn't kiss with her mouth at all. She tilted her nose in the air and pushed her cheek up against the recipient somewhere just below the eardrum. I hadn't kissed her since we were twelve, but I had watched her kiss her mother and her older married sister, and she did it that way even with them.

All in all, though it was difficult for me then (and now) to find an exact verbal synonym for the word "brat," a pictorial one was easy to come by. It was simply Janet. She was the perfect spoiled rich brat.

"You'll have to call her up, one way or the other," my mother said, still trying to persuade me. "You can't just ignore it. Even if you're not fond of Janet," she pointed out, "you may have a good time. There may be somebody there you'll like."

A sudden inspiration hit me. You bet there will be somebody there I like, I promised myself. I'll see to it that there is!

I made the courtesy call back, as required. The maid answered first, and then called Janet to the phone.

" 'lo," Janet said, in that sulky voice that was a characteristic of hers.

" 'lo," I answered, equally uncordial.

Neither of us ever used our given names to one another any more than was strictly necessary: another sign of fondness.

"Are you coming?" she asked briefly.

"Yeah," I answered. Then my voice took on an added degree of animation. "Listen," I said.

"What?" she asked, as lifeless as ever.

"Can I bring somebody with me?"

“A boy?” she asked, and her voice perked up a little.

“Nah, not a boy,” I said disgustedly. Who’d ever heard of taking another fellow along with you to a party? “A girl.”

“Oh,” she said, and her voice deflated again. Then after a moment’s reflection she agreed, without any great show of enthusiasm. “I s’pose so. There was one girl short at the table, anyhow.”

I couldn’t wait to tell Vera about it. I came rushing up to the bench the following day, kissed her breathlessly and for once almost perfunctorily, and pulling her down onto the bench along with me, blurted out: “Know what? We’ve been invited to a party.” But to my surprise, instead of being pleased, she acted appalled about it at first. “Where is it?” she asked, and when I’d told her, she kept repeating almost hypnotically, “But *Riverside Drivel* I can’t go *there*.”

“What’s so wonderful about Riverside Drive?” I said, shrugging uncomprehendingly. “I’ve been to their place lots of times. In the wintertime they get all the ice-cold wind blowing in from the river. And in the summer, when it *would* be cooler than other parts of town, they’re not there to enjoy it anyway.”

But temperature wasn’t the deterrent, some kind of monetary denominator—or differential—was. Her mind evidently magnified it and couldn’t rid itself of the fixed idea. I had never taken this into account myself, so I wasn’t in a position to see her point of view.

“That isn’t what I mean!” she said impatiently. “Only rich people live there.”

“What difference does it make?” I said. “You’re going with *me*. You’re not worried about *me,* are you? Then why worry about them?”

“But you’re different,” she said, groping to find the right words. “I never think about you in that way, maybe because I’m used to you. You’re *friendly,* and you never seem to dress up much. And besides, you’re a fellow, and it’s not the fellows that worry me as much as it is the girls.”

“What about them? They’re a bunch of drips. You’ve got more real personality than all of them put together,” I said loyally.

But I couldn’t seem to overcome her misgivings.

“And what about a dress? What kind are they going to wear?”

“I d’no,” I said vaguely. “Dresses for dancing in, I guess. Haven’t you got one of those?”

“When do I go dancing?” she said, almost resentfully.

When we separated that evening, I still hadn’t been able to bring her to the point of agreeing to come. The most I could get her to say was “I’ll think it over, and I’ll let you know.”

The next time we met it was the same thing, and the time after. As far as I could judge her attitude, it wasn’t coyness or wanting to be coaxed. She seemed attracted to the idea of going, and yet at the same time something seemed to keep holding her back. One time she even made the outrageous suggestion: “I’ll walk down there with you as far as the door, and then you go in by yourself I could even meet you later, after you leave.” Then before I had time for the heated protest that I felt this deserved, she quickly recanted it, saying, “No, that would be foolish, wouldn’t it?”

I finally told her, another time, “Let’s forget about it. If you’re not going, then I’m not either. Who needs the party?”

But she wouldn’t hear of this either. “No, I’m not going to dish you out of the party. You’re expected there, and if you don’t show up, I’ll get the blame. You’ll have to go. I won’t meet you that night, I won’t come out at all, so if you don’t go, you’ll be all by yourself.”

“We go together, or we stay away together,” I insisted stubbornly, as I had right along.

This went on for nearly the whole week or eight days preceding the controversial little event. Then on the very night before, after I’d already just about given up all further

hope of persuading her and was ready to quit trying once and for all, she suddenly said—not at the very first, but after we'd been sitting there together for quite some time—"I'm going to tell you something that'll please you. Want to hear it?"

I told her sure, sure I did.

"I'm going with you tomorrow night."

I bounced to my feet, took hold of her two hands in my two, and swung them vigorously in and out, to give vent to my elation.

"I made up my mind several days ago," she admitted, smiling at my enthusiasm, "but I didn't tell you until now because I wanted to keep it as a surprise."

The dinner had been set for "somewhere between seven-thirty and eight" (Janet's words), so we arranged to meet three-quarters of an hour earlier, in order to give ourselves time enough to get there without hurrying. She told me to wait for her at the bench, she'd come there, and I gave in to that readily enough. I didn't like the idea of having to pass in review before her whole family, anyway.

By six-fifteen the following evening, all aglow, I'd completed my rather uncomplicated toilette, which included the by-now semiweekly rite of a light overall shave, more in tribute to the future than a present necessity, and put on my one dark blue suit. I stopped in to see my mother for a minute, before leaving.

"Are you taking her anything?" she asked me. "Because I have a little unopened bottle of cologne you could have. It would save you the expense of buying something."

"I'll pick her up a box of candy on the way," I said evasively. I knew I wouldn't; I didn't think that much of Janet.

“I’d like to take her a baseball bat, and give it to her over the head!” I added darkly.

She was laughing, accommodatingly but a little unsurely, as I left her.

I was ahead of time, Vera wasn’t there yet, when I got to the bench.

I sat down to wait for her, and at first I whistled and was relaxed, one knee cocked up high in front of me and my hands locked around it. But the minutes came, the minutes went, more minutes came, more went, and still she didn’t arrive. Pretty soon I wasn’t carefree anymore, I was on needles and pins. I turned and I twisted and I shifted; I constantly changed position, as though by doing that I would bring her there faster. I crossed my legs over one way, then over the other. I swung my hoisted foot like a pendulum. I drummed the bench-seat with my fingers like the ticking away of a fast-moving taxi meter. I raked my nails through my hair, wrecking its laboriously achieved sleekness. I clasped my hands at the back of my neck and let my elbows hang from there. I probably smoked more than in any comparable length of time up to that point in my short young life.

I even combined two positions into one, so to speak—the sitting and the standing—using the top of the bench-back for a seat and planting my feet on the seat itself.

It was while I was in this last hybrid position that I heard a skittering sound, like raindrops spattering leaves, and a small figure came rushing out of the lamp-spiked darkness toward me. A figure smaller than Vera, anyway. It was the little girl who’d been up in the flat that first day I went there, and who seemed to tag around after Vera a good deal. I’d glimpsed her more than once hanging around, helping Vera pass the time while she was waiting for me on the bench, and then when I came along she’d discreetly drift off, probably at a confidential word from Vera.

She seemed to have run all the way, judging by her breathlessness; it was no inconsiderable distance for a youngster her size. Or maybe it was only feasible for that very reason, because of her young age.

“What happened?” I asked, hopping down from the bench-back. “Why didn’t she meet me here like she said she was going to?”

But she only repeated verbatim the message she had been given, evidently having been told nothing else. “She says come right away. She’s waiting for you at her house.”

I bolted off without even giving the poor little thing time to stand still a minute and catch her breath. She turned and faithfully started back the way she had just come, following me. But my long legs soon outdistanced her shorter ones, and after falling behind more and more, she finally bleated out: “Don’t go so fast! I can’t keep up with you!”

I stopped a couple of times to let her catch up, but finally I shouted back to her, rather unfeelingly: “You’re holding me up! I can’t stand and wait for you each time. Come back by yourself!” And I sprinted off and soon left her completely behind.

When I got to the building that housed Vera’s flat, I ran up the whole six flights without a pause even at landings—but if you can’t do it at that age, then you never can do it at all—and finally, half-suffocating, I rapped on the door with tactful restraint (remembering the terrible thump Frankie had given it that first day, and trying not to repeat it).

The door opened, but there was no one standing there alongside it. Then Vera’s voice said, from in back of it: “Come on in, but keep walking straight ahead and don’t turn your head. Hold your hands over your eyes.”

I thought, for a minute, she hadn’t finished dressing yet, and wondered why she’d admitted me so quickly in that case. I heard her close the door.

Then she said: “Now you can turn. But don’t look yet.”

Obediently I turned, eyelids puckered up, exaggeratedly tight, as though normal closing in itself wasn't a sufficient guarantee.

"Now!" she said triumphantly. "Now look."

I opened my eyes and looked, and she was all dressed up for the party.

"How do you like me?" she asked eagerly.

It was blue, I'm almost sure. I *was* sure then, but I'm not sure now anymore. But I think it must have been blue. She was a blonde, and it would have been blue more likely than anything else.

"My aunt ran it up for me on her machine," she went on breathlessly. "We bought the material at Koch's, on a-Hunner-twenty-fifth. We only needed four yards, and we even had some leftover for a lampshade when we got through."

Looking at it, I could well believe it. They were wearing them short and skimpy that year.

"But that isn't all I've got to show you. Just wait'll you see this!" She went hurrying into one of the other rooms, a bedroom, I guess, and then paper crackled in there. It didn't rustle softly, as tissue paper would have; it crackled sharply, more as stiff brown wrapping paper would.

Then she came back, something swirling blurrily about her as it settled into place.

"What've you got to say now?" she cried.

The blue party-shift had disappeared from view, and she had glossy fur wrapped all around her, covering her everywhere, except her face and legs. She was hugging it tight to her, caressing it, luxuriating in it, in a way I can't describe. I'd never seen a girl act that way over something inanimate before. She even tilted her head and stroked one cheek back and forth against it, over and over and over again. She made love to it, that's about all I can say.

I don’t know what kind it was. I didn’t know anything about furs then. Years later, when it had gotten so that I could identify mink, simply by dint of constant sight-references (“Mink,” somebody would say, and then I would look at it), I realized in retrospect that whatever it had been, it hadn’t been mink. It hadn’t been that dark a shade of brown. It had been more a honey-colored kind of brown. Anyway:

“Holy mackerel! I cried in excitement, or something equally fatuous but equally sincere, and I took a step backward in a parody of going off balance that was only partly pretense.

She kept turning from side to side, and then pivoting all the way around like a professional model, showing it to me from all angles. Her little eyebrows were arched in the cutest expression of mimic hauteur I’d ever seen then or ever have since.

“But it must have cost a pile of money,” I said anxiously. “How’d you ever get them to . . .?”

“Oh, it’s not all paid for,” she said facilely. “We made a down payment on it, and they let us take it home on approval. If we’re not satisfied we can return it, and they’ll give us our money back.”

“I didn’t know they did that with fur coats,” I said, impressed. But then I didn’t know much about the fur-coat traffic anyway. “It’s the cat’s meow,” I said, which was the utmost you could give to anything in commendation.

We kissed, I in ecstatic admiration, she in jubilant satisfaction at being so admired. “Don’t spoil my mouth, now,” she cautioned, but even that didn’t mar the kiss, for though she withheld her lips protectively from mine, she held my head between her two hands in affectionate pressure.

“We all set, now?” I asked.

“Just one thing more,” she said. She produced a tiny glass vial, not much thicker than a toothpick, and uncapped it.

She stroked herself with it at several preordained places: at the base of her throat and in back of both ears. “Woolworth’s,” she said. “But it’s good stuff You only get a couple of drops for twenty-five cents.”

It smelled very good to me, that was all I knew. Like a hundred different flowers ground up into a paste and leavened with honey.

“Don’t let me forget to turn out all the lights,” she said with a final look around. “They’ll raise cain if I do. It costs like the devil when you leave the electh-tricity on all night.” I remember how she said it. That was how she said it. Electh-tricity. It sounded even better than the right way.

That taken care of, we closed the door after us and went rattling down the stairs, on our way at last.

“Have you got a key for when you come home, or will you have to wake them up?” I asked her on the way down.

“My aunt gave me hers for tonight,” she said. “I don’t think they’ll be back until after we are. They went to a wake, and you know how long those things last.”

I didn’t, but I nodded knowingly, so she wouldn’t know I didn’t. When we reached the street-entrance, she stopped short, and even seemed to shrink back within its recesses for a moment, almost as though she were afraid to come out into the open, you might say. “How’re we going down there?” she asked.

“Why, in a taxi, of course,” I answered loftily. “I wouldn’t take you any other way, dressed the way you are.”

“Well then you go out ahead and get one, and bring it back to the door with you,” she said. “I’ll wait inside here until you do. I don’t want any of the neighbors to see me standing around on the sidewalk dressed like this. Then by tomorrow, it’ll be all over the house.”

“What’s that their business?” I asked truculently, but I went ahead and did what she’d suggested.

I got one about a block away, got in, and rode back to the doorway in it. Then I got out and held the door open for

Vera.

There was a moments wait, like when you're gathering yourself together to make a break for it. Then Vera came rushing out headlong and scurried in. I never saw anyone get into a waiting taxi so fast. She was like a little furry animal scampering for cover.

She pushed herself all the way over into the corner of the seat, out of sight. "Put the light out," she whispered urgently.

The closing of the door, as I got in after her, cut it off automatically. I heard her give a deep, heartfelt sigh as it went out, and thought it was probably one of contentment because we were finally on the last lap of our way to the party.

I told the driver Janet's address, and we started off, she and I clasping hands together on the seat between us.

The lights came at us and went by like shining volleyballs rolling down a bowling alley, and it was great to be young, and to be sitting next to your girl in a hustling taxi, and to be going to a party with her. It's never so much fun in your whole life afterward as it is that first time of all.

I remember thinking: This is only the beginning. I'll go to other parties with Vera, like this. Every party I ever go to from now on, I'll go to only with Vera.

I can no longer recall too many of the particulars of the party, at this distance, just its overall generalities. It was about average for its time and for its age group, I guess: like any other party then, and probably still pretty much like any such party now, given a few insignificant variations in tricks of dress and turns of dance and turns of speech. The basic factor remains the same: the initial skirmishing of very young men and girls in preparation for the pairing off of later life. Learning the rules for later on. The not-quite-fully mature, trying to act the part of grown-ups. No, that's not wholly accurate, either. For we were enclosed in our own world, and therefore we *were* what we seemed to

ourselves to be, in every sense of the word. We reacted to one another on that plane, and that made it a fact. Those outside that world were not the real grown-ups, they were simply aliens, and their viewpoint had no validity among us. The wall of the generations.

She had a fleeting moment or two of uncertainty, of faltering self-confidence, as we stood facing the door, waiting for it to be opened. I could tell it by the whiteness of her face, by the strained fixity of her eyes. Then as the room spread itself out before us like a slowly opening, luminous, yellow and ivory fan, alive with moving figures and flecks of disparate color—the party—her lack of assurance passed and she swept forward buoyantly, almost with a lilt to her step, not more than two or three fingers lightly touching the turn of my arm in token indication that I was her escort. And from then on, all the rest of the evening, that was the word to describe her: buoyant. Whether she was standing or sitting still, dancing or just moving about without music; whatever she was doing. She seemed to skim over the floor instead of being held to it like the rest of us.

She was well liked at once, it was easy to see that. All the very first words that followed my pronunciation of her name each time were warm and friendly and interested and showed a real eagerness on the speaker’s part to become better acquainted with her, over and above the formal politeness that the occasion indicated. We weren’t much on formal politeness anyway, at our ages.

I had expected the boys to like her, but the girls very patently did too. For a boy will like almost any girl except the most objectionable, that’s part of his make-up, but to be liked by her own kind is the real test of popularity for a girl. Within an hour or two of the start of the affair, Vera was a beckoned-to and sought-after and arms-about-waists member of each successive little group and coterie that went inside to the bedroom to giggle and chatter and powder its collective noses away from the boys for a few

moments' respite. She was as incandescent as a lighted lamp swinging from the ceiling of an old-fashioned ship's cabin and darting its rays into the farthest comers.

But Janet was the big surprise of it all. I had fully expected her to be her usual prickly self, and though for my own part this wouldn't have fazed me in the least (I even welcomed it, for it put us on a more even footing of mutual ill will, of verbal give-and-take with no holds barred), I had intended to do all I could to protect Vera from her quills. But it turned out not to be necessary at all. Janet seemed to take to her from the moment that she first stepped forward to welcome her, sizing her up in one quick, comprehensive, head-to-foot look, the kind even very young girls her age are fully capable of giving. She obviously liked her, whatever her reasons. From then on, she made her the exception to the entire group. She was quite simple, natural, unaffected, cordial, and hospitable toward her, with just a touch of self-effacement. Her smiles were elfin, but at least they were real smiles. Her remarks had no rusty razor blades embedded in them. A new Janet I had never seen before began to peer shyly forth.

I caught myself thinking as I watched her: Well, I'll be darned. Sometimes you know people for years, and then suddenly you find out you don't really know them at all. Somebody new comes along who brings out another side to them that you didn't even suspect was there, simply because it never had been shown to you before. This is how she would be if she had really liked anyone before. She feels about all of us exactly as I feel about her; she's known us all too long and well, and she sees only our unappealing qualities by now.

We had dinner first, and then afterward we danced. We played records on the phonograph and danced to them: "Kalua," which was just going out, and "April Showers," which was just coming in, and others which were in-between. The phonographs of the day were upright

consoles, generically called victrolas, although other manufacturers in addition to the Victor Company marketed them. The average one still had to be cranked by hand, although a few of the costlier ones could now be operated on electrical current, but that was as far as mechanization had gone. They stopped after just one record each time, and a new one had to be put on by hand. We were uncomplaining, though. Our older brothers and sisters, or at least the younger ones among our parents, had had to rely for the most part on player pianos and hand-played pianos, and squeaky, open-topped little turntables with tremendous tulip-horn amplifiers, when they wanted to dance in their homes.

We had dinner and we danced, and that's all there really was to the party.

We were the last ones to leave, Vera and I. I think we would have stayed on even longer if it weren't for the fact that we were now reduced (from my point of view, at least) to being alone with the unpleasing Janet. Vera seemed not to mind how long we stayed. She was so keyed up and animated from the hours-long peak of stimulation whipped up by the party (just like an actress is after an opening night, I suppose) that she kept talking away without a let-up, as if there were still dozens of people there and not just three of us.

Janet, whom I had frequently known to be quite ungracious and even blunt in her dismissals (she had once said to a whole group of us, holding the door back at full width, "All right, everybody out; go home now"), seemed to enjoy having her stay. She sat beside Vera, an arm about her shoulder, nibbling at something from the refreshment table, drinking in everything she said with little nods and grins of accord. But it was close to one o'clock, which was still a fairly raffish hour for us at that stage of our lives, and I finally suggested to Vera she'd better let me take her home.

“Oh, what a lovely party that was!” she burst out as we emerged from the glowingly warm building into the cold, bracing night air, which immediately formed little wisps of steamy breath in front of our faces. “I never dreamed I’d have such a good time. My head’s still swimming from it.” And while I was busy scanning the street for a cab, she spread her coat and dress out wide between her outstretched hands and executed a succession of little whirling dance steps, waltz-turns, there on the sidewalk, turning, reversing, then turning back again.

Back at her house, we hustled all the way up those six flights of stairs, and then stopped suddenly almost at the top, and threw our arms around each other, as much in high spirits as in love. We stood there, and we kissed, and we whispered so low that no one standing right beside us could have heard, even if there had been someone standing right beside us.

Something more could have happened; she would not have opposed it. She was stirred by the party, intoxicated by her success at it, and this would have been part of that, and that would have been part of this. There is an unspoken understanding, a wordless language, at certain times, and even a youngster such as I was then, can sense and translate it. The half-turn her head made against my shoulder, lying inert, passive, submissive, the way her hand dropped off my arm and hung down loose, the play of her breath as soft as the ebb and flow of breath-mist on a mirror, against my face, were words enough, no real ones were needed. This is part of the race’s instinct.

But I didn’t want it to happen. I did, but I didn’t. And I made the didn’t master the did. She had me accustomed now, conditioned now. I wanted her this way, the way she was, the way she had been on the bench that night. I had this image of her. I wanted to keep it, I didn’t want to take anything away from it. (I didn’t realize until years later that that’s all there are, are our images of things. There are no

realities. There are only the hundred different approximations of reality that are our images of it, no two the same, from man to man, from case to case, from place to place.)

There was a breathless springtime charm about her this way, a fragile sway she exerted over me, which would have been gone at a touch. Maybe a more heated, more grown love would have taken its place. But only for a while. Then that would have gone too, as it always does in such cases. And nothing would have been left. Not the first, not the second.

It wasn't a mere matter of purity or non-purity. Even that young, I wasn't narrow-minded. That was a mere cuticle-distinction.

It was partly possessive: You have something that belongs to you, that you value, like a bright new necktie or a leather wallet or a chrome lighter with your initials on it, and you don't want to get a stain on it, you don't want to deface it.

There was part self-esteem in it, I think. Your girl had to be better than any other girl around, or what was the use of her *being* your girl? You were so good yourself that you rated only the best, nothing less would do. Caesar's sweetheart.

But it was idealistic, mostly. If you're not going to be idealistic at that age, you're never going to be idealistic at all.

I don't know. I didn't know then, I still don't now. Who can explain the heart, the mind, the things they make you do?

I dropped one foot down to the step below, and took my arms off her.

"You better get inside, Vera." I said. "You better say good-night to me."

And then I said again, "You better hurry up and get inside, Vera."

"Aren't you going to kiss me good-night first?" she said softly.

“No, say it from up there. Not down here.”

She went up the three or four remaining steps to the level, and took her key out and opened the door with it. Then she turned and looked at me as she went in. I saw her put the backs of a couple of her fingers across her lips, then she tipped them toward me in a secretive kissing sign. Still looking at me to the last, she slowly drew the door closed past her face, very slowly and very softly, almost without a sound.

She didn’t come to the bench the next afternoon. I waited there for her for several hours, with that slowly fading afterglow you’re left with on the day after a party, wanting to share it with her by talking the whole thing over, but she didn’t come. Finally, when the early winter twilight had closed down and turned the whole world into a sooty, charcoal line drawing, all of black and gray, I got up and left, knowing she wasn’t coming anymore this late, and knowing just as surely I’d see her the following day. I didn’t even stop by her house to find out what had kept her away, because I felt sure it was nothing more than a case of her being overtired from the night before, and of having slept late as a result.

But the next day she didn’t come again, either, and I wondered about it. I wondered if she’d stayed out too late with me to suit her family, and they were keeping her away from me for a few days to show their disapproval. But they hadn’t been home yet themselves, to all appearances, when I’d brought her back.

Then I wondered if something had happened at the party that had offended or displeased her, something that she hadn’t told me about. But I remembered how she’d danced in exuberance out on the sidewalk after we’d left, so it didn’t seem likely it was that.

The third time she disappointed me, it was already the start of a new week, the party was already three or four days in back of us now, and I didn't wait any longer. The only possible explanation left was that she'd been taken ill; she might have caught cold that night, she'd been thinly dressed and it had been stingingly cold from what I remembered. And if she was ill, I wanted her at least to know I'd asked for her, and not let her think I'd been completely indifferent. So after a forlorn half-hour's token vigil on the bench, with no real anticipation even at the start, I got up again and went over to her house to see if I could find out anything.

I don't recall any longer whether I made two visits over there on two successive days, on the first of which I merely loitered about in front of the place, in hopes either of catching sight of her or else of questioning somebody who might possibly know her (such as the little girl who had carried her message the night of the party), and on the second of which I finally went all the way up the stairs as far as her door; or whether the two telescoped themselves into one and the same occasion. But I do know that, all else having failed, I finally stood at the top of the six flights of stairs and I finally knocked at her door.

After a moment's wait I heard a single heavy crunch of the flooring just on the other side of it; I imagine the one board that had been trodden on creaked, while all the rest of them did not.

A voice asked: "Who's that?" A woman's, but that was all I recognized about it.

"Me," I said. "Vera's friend, Con." (To my own ears, it sounded like a faltering quaver that came out of me.)

The door opened, and her mother stood there.

Her face wasn't friendly. I couldn't decipher exactly what was on it at first, but it was set in bleak, grim lines and no smile broke on it.

“And is it Vera you’re asking after?” she said, and I can still remember the thick Irish twist of speech she gave it.

I nodded and swallowed a lump of self-consciousness in my throat.

Her voice grew louder and warmer, but not the warmth of congeniality, the warmth of glittering, spark-flying resentment. “You have the nerve to come here and ask for her? You have the nerve to come here to this door? You?”

She kept getting louder by the minute.

“I should think you’d have the decency to stay home, and not show your face around here. Isn’t it enough you’ve done? Well, isn’t it?” And she clamped her hands to the sides of her head, as when you’re trying to stifle some terrible recollection.

I drew back a step, stunned, congealed with consternation. Only one explanation was able to cross my mind. I knew nothing had happened on the stairs that night. But maybe they didn’t, maybe they thought something had. And if they did, what way was there I could ever—

“Now go on about your business!” she said sternly. The expression “Get lost” had not yet come into general parlance, but she used an approximation of it. “Take yourself off,” I think it was.

By that time I was partly down the stairs already, and then had stopped again and half-turned around to her to hear the rest of it out.

“Stay away from here. There’s no Vera here for you.”

The door gave a cataclysmic bang, and that was the end of it. There was no Vera there for me.

I have often wondered since why it was such a long time after that before I ran into Frankie again. Maybe it actually wasn’t, but it seemed so at the time. Weeks, if not quite months. But our paths didn’t happen to cross, I guess, for

we each had differing interests by now. The hero-worship stage was long a thing of the past. I had probably grown out of it by myself; I don't think my friendship with Vera had anything to do with ending it. And I hadn't sought him out, because it had never occurred to me that he might be in a better position than I to pick up the neighborhood rumors and gossip, his ear being closer attuned to it than mine, in a way.

Anyway, one day we came along on opposite sides of the same street, he going one way, I the other. He threw up his arm to me, I flung up mine to him, and he crossed over to me. Or we met in the middle, whichever it was.

We made a couple of general remarks, mostly about his current boxing activities (he was still in the amateur category, he told me, but about ready to become pro; all he needed was to find the right manager). Then he suddenly said: "That was tough about your friend, wasn't it?"

I must have sensed something serious was about to come up; I quickly became alerted, even before the conversation had gotten any further. "Vera? What was tough? What was?" I asked tautly.

"About her getting caught up with like that."

"Caught up with how?" I insisted.

"What are you, serious?" he said impatiently. "I thought you knew about it. The whole block knows. How come you don't know about it, when you been going around with her so much lately? Practically steady."

"All of a sudden I didn't see her anymore," I tried to explain. "She dropped out of sight, and I couldn't find out why. Nobody told me."

"I could'a' told you," he said. "Why di'ntya come to me?"

"Well, what is it?" I urged. "What?"

"She was picked up," he said flatly.

I didn't understand at first; I thought he meant a flirtatious pickup, by some stranger on the street.

“Picked up by some fellow? She wasn’t that kind. I know her too well.”

“I don’t mean picked up by some fellow. Picked up by the cops. She was taken in.”

I felt as though one of his best punches had hit me squarely between the eyes. All I could see for a minute were swirls in front of them. Like a pair of those disks with alternate black and white circular lines that keep spinning into a common center, but they never come to an end, they always keep right on coming.

“For what?” I managed to get out when they’d finally thinned somewhat and started to fade away. “What for?”

I guess he could see by my face the kind of effect he had had on me; it seemed to make him feel regretful that he’d told me. “Don’t take it like that,” he said contritely. “I wounna told you, if I knew it was going to get you like that.”

“But why?” was all I kept saying, tearful without any tears, querulous, resentful, all those things at once. “What’d she *do?* They can’t just come along like that and haul anybody in they want to.”

He didn’t stop to argue that with me; evidently he felt the facts did it for him. “You know the old lady she worked for part-time, the rich old lady on West End Avenue—? She ever tell you about her?”

“Yeah, I knew she worked for her,” I said marginally.

“The old lady put in a complaint about her to the cops. She called them up and told them there was an expensive fur coat missing out of her closet, and she accused Vera of swiping it. So they went over there to Vera’s place, looking for it, at eight o’clock in the morning. She was still in bed, but they found it folded up underneath her mattress.”

“She had one she was paying for on time—” I tried to say in her defense.

“Na,” he said juridically. “The old lady identified it, it had the same labels on it.”

“Then what’d they do?” I faltered, sickish in the throat with backed-up salty fluid.

“They made her get dressed, and they took her with them. She claimed she just borrowed it to wear for one night, and was going to bring it right back the next day. The trouble was she couldn’t prove that, because they caught up with her too quick and she still had it in the room with her when they got there.”

An excruciating little mental image crossed my mind, of her coming out the street-doorway of her house, that same doorway where she hadn’t wanted the neighbors to see her “all dressed up,” but now with two men alongside her, people looking on from windows and from the steps, holding her head down, and with tears probably, tears almost certainly, gliding down her shame-flushed face.

“But if the old lady got her coat back, why didn’t she just let her go?” I wailed querulously.

“She wanted to teach her a lesson, I guess. She said she’d been very good to Vera, and Vera had repaid her by stealing from her behind her back.” And he interpolated sagely: “You know, them old ladies can be very mean sometimes, especially when it comes to losing something like a fur coat.”

“I know,” I assented mournfully. To both of us, I suppose, a woman of forty would have been what we considered an old lady.

“She was sore, and she wouldn’t drop the charges. They brung Vera up before a magistrate—I doanno if it was in juvenile court or where, but I guess it was there, because she’s still a minor—and he committed her to a reformatory for six months. She’s up there now, at some farm they got upstate.”

And he added, quite unnecessarily, “That’s why you haven’t seen her around anymore.”

After a wordless pause of several moments, I started to move away from him.

“Hey, come back here,” he said. “Come back here.” He was trying to be sympathetic, consolatory, in a gruff sort of way, which was the only way he knew how.

I kept on going, drifting away from him.

Then he tried to come after me and rejoin me. I didn’t see him because I didn’t turn to look, but I knew he was, because I could tell by the sound of his feet, coming along behind me. I motioned to him with a backward pass of my hand to leave me alone, to go on off.

I didn’t want him to see my face.

I felt like a dog that’s just had its paw stepped on real hard, and it goes limping off on three feet and is leery of everyone, doesn’t want anyone to come near it for a while. The only thing I didn’t do was whimper like one.

All the winter long I’d pass there now and then, and every time I passed I’d seem to see her standing there in the doorway. Just the way I’d seen her standing sometimes when we’d met by her door instead of at the park bench.

Complete, intact in every detail: looping her tamoshanter around by its headband on the point of one finger. Much more than an illusion: a life-size cut-out, like those figures they sometimes stood up outside of theaters. So real that the checks of her coat hid the grubby brownstone doorway-facing behind where they were. So real that even the remembered position of her feet repeated itself on the brownstone doorstep, and they seemed to be standing there once again just as they once had: one planted flat out a little way before her so that the shank of her leg curved gracefully outward a little to reach it, the other bent backward behind her, and planted vertically against the sideward part of the doorway. And as I’d once noticed, when she thrust a door closed behind her with a little kick-back of her heel, here again she gave grace, not grotesqueness, to this odd little posture.

But then as I’d look and look, and look some more, longingly (not so much with love—for what did I know of

love at nineteen? Or for that matter, what did I know of it at thirty-nine or forty-nine or fifty-nine?—as with some sense of isolation, of pinpointed and transfixed helplessness under the stars, of being left alone, unheard and unaided to face some final fated darkness and engulfment slowly advancing across the years toward me, that has hung over me all my life), the brownstone-facing would slowly peer back through the checks of her coat, the doorstep would be empty of her disparately placed feet, and I'd have to go on my way alone again. As all of us have to go alone, anywhere that we go, at any time and at any place.

The young, I think, feel loneliness far more acutely than the older do, for they have expected too much, they have expected everything. Those older never expect quite everything, or more than just a little at best, and when loneliness strikes, their lack of complete expectation in the first place dulls the sharp edge of it somewhat.

The spring came again, and then that warmed itself into early summer, and by now it was a year since I had first met her. I still thought of her very often, but I no longer thought of her all the time. Her immediacy had faded.

One night in June I was passing along Eighth Avenue again, and as the corner of One-hundred-fourteenth Street came abreast of me and opened up the side-street into view, it suddenly seemed to blaze up from one end to the other like a rippling straw-fire, an illusion produced by scores of light bulbs strung criss-cross from one side of the street to the other, and fidgeting in the slight breeze. Vehicular entry had been blocked off by a wooden traffic horse placed at the street entrance. People were banked on both sidewalks looking on, and between them, out in the middle, tightly packed couples were dancing. They were holding a block party on the street.

Block parties were nothing new. In fact, by this time they were already well on their way out. They had first originated about four years before, at the time of the mass

demobilization, when each individual block celebrated the return to its midst of those young men who had seen service overseas by holding a community homecoming party in their honor out in the street (because that was the only place that could conveniently accommodate all the participants).

But this was the early summer of 1923, not 1919 any longer; the last soldiers had finished coming back long ago; the only ones left were regulars, on garrison duty along the Rhine, at the Koblenz bridgehead. Another thing: The climate of public opinion had noticeably changed in the meantime. The naive fervor of the first postwar year or two had now given place to that cynicism toward all things military and patriotic that characterized the remainder of the decade. So the occasion for this particular party must have been something else: a church benefit or charity affair of some kind.

I moved in among the onlookers and stood there with my shoes tipping over the edge of the curb, watching. The music wasn't very good, but it was enthusiastic and noisy, and that was the mood the crowd was in, so that was all that mattered. They were probably amateurs who lived on the block themselves, and each one had brought his particular instrument down into the street with him, and joined forces with the others. But they were so uneven they were almost good, because the music of the moment was supposed to be played in just that sort of jagged, uneven time, anyway. I can still remember them blaring and blatting away at two of the current favorites: "Dearest, You're the Nearest to my Heart" and "Down, Down Among the Sleepy Hills of Ten, Ten, Tennessee."

Then as I stood there on the lip of the curbing, taking it all in, she was suddenly there in front of me. I never knew afterward which direction she'd come from, because I didn't have time to see. She was just suddenly there, that was all, and I was looking at Vera again.

She hadn’t changed much. The even-all-around cut might have been missing from her hair, but I can’t be sure, for I didn’t look up at it, just looked at her. She had on a fresh, summery little dress, orchid in color, that much I seem to remember. It was both gauzy and crisp at the same time, most likely what they call organdy.

But there was one thing I did notice clearly, as we looked straight into one another’s eyes, one thing that hadn’t been there before. There was a little diagonal crevice, like a nick or slit, traced downward from the inside corner of each eye, slanted like an accent mark and just as brief as one. It couldn’t have been called a crease, for she was too young to have creases yet. It wasn’t a furrow either, it wasn’t deep enough for that.

Studying her, I wondered what had caused it. Tear-tracks, maybe, from excessive crying? No, not tears alone. Tears maybe, but something else as well. Long, sleepless nights of brooding, of frustration and rebellion.

If they grew longer, deeper, I sensed somehow they would change the expression of her face, give her eyes a hardened, crafty aspect. But it was too soon to do that yet. All they were so far was a mark of hurt; they gave her eyes an apprehensive, reproachful look.

I don’t know what we said first. Probably I said her name, and she said mine.

Then she moved her mouth upward toward me a little, and we kissed.

“It’s been an awful long time I last saw you,” I said, skipping the “since” in the hurry of my speech. Tactless, without meaning to be. But what else could I have said? I hadn’t seen her just yesterday.

“I’ve been away,” she said reticently.

I wondered if she knew I knew. I hoped she didn’t. I would have liked to tell her that I didn’t know, but I couldn’t figure out a way that wouldn’t tell her that I did know.

“Working,” she added even more reticently.

“You still live here on the block?” I asked her.

She answered that with less constraint. “Not anymore,” she said. “I just came around tonight to see what the old neighborhood looked like.”

Then, as if to break the chain-continuity of questions, she suddenly suggested: “Dance with me. It’s too hard to try to talk with all that noise they’re making.”

I stepped down to the asphalt roadbed she was standing on, which had been powdered over with something to make it less abrasive to the dancers’ feet.

We moved a few steps, a few steps only, and then even that was taken away from me.

A girl came jostling and thrusting her way through the mangle of dancers, someone I had never seen before. She touched Vera on the back or something, I couldn’t see what it was, to attract her attention.

“What’re you doing?” she demanded in a tone of urgency. “Don’t you know they’re waiting for us?”

“I just met an old friend,” Vera told her happily, and she indicated me with her head, about to introduce us.

The other girl brushed that aside, as if to say: This is no time for that now. She didn’t even look toward me.

“This is the second time they’ve sent me out to look for you,” she went on rebukingly. “How much longer you going to be? You must have seen everything you wanted to by now. What’s there to see around here, anyway? They won’t like it if you keep them waiting much longer.”

“All right, I’m coming,” Vera said with a sort of passivity, as though she were used to being told what to do.

“I guess I have to go now,” she said, turning to me, with a regretful little smile that, whether she meant it or not, was a pleasant balm to my feelings.

She turned aside from my still-upheld arms and followed the other girl back through the crowd. And after a moment, I went after the two of them, more slowly.

Once up on the sidewalk and in the clear, they broke into a choppy little quick-step that girls sometimes use, not quite a run but more than a walk, Vera still a trifle in back of the other one.

“But when am I going to see you again?” I called out after her, bewildered by the rapidity with which I’d found her, only to lose her again.

She turned her head around, but without breaking stride in the little jogging trot she was engaged in, and called back reassuringly: “Real soon, Con. And that’s a promise.”

Then they both made the turn of the comer and whisked from sight. I went down there after them, not to try to stop them, for I knew that wouldn’t have worked, but simply to see if I could get a look at who it was they were hurrying so to join.

As I put my head around the corner, a pale-stockinged after-leg was drawing from sight into a car that was standing there, and then the car door cracked shut with that flat sound they always have.

It was standing, oh I don’t know, about ten yards along from the corner, and there were a number of men in it, exactly how many I couldn’t tell, maybe three, possibly four, but certainly more than just two to pair off with the girls. They were older men, not youths my own and Vera’s age. This was more a matter of outline than anything else, since I couldn’t see their faces to the slightest degree, but the impression of maturity was unmistakable. The massiveness of their shoulders gave it to me, and the breadth of the backs of their necks, and they were all alike wearing rather too dressy snap-brim felt hats (and this was already June). One of them was smoking a cigar, I saw it glow for a moment in the darkness under the roof of the car, and the livid concentric swirl it made was much larger than a mere cigarette ember would have been, particularly if seen from a distance like that.

And finally, the car itself was not of a type that young men would have owned or cared to own or habitually been found driving around in. It was no runabout or roadster or rattling, motto-inscribed “flivver.” It was a closed car, a black sedan, a very heavy-set, high-powered affair. It almost looked custom-made. It had more than the usual amount of burnished hardware on the outside (door handles, headlights, and a smaller, cone-shaped swivel light up alongside the windshield). If it weren’t for the wheels, it could have resembled a coffin.

I don’t know who or what they were, and I never will. Maybe they were just hard-bitten older men, older than the two girls with them, toughened up by years of wresting every hard-fought buck from a reluctant world. Without grace, without compunction, without laughter. Harmless otherwise in general (except of course to young girls such as those). Non-lethal, or I should say, non-illicit.

And then again maybe not. About two or three years after that, around ‘25 or ’26, when an awareness of the new type of public violence, which the First War and Prohibition had bred between them, finally percolated through to the public consciousness from the specialized areas to which it had been confined until now—the police-files, crime- and police-reporters, certain politicians, speakeasy operators, and the like—and new words like *gangster* and *racketeer* and *public enemy* began to sprinkle the pages of the newspapers more and more often, along with accounts of nocturnal ambuscades and machine-gun fusillades and murders in garages and warehouses and concrete-weighted drownings along the water’s edge . . . Every time I’d come across one of them, something brought back the picture of that car to my mind’s eye.

And I’d wonder then, as I still wonder now, was it men of that kind she and her friend had gone off with that night? Some of their earlier prototypes, their very first vanguard?

Or was there just a superficial resemblance there that fooled my untrained, unknowledgeable eye?

And I'd hope, every time I thought about it, that that was what it was, and nothing more.

But I never could be sure.

It didn't even have a tail-light on, to follow its recession by. But like a great big inky patch against the paler night it grew smaller and smaller as it dwindled down the street, stealthily, without sound, until it had contracted into extinction and was there no more.

We never saw each other again, in this world, in this lifetime. Or if we did, we didn't know each other.

EVEN GOD FELT THE DEPRESSION

I'd hardly made a cent that whole year. Or for that matter the one before, or the one before that. The Depression had become stabilized by this time. It was now accepted as a permanent condition. The sharp downgrade had come to an end, and it had leveled off, but with that had also ended all the earlier hopes of an upturn, of a magic-wand dismissal, of a just-around-the-corner mirage of a picture-postcard goddess called Prosperity spilling roses and gold pieces indiscriminately out of a brimming cornucopia. People had given up hoping. It was now a part of everyday existence, and everyday existence is the most difficult thing of all to change; all the emperors, kings and conquerors have found that out. It was the Present, it was the Thirties, you couldn't have one without the other. Even the songs were tinged with it. "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"; "I'll never be the same, Stars have lost their meaning for me—"; "No more money in the bank—"; "Potatoes are cheaper, tomatoes are cheaper—For the first time, love, in this context, ran a poor second.

As the new decade plodded dejectedly on, holding an apple for sale in one hand, an upturned hat in the other, it became hard even to remember the time when there hadn't been a depression. That time was legend, not reality anymore. There'd been a time when there'd been Indians

and colonists. There'd been a time when the states warred against each other.

So too had there been a time when you went to parties and speakeasies. And the only thing that mattered, if you were a girl then, was to wear the shortest possible haircut and the shortest possible skirts. And if you were a young man, to know the greatest number of speakeasies so long and so well that you were called by your first name there and admitted on sight when the small grille first opened and an eye looked out at you, without having to present one of those meaningless, ubiquitous little cards that seemed to be floating around by the thousands and said, "Charlie sent me," or "John," or "Joe"; only the uninitiated had to do that any longer, by the time the period reached its crest. That was for visitors, out-of-towners, strangers, and even they were seldom refused. Even a policeman would now and then drop in, not for purposes of inspection—for he was on their payroll, so to speak—but to have a friendly drink; and on one occasion at least, at which I was present, to sing "Silver Threads Among the Gold" in a beautiful baritone for the entertainment of the other customers, who then passed around the hat.

During the twenties, there was always money around somewhere near at hand, somehow. If not right in your pocket, then over in your room, or your apartment. If not in your apartment, then around at the bank. If not around at the bank, then in some friend's pocket, until there was once more some around at the bank. Never a matter of more than a few days or a week at the most.

Of course it didn't just grow on trees, no. You worked for it. But the work was so easy and the pay was so large. And the working part of the day seemed so short and inconsequential compared to the long, delectable speakeasy nights and dawnings. And if you were dissatisfied with the work (and it was the worker who was dissatisfied more often than those he worked for) you simply went on to

another place where the pay was even larger. Only absolute ineptitude or a personal feud with a superior seemed able to cost anyone his job against his own volition. And if you were a writer, or at least an entertainment-writer, such as I had started out to be, you shared in this general run of things. The work was easy and the pay was large.

Those were marvelous times. Not even the time before the French Revolution equaled them in splurge and squander: For then the poor had been discontented. Now there were no poor at all. (Until the bottom fell out of the whole world, and everyone was poor together.)

But all that was long ago, dimmed by the mists of time. Those days had been whisked backward out of the memory as though they had been forty years before and not just four.

And now, it was no time in which to be a writer. Food and shelter were the essentials. They could no longer be just taken for granted, they had to be struggled for now. And thousands had even lost them altogether. Whole families had broken up. The wives and children, because women are less fit for a nomadic life, went back under their parents' roofs, if they were lucky enough to have parents who still had roofs. To live it out somehow, to bide their time, until the dreadful thing should pass, if it ever did pass. The men built colonies of shacks, of cartons and of packing cases and gasoline drums and whatever they could get their hands on, and drew their drinking water from the nearest comfort station (because they could be sure at least it was sterile there) and got their food standing in endless, dejected lines outside of public soup kitchens and other charitable hand-out places.

These shacks along the river banks, and whatever other public unrestricted ground they were allowed to trespass upon, were commonly called Hoovervilles, in unjust deprecation of the man who had not at all caused the situation but simply inherited it.

No, it was no time in which to be a writer. Magazines were expiring all over, dropping off like autumn leaves falling from trees. Who had time for books, for magazines? Who had the money to waste on fairy tales of a world that had vanished? The two great mutually antipathetic forces in this life have never been love and death, but love and hunger. Whichever gains the ascendancy, the other suffers by it.

No one cared who got the girl in the story anymore. They knew he couldn't keep her very long, nowadays.

On the other hand, the new times were too new to be written about yet. Those who would write about them a little later on were still busy living them now.

I had given my situation as a writer in these indigent times much thought. I had had to. There was no money coming in anymore, absolutely not a single penny. My last sale had been late in 1932, already nearly half a year back by this time (counting from the check and not the acceptance date, which were not the same thing by any means), to a magazine called *Illustrated Love Stories,* which had had the great advantage, if nothing else, of being displayed and sold throughout the widespread and popular Woolworth five-and-ten-cent store chain. But even that money by now had fallen by the wayside and was no more.

At the time of the memorable bank closure of February 1933 I had had exactly sixty-one dollars to my name in one of the locked-up banks. This amount I can stake my word on, because I distinctly recall a friend of mine saying he envied me having even that much, as he himself had had only sixteen left in, and then we both noticed that the figures were reversible, that is, interchangeable if turned around. When the banks reopened I quickly took the sixty-one out, mainly because I'd already pledged a good part of it toward my daily needs, and the remainder because I was apprehensive, as many others were, that the banks might reclose again any day as unexpectedly as they had the first

time, and I wanted the few dollars out in the open where I could put my hands on them.

By now, about two months later, this sixty-one dollars was all gone, but I'd found various ways of tiding myself over in the interim. There was a beautiful gold watch my father's younger brother had left me. This was constructed in such a way that I managed to live off it for some time, in the way that you eat an artichoke, leaf by leaf It had two thick outer casings, one on each side, and then two somewhat thinner ones inside, making four altogether. All of the finest purest gold. Its works were heavily jeweled, and then a massive gold fob went with it, such as they had worn in those days.

At intervals which I spaced as widely as I could, I used to take it downtown, near the foot of Wall Street, over toward the river, to an assay office that bought precious metals, and have them carefully pry off one lid, so that the rest wouldn't be damaged, and have that weighed and sell it to them. I got surprisingly liberal amounts each time, too; when the nineties made something of gold, they weren't stingy with the gold. Still, I felt bad each time I had to part with some more of it—nostalgic, wistful, penitent—and surprisingly, considering that it was the gift of a man whom I hadn't seen since my early boyhood.

When the last of it was all gone finally, and only a scrap of black grosgrain ribbon was left to show what it had been, I started in on my books and sold them piecemeal as well. I had a considerable number of limited editions given to me as gifts at Christmastime by the publishers themselves, during the course of the years, all numbered, inscribed, rag-papered, gilt-edged, and beautifully bound.

I used to get a miserable couple of dollars for one of them each time: for a thing which could not have been obtained on the open market at any price. I had a little red-and-black tiered bookcase in my room, and the increasing gaps in its various compartments used to stare out at me accusingly, like wide-open eyes, and I'd want to turn my head away.

Then one night, right after I'd parted with a costly deluxe edition of *The Life of Isadora Duncan,* I happened to go by a bar. It was one of those bland, springlike evenings that always seemed to stir a longing for recreation even more than at other times. The lights looked inviting, and there was the pulse-beat of music coming from inside. So I went in, and bought a beer, and stood there with it for a while.

Then just as I was about to order a second one, the thought suddenly came to me: This is someone's life you're drinking down. Her glories and her triumphs, her aspirations and her strivings, her heartaches and her happiness. Should this be the end result of all that? Is this all she lived for? Is this all the transmutation her life deserves? Cheap rank-smelling beer going down some brash young guy's gullet? And afterward maybe, in some foul washroom, to turn into something even worse.

How would you like it if, someday after you're gone, and have left behind you (if you do) just one worthwhile book, one thing you put everything into, one thing to live on after you, one thing to show you'd ever been around in the first place; then how would you like it if some young fellow who never had heard of you, and wouldn't have cared if he had, stood up one night and did that to your life's work?

I winced, and put down my glass, and got out of there fast, and I never repeated that again. Not on the proceeds of anyone else's book, anyone else's lifeblood, at least.

But I was starved for recreation, and had to get it the best way I could, even if I had no money to pay for it.

There was a rooftop motion picture theater nearby at that time called Japanese Gardens (most likely because its overhead aisle-lights were encased in a few pseudo-Japanese lanterns; there was never anything else Japanese that I could notice about it). It was not an open-air theater, but simply a roofed over one on the top floor of the building. The great advantage of the place was this: If you bought an admission and entered legitimately, so to speak, which I

could not do because I couldn't afford the twenty-five cents, you were carried from the street-level lobby by elevator up to the theater itself. But in compliance with fire department regulations there was an enclosed safety-staircase that ran down from above and gave onto the street by means of a heavy metal door, which could not be opened from the outside, but could easily be pushed aside from the inside. The elevator was slow in coming up, and very often people who had finished seeing the show and wanted to leave were too impatient to wait for it and would come down the stairs instead. I used to hang around the outside of this staircase door and watch it like a hawk, and when I saw it start to swing open, I'd hook my hand to it and keep it akimbo until I could get in myself. Those leaving never offered any objection; they seemed tolerant that way. I didn't mind climbing up the five or six flights. It meant nothing to me; I considered it well worthwhile. They changed the bill twice a week, and for several weeks I took in each new show and managed to see a fair sampling of the best feature pictures of the early thirties.

But one night, careless from long immunity, I timed myself wrong, and the usher on duty must have spotted me without my knowing it, as I crossed the vulnerable open space between the stairhead and the last row of seats. He waited until I'd picked out a nice comfortable aisle seat, then I felt a rock-hard tap on my shoulder, and when I looked up, he grimly and wordlessly swung his thumb back and forth a few times toward the staircase.

He didn't actually take hold of my arm, but he insisted on escorting me all the way down the stairs again to where I had originally entered. The sound of his slapping footsteps counterpointing mine down five or six whole flights irritated me for some reason.

"All right," I protested, offended. "I'm going. You don't have to come all the way down to the bottom with me."

He came back at me with a catch-phrase popular at the time: “You’re telling *me* you’re going? No, I’m telling *you*.”

When we were both on the outside, he securely reclosed the front door from that side and then he himself reentered by the front way, in order to be able to ride the elevator up, leaving me standing by myself on the dismal sidewalk, heaving and as cracklingly indignant as though I had been unjustly put upon.

And this was the way things had been going with me right then. It was, as I said at the beginning, no time in which to be a writer.

But I knew I had to be. It was something I couldn’t help being. It was something that had been in me all my life, from the time that I was a kid and first kept a schoolboyish diary. It was something that I couldn’t push aside until later, when I would know the real meaning of unhappiness, not these little trials and tribulations I knew now. I used to round my fist, and swing it with all my might into my other palm, whenever I received a disappointment or a rejection, and mutter doggedly: “I’ll beat this game yeti I’ll beat it yeti”

I thought about it, and thought about it, and finally I came to a decision. There was one solution and only one. There was one way to make enough money all at one time to tide me over, take the curse off this hand-to-mouth existence I was leading, give me a start back onto my feet at least. Books wouldn’t do it, they weren’t selling. Magazines wouldn’t do it, they weren’t buying.

But there was one medium of profit left. The motion-picture industry. Although its earnings, too, had gone down greatly, it was so worldwide, so universal, had become such a standby of modern-day living, that it alone managed to keep its head well above the general inundation. Many a man without work or hope of work (or after a while even the desire for it) managed somehow to find a stray quarter and go into some small moviehouse at noon when it opened,

and spend the rest of the day in there trying to forget that he had no work or hope of work. Smoking, eating a stale roll, watching the anesthetic up on the screen.

The motion-picture industry still bought from writers. It needed them, it fed upon them, they were its fodder. And when it bought, it still paid, not by the hundreds of dollars but by the thousands.

The problem, though, was to offer them something that stood a good chance of acceptance, that was likely to be bought. To come up with anything else would be just a waste of time. All the things I had on hand, already done, were as stale as the speakeasies and the knee-length skirts; I knew no one would touch them.

Then when I least expected it I came across, quite by accident, something that seemed to have just the right possibilities. Opening my valise one day to scramble through it for something (it always made me wistful to bring it out into the open and see the travel-and hotel-stickers still all over it—"Red Star Line," "Holland-America Line," "Hotel Colon, Barcelona," "Pension Isabella, Muenchen"—from the carefree days now gone), I upturned the first few pages of a novel I had started in Paris two years before and never gone ahead with.

It was called *I Love You, Paris,* a title which would have been invalidated a couple of decades later by the hit song from *Can Can.* There was very little of it done, just an opening chapter, but I found when I reread it that what I had intended to do with it was still fresh enough in my mind, and in any case there was a key-sheet along with it, with a skeleton plot-framework outlined on it.

My volatile optimism (at least where my own material was concerned) immediately blazed up on reading it over, and it seemed to me to be the very thing I was looking for, the best possible bet for what I had in mind. For one thing, the period I had picked for it—pre-war Paris, 1912—was still completely untouched as far as the pictures were

concerned, and I felt that should make a very good selling point. The screen was known to be always on the lookout for new, unhackneyed settings for its stories.

My protagonists were a pair of professional ballroom dancers, the man much older than the girl, his pupil and protégée, one of a long succession he has had throughout his career, whom he has taught to dance, made famous, and who then have repaid him by leaving him for some other, younger man. He is in love with his current partner, but she looks upon him only as a father and mentor.

Along comes a younger man the girl's own age, and he and she fall in love. Then the young people have a misunderstanding and fall out again. She disappears, and he goes looking for her everywhere and cannot find her. Then, on her opening night, the night of her professional debut, he happens to pass the place where she is to appear and recognizes her from a photograph in the foyer. He goes in to watch her, thinking this will be the last time he will ever see her.

She has an enormous and dazzling success, and instantly becomes the sensation of Paris. But she has recognized him sitting out front, and immediately after the performance she runs out to him, throws her success over her shoulder, and they go off together.

Her partner, who has really got a bad deal out of the whole thing, accepts it with graceful resignation (he is used to it by now) and goes back to his former partner, who has been intermittently sending off sparks of jealousy in the background throughout the story. The implication is that they will continue to bicker like cat and dog, as they did the first time, but at least will understand each other.

There were also a couple of subplots to help fill the thing out, in a more or less comic vein. A rich fat maharajah becomes enamored of the girl, though he already has a retinue of vivacious young Parisiennes who follow him around all over, and a middle-aged American lady tourist

from the Middle West, also well-to-do and speaking hilarious (I hoped) broken French, mistakes the young man for a gigolo and pursues him almost to distraction.

If all this sounds pretty bad, all I can say is it was. But we are always so much wiser in retrospect, all of us. I would have died to defend its merits then. At least it was no worse than anything else that was to be seen on the screen those days.

The format in which to present it had to be considered. I decided that a shortcut, simply to save myself work, wouldn't be advisable, would lessen its chances. That a synopsis or outline, what they called a short "treatment," wouldn't do any good. I felt it might be pigeonholed and forgotten, as they received literally thousands of such things. Moreover, to avoid later accusations of plagiarism, many of the studios, it was my understanding, refused to accept them, returning them unopened. Therefore, the only sensible thing to do would be to complete it first as a book, to write it out at full, toilsome length no matter how much labor was involved, to try to get it published by a book firm to start with, to give it that much more prestige, attract that much more attention to it, and then to immediately try to sell it from there, perhaps from the galley-proofs alone, without even waiting for formal publication.

This meant, and I knew it well, anywhere from six weeks to two months of the most driving, uninterrupted drudgery, amounting almost to self-immolation. To give up everything else, all thought of recreation. And to continue living in the meantime as I had been doing all the while: scraping along tooth and nail almost without any money to speak of, only nickels and dimes in my pocket. When you look back toward a certain age, two months isn't long. But when you *are* that certain age, two months is eternity.

It was a gamble, and a very great one. All or nothing. But I decided to take it. If I didn't try it, I still had nothing. But if I did try it, and I succeeded, then I had just about

everything. The money problem would be over, for years to come. What other choice was there for me anyhow? I asked myself. I wasn't equipped for anything else. To wait on customers, sell things over a counter, either in a haberdashery or a grocery? There were thousands who could do it much better than I, and they couldn't get those jobs themselves, jobs like that weren't to be had. This was the only thing I knew how to do. So I tightened my belt, took a last regretful look at the coruscating, titillating world around me, and sat down and grimly bent to work.

As far as the book-publishing stage of it was concerned, that didn't worry me too much. I had a promising opening, or at least potential opening, waiting for me there. A man in the editorial field whom I'd dealt with in the past had, just shortly before this, been taken on at one of the smaller publishing houses—probably displacing somebody else, which was the only way it was done at this time. I'd known him in the halcyon days of four or five years before, and then lost track of him until now. I'll call him Irwin, since I've never been sure exactly what part he played in what happened later on, and have no wish even at this late date to do him an injustice. His own first name began with the same capital letter, at any rate.

I'd noticed a little squib about his new alignment in the book notes which the *Times* habitually ran on its daily book page, and I promptly got in touch with him and told him I'd started working on something. He sounded very encouraging and hospitable, and urged me to let him see it as soon as I'd finished doing it. This of course might have been no more than the ordinary professional courtesy he would have extended to any published author, but I took a sanguine view of it.

There was of course no question of an advance before its completion, and I knew enough not to ask him for one, although it would have solved all my problems beautifully. If the thing was no good, I would have had no way of repaying

it, and we both realized it. Publishers weren't using their money to speculate on anything sight unseen in those parlous days, except in the case of a big name, perhaps, and I was a writer of too dubious a stature to warrant it. I was fairly well known, but on the strength of fairly little accomplished. I wasn't by any means what could have been called a good risk at the time.

I had everything lined up now, and the rest was up to me. I worked, and I worked, and I worked. I worked in the morning, I worked in the afternoon, I worked at night. I don't think typewriter keys ever took such a hammering before. Perhaps stenographically, but never creatively.

The spring was advancing, and tantalizingly beautiful days came; there seemed to be an endless succession of them, as if purposely sent to plague me. New York may not be notable for its weather, but when it does turn out a fine day, no place else can top it. And just enough of that first delicate, immaculate green showed through its concrete crevices here and there to put nature's official seal on the season, adding a decorative touch, like the parsley on the omelette or the mint sprig in the lemonade. Each day had the effect on me of a champagne cocktail: golden and tingling and heady. And I couldn't even touch it, had to pass it by.

The nights were even more excruciating. To me those long lines of lights that flamed along the avenues as far as the eye could see were never garish (as they probably were) but glamorous, seeming to hold out a promise of wonderment and magic, and I wanted to be out where they were. Everyone else was, in droves; I could see them passing the corner, from my window, in two continuous opposite-moving streams, and there I sat, in a solitary room, locked in the lonely pool of light cast by a desk lamp.

But I wouldn't leave the desk. I almost had to grab it with both hands and hang onto it for dear life, almost had to hook my ankles around its legs to stay on the chair, but I

wouldn’t leave it, no I wouldn’t leave it. Consummation had to come first.

During this whole time I was having a great deal of difficulty with the hotel manager, Mr. Drew. Difficulty avoiding him, I mean. I was chronically anywhere from a month to a month and a half behind in my room rent, and though I paid installments on it as often as I could, the gap was so great that I never could seem to bridge it and bring myself up to date. It was like a sort of hopeless treadmill. By the time I finished up one month, a new one would be over already.

Mr. Drew was a corpulent, apoplectic man and, in my case at least, a great believer in the personal appeal as far as rent-lag was concerned, always accompanied by numerous histrionic gestures such as clapping his forehead and flapping his hands about in a woebegone way. I suppose he had learned by now that all the standard methods, such as reminders from clerks, notations at the foot of bills, and even telephone calls, were of no avail in my case; they weren’t, because there was nothing I could do to remedy the situation myself. He had come up through the ranks in the hotel business, starting first as a waiter, then maitre d’, and so on, and I think basically we liked each other, but if we did, no two people who liked each other ever had such a scrappy, turbulent relationship as we.

The hotel had an elevator that used to continue on down below the lobby floor, where the desk was, and bring you out at the back of a drugstore that the building housed. From there you could gain the street, without having to pass the front desk and Mr. Drew’s watchful eye.

I used this means of escape with great frequency until, as Drew became familiar with the tactic, its usefulness began to wane. For the elevator, unfortunately, had an old-fashioned lattice-work draw-gate securing it, which could be looked through, and when he would spot me in the interior of the car, trying to make myself as inconspicuous

as possible as I continued on down below, he would dash out from around in back of the desk, chase down the entrance-steps, out the main entrance, and around the corner to the drugstore doorway, and I would walk right into his arms, so to speak, when I came quick-stepping out a minute later.

After several of these half-supplicating, half-stormy sidewalk fracases, I gave up coming out the side entrance, as an expedient that had outlived its usefulness. I couldn't give him his money, because I didn't have it to give in the first place, but I stopped trying to evade him, and he had to fall back on his original (and wholly unproductive) technique of bombarding me with countless bills, all with lurid crimson-ink "Past Due" stamps on them, and calling me in my room on the phone at varied hours of the day and night, ranging from eight in the morning until midnight. He only stopped then because he went to bed around that hour himself, I suppose. I did more angrily severe banging up of the telephone receiver in those days than I have ever done in my life, before or since.

Thus we stalemated one another, and finally relapsed into a state of sullen, armed truce.

One night there was a knock at my door around nine or so, and when I took my hands off the keys and went over and opened it, Drew was standing there.

I raised my arms and slapped my hands against my sides fumingly. "For the love of Pete," I burst out. "You're not going to start in at this hour of the night, are you? I've told you over and over, as soon as I get something I'll give it to you. Can't you let up for one day at least?"

"Now wait a minute, wait a minute, don't get your back up," he tried to calm me. "D'you want to go to the movies?"

"What d'you mean, do I want to go to the movies?" I asked suspiciously.

He took a slip of paper out of his pocket. "I have a pass here for the R.K.O. Eighty-first Street. They send me one

each week for letting them display their advertising down at the desk."

"It's for two," I said, glancing at it. "Are you coming with me?"

"I can't leave the hotel," he said. "My boss might take it into his head to call up or even drop around, and it would look bad if I weren't on the job. Take someone else with you. Take some girl."

"I can't take a girl," I said inflexibly. "It means an orangeade or a soda afterwards, that's the least you can do, and I can't even afford that much right now. It's too late to call anyone up at the last minute like this, anyway."

"Go by yourself then," he urged. "It'll do you good, relax you, take your mind off. You're leading an old man's life, C'nell, shut up in here day and night, night and day. You're only young once, mark my word, you'll regret it someday."

"No I won't," I contradicted him. "I've figured it all out. It's got to be now or later. I'd rather have it now and over with, and do my playing later."

But I took the pass from him and closed the door.

I buttoned up my shirt collar, put on a tie, slung my jacket across my arm, and went out—for the first time (except for just a hurried meal) in I don't know how many weeks.

I got as far as the corner, and then my feet seemed to lock themselves rigid on the pavement, wouldn't go on any further. I couldn't do it. I longed to see the show, as much as any school kid ever did who's only allowed to go once a week to a Saturday matinee—longed for a little fun and recreation, was almost famished for it—but I couldn't do it. My conscientiousness about first finishing the work I was doing was as rigid as an iron poker; I couldn't seem to bend it in the slightest.

I turned around and went back inside the hotel again and up to my room.

The door of the lady who lived on the other side of the hall from me was slightly ajar, and I could hear Drew's voice

in there talking to her, as I came off the elevator.

He was taking his leave, and as he slowly came out backward, he didn't see me.

"—never lets up," she was complaining in a low, mournful voice. "Starts in at nine in the morning, and goes on all day long, sometimes until after twelve o'clock at night. I get the most splitting headaches from it. I've called down until I'm blue in the face, and it doesn't seem to do any good."

"Well, you won't have to listen to it tonight, at least," he promised her in a soothing voice. "I got rid of him for one night, anyway, by giving him a pass to a movie. Wish I'd have thought of it sooner."

"That's what you think!" I called out stridently.

He jumped almost a half-foot off the floor, and whirled around, and his normally ruddy face got almost the color of a raspberry.

I shied the pass across the hall in his direction, keyed open my door, slammed it shut behind me, and went back to the typewriter keys again, with the renewed vigor of rancor now added to everything else.

Then suddenly one day there was a mystifying change in Mr. Drew's attitude. He beamed, his expression was cherubic, as we came unexpectedly face to face. He clapped my shoulder, he asked how I was, he winked at me to show a special geniality.

When I saw his extended hand, waiting for mine, I said with overemphasized weariness, "Now, please. Don't start that again. I've told you over and over: when I can, as soon as I can."

He looked hurt that I should misconstrue his friendliness. He creased his forehead ruefully. "C'nell, I haven't said a word. C'nell, have I said a word? Why do you jump on me like this?"

"No, but you're going to," I said skeptically.

"All I wanted to say was, now that you're caught up, try to stay that way. Don't let it run so far behind the next time."

“Next time?” I said dumbfounded. “What happened to this time?”

“Don’t worry about it—” he started to say blandly.

“Don’t worry about it?” I flared. “Now I *am* going to worry about it more than ever, because it’s not like you to be so easygoing. There’s something up. You’re just trying to put me off my guard. I’ll probably find my door plugged up when I come back.”

“C’nell,” he protested, horrified, raising a sanctimonious pudgy pink palm. Then he asked me, “Have you gotten a bill, all this week? Tell the truth now, have you?”

I suddenly realized I hadn’t; they’d stopped. I was so used to ignoring them anyway, I hadn’t noticed the difference.

“There you are,” he went on. “You’re in the clear. All paid up. Forget about it.”

“Paid up?” I called after him loudly. “How can I be? Since when? Aren’t you always dinning it into my ears that you don’t know what you’ll tell the owner when he comes around to collect his rents, that you don’t know how you’ll face him?”

But he was now, I could see, in as much of a hurry to get away from me as he had been before to approach me. I followed him a few steps, but I couldn’t get another word out of him.

I couldn’t make head nor tail out of this wholly improbable turn of events. I knew he was too good a hotel man to have mixed my account up with somebody else’s, although for a moment that gratifying thought did cross my mind. I decided there was only one way to find out for sure, and that was to get a look at the hotel’s bookkeeping ledger with my own eyes.

I knew that neither of the two daytime clerks would be likely to allow me to do that. They were too much under Drew’s thumb. But the midnight-to-morning desk-man, Mr. Mack, was a far more unfettered spirit where Drew was concerned, since their hours did not coincide and they

rarely saw one another. I might just possibly get him to do it if I went about it in the right way.

So late that night, shortly after he'd come on duty, I approached the desk, leaned negligently on my elbow and chatted with him for a while. Then after I'd offered him a cigarette, I asked casually, "By the way, how does my bill stand? Do I still owe anything on it?"

He got out the bulky ledger, thumbed its pages over, scanned one, and then looked up at me. "You're paid up until the thirtieth of this month," he said.

"Let me see that," I exclaimed.

Caught off guard, just as I'd hoped, he let me turn it around my way without protest and trace my finger along the page. The entry was there as clear as day; the entire amount outstanding against me had been paid up, a matter of some five or six days earlier.

I didn't say anything more to him. I turned around and went back up to my room, almost in a daze.

I sat down and tried to think the thing out logically in my mind. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became there was only one possible explanation, until finally I was sure I must be right.

Late the next afternoon, after I'd finished my daytime stint and before beginning my evening one, I went over to my mother's house to see her. I shouldn't actually call it her house; it had belonged to my grandfather, who had died six or seven years before, and his daughters had stayed on in it after that, both having lost their husbands. My mother was the older, and (I suppose) the titular head of the small establishment.

The chow dog they kept in the house, Blong (or "Blong Mei," pidgin for "Belongs to Me," the name on his pedigree papers), always rushed clamoring against the door at anyone's ring, and then, when he'd hear my voice, would subside. But I always got the impression it was in a miffed sort of way, as though he felt cheated of having a chance to

show his valor off before the two ladies who were in his charge.

“Are you going to have something with us?” was the first thing my mother asked after we’d kissed.

“No, I have to get right back,” I told her. “You know I’m working on that thing.”

“You’re working too hard. You’ll kill yourself. You’ve got to eat better.”

And my aunt, tilting her head sideward to study me, concurred (as usual) with a plaintive “You don’t look good. You looked better the last time you were here.”

“Oh,” I said impatiently, “I’ll have all the rest of my life to eat in.

The work comes first right now.” Then I said to my mother, “I came over because I wanted to talk to you about something.”

As soon as we were alone together in the other room, I told her: “I found out what you did.”

A momentary flicker of guilt showed on her face, reminding me of the expression on a little girl’s face when she has been found out doing something she knows she shouldn’t. Then a look of quiet hurt took its place.

“That just shows you how reliable Mr. Drew is. He promised he wouldn’t say anything.”

“Drew didn’t tell me,” I said, and found myself for once in the odd position of defending my arch-enemy. “I got the night man to show me the ledger.”

She didn’t say anything to that.

“You don’t carry that much around with you in your handbag at one time,” I added. “You must have taken it out of your savings account.”

“I went down to the bank the next day, after he’d spoken to me the last time I was over to see you, and I stopped off with it on my way home.”

But I could only see it from my own point of view, no other. “I don’t want to be helped,” I insisted. “Don’t you

understand? I want to do this all on my own, prove to myself that I can do it, without any help from anyone. If you help me now, and I succeed afterward, then you've taken that much away from my success, made it that much less. I want it to be all mine. That's the only way I can really enjoy it if it comes." And I added with all that sublime, ridiculous cocksureness of one's young years, "I'm not going to sponge off anyone—not even my own mother."

I saw tears form in her eyes, but she kept them back.

"I don't understand you, the way you talk sometimes," she said quietly. "I only did it because I thought I would be helping you keep up your morale that way."

"But it's just the opposite; it's bad for my morale, instead of being good for it. Don't you have confidence in me?"

She came to me, put her arms around me, and pressed me fervently to her. "Every confidence!" she breathed. "You've got too much in you not to be recognized someday. I only hope I live to see it, that's my one prayer."

"I know I'll make it," I chanted raptly. "I'm going to, and I will. I know this thing will work out right. It's got to." Then I said in a softer voice, "Promise me you won't do anything like that again."

"I won't, if you don't want me to," she said submissively. "But will you be all right?" she added with a touch of anxiety.

"Sure I will. I'm not afraid of Drew," I scoffed. "He's a great big coward, fat as he is."

"But he did turn the lights in your room off once, you told me."

"He won't try that again in a hurry," I assured her. "You should have seen me chase him all around the desk, in front of everybody standing there, until he sent the mechanic up and had him put the fuse back in again. It was like slapstick comedy; I'd go running in at one end and he'd come running out at the other, then he'd go running in again at the opposite end as I came out once more at the first one."

In retrospect, I can tell she didn’t see the humor in it that I did. “I don’t like you to be bad friends with him” was all she said, demurely.

Now that I’d gained my way in the major matter, I gave in on the minor one, not an uncommon trait in human nature. I stayed and had my meal with them, and they waited on me and handed me things at the table and made a lot of fuss over me, as they always did, and made me feel altogether like a king. Or at least like the lord of a manor visiting among his loyal and devoted tenantry.

But late that night when I was back in my own room, and through with my work, and going to bed, I thought again of what she, my mother, had done, and saw it in a different, truer perspective than I had at first, and the tears came to my own eyes for a moment, just as they had to hers.

I understood always, my whole life through, how much she loved me. And I think she understood, surely must have, how very much the same I felt about her.

On the night I finally came to the end of it, it was well on into the early morning hours. It seemed so quiet all at once, so smotheringly, stiflingly still, after all those days and nights and weeks of cricketlike chattering of the keys. Almost as though a thick eiderdown quilt had fallen down all over me, muffling everything. My ears couldn’t seem to get used to it. They felt stunned, they almost seemed to be ringing with the emptiness. I’d stopped many times before this of course, stopped each night, and several times each day. But that was different, because then I knew I’d have to go on again each time. Now there was nothing more to come, the last keys had been struck, “The End” was lettered at the bottom of the final page, it was over. That’s why, I suppose, I noticed the silence so much more than I had those other times. It was a psychological silence as much as an auditory one.

The hotel was asleep all around me. It was a quiet, drowsy sort of place anyway, most of the time. And even the

street outside, which in that part of New York was, as a rule, never still, day or night, this night seemed to be so too, as if to blend itself in with my mood, just an occasional taxi-horn barking somewhere a block or so off. And the muffled surge of a lonely, passing subway train would now and then come up through the ventilating grids on the sidewalk and be plainly heard in the stillness of the streets above.

I turned the light out first, to cool my poor overworked eyes. It had been on so long, so steadily, that the heat of the glowing bulb extended all the way down the chain-pull to its very tip. When I touched that, it was hot enough to make me quickly take my fingers away. I sat there slumped before the desk in the dark for a while, too tired even to get up and leave the chair. Then after a while I made room by pushing things aside, and I laid my head down on the desktop, forehead first. I must have jarred the typewriter carriage slightly, and the little bell that always signaled the end of a line tinkled faintly. I remember. I thought it was a fitting coda to the whole thing. *Ping,* like that: and then unbroken silence.

I wanted desperately to go to sleep, and yet I was too keyed up, my nerves were too taut from the last long stint I'd put in, for me to be able to. Then suddenly hunger came. It struck me like a blow, almost. One moment there was no thought of food in my head, the next I was ravening.

Fd never felt hunger so strong, I'd never known it could be. It couldn't wait another moment, sleep was an impossibility until it was fed. It was agonizing. It was the actual pang I'd so often read of, but that I had never fully realized the meaning of before. It was like the teeth of an animal caught into you and refusing to let go their hold.

I dug into the linings of my pockets, quite unnecessarily. I'd already known I had no money. I had none. But this is not poetic license or retouching of a fact simply to point up, play up, a plight. This was literal: I had not one single, solitary penny of money on me, or in the room about me, or

anywhere in the world, at that moment. The next day there would be some way of getting a little, there always was. But hunger couldn't wait until the next day. This wasn't one night's hunger, this was two months'. Even more, for that matter. I hadn't been eating well, even long before I'd first begun the book.

Now I thought of the poor strays who had come up to me on the street occasionally and asked me for enough money to get something to eat, and I was glad of the few times I'd been able to give it and sorry for the many times I'd had to refuse. But like most New Yorkers I'd been cynical, and thought they just wanted it for a drink. Tonight I knew better; there must have been some of them at least who felt like I did now.

I got up, left the room, and closed the door behind me, about to do very much the same thing they had myself. Not on the streets, perhaps, but right here in the hotel itself—that was about the only difference. I went up to Drew's floor, two floors above my own, stood there for a moment mustering my courage, and then knocked on his door. I don't know yet—even as I stood there at the time I didn't—where I got the amazing gall, the effrontery, to single him out, of all people. Beneath all our squabbling and differences, there must have been some sense of empathy there.

It required quite some knocking, and of a steadily increasing caliber, before anything happened. Finally I heard his voice ask blurredly on the inside: "Who is it?"

For some indefinable reason, possibly a feeling of embarrassment, I couldn't bring myself to give my name, I just repeated my knock.

He opened the door and looked out at me, face puffed up, rounded more than ever with the swellings of sleep, eyes closed into slits, and in a dingy bathrobe.

"Help me out, will you?" I burst out impetuously. "I've got to have something to eat, I can't stand it—and I haven't got

a cent. Lend me something, and I'll give it back to you. Even fifty cents. Anything."

He looked at me as though he thought he hadn't heard me right. "C'nell, are you crazy?" he gasped.

"Not crazy," I said, glowering at him. "Hungry. I'm crazed with hunger, yes."

He looked searchingly into my face, and I think he must have detected that I was practically drooling with the need for food. If my chin wasn't actually wet, the inside of my mouth kept filling with a saliva that I couldn't seem to dispose of.

Suddenly his wife called out from within their bedroom, "Charlie, who is that?"

"C'nell," he said, turning his head aside. The two of us looked at each other with a sort of telepathic understanding. Husbandlike, he must have given her a faithful transcription of all our difficulties and all my derogations of him, and she could hardly have been a great admirer of mine.

Not realizing that I could hear her where I was, or perhaps not caring, she called out, annoyed: "Tell him to go to grass!"

He made an inscrutable sign to me, and muffled his voice in precaution. "Too bad you woke her up. Wait here a minute. I'll see if I can get you something without letting her see me."

I stood there by the half-open door, and he went back toward the bedroom.

I heard her ask suddenly, as distinctly as ever, "Charlie, what are you doing over there?"

I quailed for a moment, as I know he too must have.

"I'm looking for my cigarettes, Cass," I heard him say to her.

Then he came back to the door again and, with his head turned watchfully in her direction, put a dollar bill into my hand.

I didn’t know what to say to him. “I’m sorry” was all I could think of. “I’m sorry about all the times I’ve rowed with you and insulted you. It won’t happen anymore, after this.”

“Forget about it, boy,” he said, and he gave me one of the usual claps on the shoulder, but at the same time I saw him shaking his head to himself. “I didn’t realize. You really are hard up, aren’t you?”

Her final voicing aloud put an end to our bathos-redolent reconciliation scene. “Charlie, come back to bed!” she called out in no uncertain terms.

He quickly closed the door, and I as quickly went away from it.

I went up the street one block and across, where there was a cafeteria that stayed open all night. I ordered scrambled eggs and coffee and sat down to them, moaning under my breath with a peculiar mixture of pain and pleasure. The tabletops were white glazed, and stained with unwiped food marks. The sugar was caked in the sugar sifters. The coffee had been reboiled a hundred times. Still, I’d eaten a thousand times before then, and I’ve eaten a thousand times since then, but no food I’ve ever had tasted as good as the coffee in that inch-thick mug and the eggs on that greasy cracked plate that I ate in that cheap cafeteria at three or four o’clock that morning. It tasted the way food should taste. I almost wanted to cry with gratitude, it tasted so good.

Then I went back to my room and fell into the bottomless, prostrated sleep of release from months of accumulated fatigue and overwork.

I took the book downtown the next day and turned it over to Irwin, and the rest was only to wait.

I found the waiting harder than the working almost. For my life hadn’t changed; the same scrimping, scraping,

cutting down on meals to save a penny went on as before. Never any money, at least not enough all at a time to do anything with. And now that the solar plexus of the book had been taken out of my life, there was a great big hole left in the middle of it. I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't start working on something else because there wasn't the remotest possibility of selling anything else right then, and even if there had been, I still couldn't have; I was too drained by the effort I had just put in, I needed a breathing spell first.

Every night I would go out walking, killing time, merged in the drifting crowd I used to glimpse so longingly from my window. Yes, people still strolled the avenues in the Depression evenings, even if they couldn't do anything else. The lights were as gay as ever, the voices as animated, the smiles as ready, even if the hearts weren't quite as light anymore. The lights would be rippling on the picture-theater marquees like sprays of colored water, glinting in furriers' show-windows, which were coated with amber-tinted cellophane (a new decorative device then). The lights would be sizzling on casefuls of zircons and rhinestones like glassed-in fireworks displays. The lights would be shining from below upward, like submerged crocuses, at the feet of posturing mannequins garbed in the by-now universal silhouette of the new day: skirts to the shin and shoulders squared off and padded like those of a football player's uniform. And hair brushed flat from side to side across the top like that of a little girl of seven.

Even when they couldn't buy half the things they looked at, it was nice just to look, and the same went for me.

Then when they were tired of walking, they could always go back home and listen to the Kate Smith program, or the Eddie Cantor show, or Burns and Allen, and that was free of charge, too. I could do that too; the only difference was I couldn't sit down or take my coat off. I'd sold my little Emerson portable radio long before, but I used to get all

the programs by standing in the entrances of hospitable music stores that had their loudspeakers turned on over the doorway. The jokes were just as funny there.

Life was as good as ever, as good as it's always been, to me and to those strolling with me. The only difference was you needed money more than you once had, for there was now far less of it around. But there wasn't one of us in that promenading-to-nowhere-and-back crowd who would have changed it, changed life, for anything else.

Each night when I went to bed, I said to myself, "Maybe tomorrow he'll call." Then the day came, and he didn't, and the night came, and again: "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow."

A dozen times, a half a hundred times, I started to call him instead, and I kept from doing so. A dozen times I already had my nickel in the pay slot, and I pressed down the arm and brought it back to me again. Once I even got through to his office, and then I wouldn't name myself to the switchboard operator, hung up before she could put me through.

For I knew it wouldn't help any, wouldn't hasten it any, might even detract from it if I become too importunate or impatient. One call would bring on a second, then a third, and each time less and less gained. He would call me when he was ready, when the decision had been reached, and he wouldn't call me before. My calling him wouldn't make the decision; only his calling me would.

So until then it had to be "Maybe tomorrow he'll call me. Maybe tomorrow he'll call."

And then suddenly one morning he did. Very early, very unexpectedly, about 9:30 in the morning. It must have been almost as soon as he reached his desk. I'd jumped straight to the phone from my bed, and it was only as the film strips of sleep peeled slowly off my mind one by one that I realized whose the voice was. I stood there, holding up my pajama pants with one hand, the phone in the other.

“You sound half-awake,” I heard him say. “Can you come down here later in the day?” he said. “I’d like to talk to you. I’d ask you to lunch, only I’m doing without lunches these days.”

I was fully awake by now and almost bursting with excitement. “Forget lunch.” I told him. “What about the book? Is it in? Is it in?”

“Wait’ll you get your eyes open, then come down,” he hedged. “I don’t like talking on the phone anyway. It’s much more satisfactory when you get together personally.” And he hung up.

I tried to click him back on again, but he was off for good and I couldn’t get him back.

I let go my pajama waistband and it fell down to the floor and I had to bend over and hoist it up again.

It can’t be a rejection, I kept thinking as I dressed, and then later as I rode the excruciatingly slow subway, or he would have told me then and there. I knew editors well enough by now; in that case he would rather *not* have had me come down and see him.

When I stepped into his office, the first thing I noticed was that it wasn’t in evidence, he didn’t have it there on his desk ready to give back to me, and my hopes rose even higher still.

He started in by mentioning its good points, bouncing a pencil on its end as he remarked each one.

“It’s gay, it’s jaunty.

“There’s only one trouble. It’s no longer valid.

“That Paris is gone.”

“That Paris’ll never be gone,” I retorted resentfully, much as you refute a slander against the personality of your first sweetheart—such as that she’s aging, no longer what she used to be.

“Yes it is,” he insisted. “It’s as dead as the New York that used to send half its own population over there to visit every summer. That’s beside the point anyway. We’re not

selling the book in Paris, we're selling it right here in New York. People aren't going to read it there, they're going to read it here. And the New York that used to want to read about that Paris doesn't exist anymore."

He was right; I could see with my own eyes that it didn't.

"It's out," I murmured, releasing a long, mournful sigh.

He didn't answer.

"Well, where is it, then?" I finally wanted to know. "I may as well take it home with me."

He opened his desk drawer and fumbled around a little, but more as though making time than actually looking for something which he really didn't know where to locate. Then instead of the thick 300-odd-page typescript, he brought out a single sheet of paper with a few lines typed on it.

"I know you want to make money on it," he remarked.

I didn't answer that; it was too obvious.

He handed me the slip of paper to read.

It very briefly stated, in no more than two or three typed lines: In the event of a sale of my book, *I Love You, Paris* to X-Studios on the recommendation of Mr. Y, associate producer at that studio, I agreed to divide the profits of the sale fifty-fifty with Mr. Irwin—.

"You keep all the other rights just as much as ever," he hastened to assure me. "In fact, they might even reconsider here and do it as a book, if a successful motion picture comes out of it. That's been done before. A successful motion picture helps to sell a book, you know."

Then he went on to tell me that he knew this Mr. Y, and was sure that if he liked it a sale could be made on the strength of his recommendation to the studio heads. It was not like sending it to an agent. This was a direct contact with the studio itself.

I didn't need much more urging than that. I signed it and he put it back where he'd taken it from.

Then and only then he told me, “It’s already out there. We ought to hear any day now. I know you need the money, don’t want to be held up too long waiting.”

We shook hands, and my hopes went way up again, even higher than they’d been before.

On that note I left him and went home.

I knew I hadn’t been too astute, but I felt I hadn’t had much choice in the matter, and anyone else in my position would have done pretty much as I had. Certainly, I was giving away half my potential profits. But I was giving away half of nothing, for without him and his associate producer friend Mr. Y, there would be no chance of a sale at all, I knew. Half a cake, to be La Rochefoucauldian about it, was better than none.

At that, he could have been much more demanding, or let’s say much more flagrant, about it. By that I mean he could have insisted on a half-share of any picture sale at all that was made, and not just a sale to the one studio that was specified. Or worse still, he could have bought the book outright from me, all rights to it, for a thousand dollars or even five hundred dollars of his own (which I’m not sure I would have been able to refuse) and thus stand to collect the entire amount when the sale came. But I suppose, to be completely objective about it, he didn’t have the thousand or five hundred in his own pocket, and couldn’t very well ask the publishers for it since they’d already turned the book down.

I think all it amounted to was that he saw a chance to make some money on his own account out of something that had fortuitously come his way, and took it. And who is to blame him? I could see his logic, and I didn’t resent it in the least.

I’m only trying to be fair. It doesn’t matter now anymore, but it mattered terribly then.

I went home again to wait. This second wait was even worse than the first, for it was added to the first, was a

continuation of it, and therefore seemed to have gone on twice as long as it actually had. But I outlasted it, I outlived it. Everything comes to an end, and at last it did, too.

When he called me this time, he did it indirectly. He had his assistant—he seemed to have attained the status of having his own secretary by now, or perhaps it was just the general operator for the office—put the call through for him, and he didn't get on himself. She asked if I could come down that afternoon, said he'd like to see me. I said I would, of course, but when I asked if I could talk to him himself, she told me that he was either tied up in a meeting or had stepped out of the office for a short while, I forget now which it was. Which could have been perfectly true, after all.

I let it go at that; what difference did an extra hour or two make, after all those leaden-footed days and weeks I'd put in waiting?

On my way to his office from the subway stop, I took a shortcut through a side-street. As I was moving briskly along through it, the figure of a middle-aged woman descending a short flight of stone steps just ahead of me caught my eye. She was shrouded completely in black, apparently in widow's weeds, but the brief glimpse I had of her face as she turned away and went up the street before me had showed a serenity, a passivity, that struck me. It was a sad cast of expression with its downlidded eyes, but it was completely at peace, that much couldn't be doubted.

I glanced at the steps, and then up above them. The cool, dingy and yet dignified facade of a church met my eyes. I had never yet been inside one. Neither for any joyous occasion nor any sad one. Neither for a wedding nor a funeral, a baptism nor a confirmation nor a mass.

I stopped, and turned halfway, and stood there looking at it. Then I moved slowly back again the few steps past it that I'd gone, and stood and looked some more.

People went into them for help; why shouldn't I? That woman I'd seen just now had, and you could tell by her face that she'd found it, been given what she asked.

But, something inside me argued, that woman's concerns are with death, her black garb shows that. Yours are with life and life only; it isn't the same thing.

I loitered around out there thinking the thing out, a sort of sidewalk loafer in front of a church, my hands deep in my pockets in uncertainty, the inevitable cigarette clenched in my mouth.

My sense of fair play, my sense of good manners, told me: You shouldn't go in just when you have something to ask for. You should have been going in steadily all along before now. Then you would be entitled to go in now and ask for your favor. This way you're not. You're only trying to use God. It's your problem, you should keep it to yourself.

Everyone uses God. Why shouldn't I? Every prayer that was ever sent up is asking God a favor. Why shouldn't my prayer go up too, along with all the other millions? I'm entitled to my happiness as much as anyone else.

Then another thought came to further cloud the issue: You wouldn't let your mother help you. You claimed it would take something away from you. Then why are you willing to let God help you? Won't that also take something away from you?

It's not the same thing, I answered in thought. My mother is weaker than I am, God is stronger. My mother looks up to me, admires me. God certainly doesn't. When you let the weaker help you, you detract from yourself. When you let the stronger help you, you don't. If you see a small child fall flat and lie there on the ground bawling, and you go over and help it back to its feet, do you detract from that child?

I threw my cigarette over my shoulder, jerked my hands out of my pockets, and ran tautly up the steps, neck slightly bent, as though they were a springboard into a pool of icy-cold water.

I had a fleeting impression of a marble-floored vestibule with a stone basin of water (was that what they called holy water? I wondered) set between two massive inner doors, and then I was standing stock still in the dim interior, as suddenly as I'd surged forward from outside just now.

The hush was the first thing I noticed about it. There was some sort of an inner quiet here that other buildings didn't have, for surely its walls were no thicker than many of theirs and yet they lacked it. The absence of windows? I asked myself. Far ahead, it seemed, there were little taper-lights. They seemed to be up on the wall, although I knew they actually weren't. They reminded me of shimmering teardrops and little ruddy drops of blood that had trickled down a certain distance, and then stopped and stayed there, pulsing, each one where it was.

Finally I moved again. I didn't go too far forward, I was too timid to. I think subconsciously I was fearful somebody would come out from the side, down there by the altar, and ask me what I was doing in there, what right I had to be in there.

I chose about the fourth or fifth row from the back, entered it, and sat down three or four seats from the outside. I clasped my hands and rested them on the back of the seat in front of me, and just sat for a while, my head respectfully lowered a trifle, but taking everything in from under my eyelids. It had a tragic grandeur to it, and yet an infinite loneliness too. I wondered if the next world was going to be this lonely. People took your loneliness away; God made you feel vastly lonely. I wondered why that was; it should be the other way around, I thought, shouldn't it?

My unaccustomed mundane eye, no conscious irreverence intended, kept traveling in the direction of the altar and expecting to come up against a big, blank picture-screen that was not to be found there. The cavernous grandiloquence was like that of a large motion-picture palace before the audience has filed in and the cameras

have started turning in the projection room. I kept trying to put the thought out of my head, but it kept coming back again each time. It was the only comparison my past experience could conjure up.

I brought one knee down to the floor, but since that was an awkward position—there wasn't space enough there to comfortably allow the length of a bent leg—I finally brought the other one down beside it, and crouched there like that, my forehead pillowed against my clasped hands.

I had common sense enough to realize that formula didn't matter, it wasn't what counted. I knew no stylized prayers or forms of addressing God, because I'd never used any. And even words, that is, unspoken words within my mind, were difficult to marshal. So I contented myself with offering my prayer in thought form only, letting the smooth-flowing current of my thoughts carry it along far more evenly and naturally than any word-forms could have.

It was about like this:

"Dear God: Nature or You—if you are separate, and I don't think you are, or both—have put an unusually strong love of life in me. Everybody has it, I know, but I have it to an inordinate degree. And by love of life, I don't mean just the act of breathing and the wish not to stop breathing. I mean having fun, having a good time.

"My youthfulness is about to end, and I myself robbed it of many of the years it was entitled to.

"That's why I ask you: Let me have this money now, while I can still enjoy it as it should be enjoyed, to the hilt. Five years from now will be too late. Or even four. Even three.

"I don't want it for security. I don't want it to hoard, or put away in a musty bank, or count over, or scheme with. I want it to live with.

"Let me have it now.

"Now.

"Now, or not at all."

I noticed a strange thing immediately afterward. I felt strangely emptied out, weak, as when you've just expended all the energy you're capable of. I knew by that, whatever my prayer's merits, whatever its importunity, whatever its impertinence, it had been at least sincere, not feigned, not superficial, not play-acting.

I stayed there as I was for some time afterward, too limp to move, and I noticed that there were beads of perspiration on my forehead, and I felt moist under the arms.

After a while I passed my sleeve across my forehead and dried it off, and got stiffly and clumsily back to a sitting position. I say again, I meant that prayer with all my heart and all my soul.

Finally, as the pressures of the outside world began to circle closer around me again, and particularly as the imminence and importance of my appointment with Irwin came back to mind, I got to my feet and moved haltingly backward out of the space between the seats. Why backward, I haven't any idea. Possibly I thought it was the proper etiquette.

I went up the aisle and outside into the streets, and the sudden onset of their life-noises was almost like being buffeted by a howling storm, the first few minutes, after the unearthly silence inside there.

The effect (not of the noise but of the emotion spent) hadn't altogether worn off yet even by the time I reached Irwin's office. I could tell that by the meek, almost limp way I went in, when the girl ushered me, and shook hands and submissively sat down opposite him, instead of rushing in with all sorts of questions popping from my lips as I ordinarily would have.

He came directly to the point, now that he had me in front of him. (And I have never been able to understand that telephonic indirectness, evasiveness, of his, then or since.)

“Cornell,” he said, “I wish I had something good to tell you. It’s back. It came in this morning.”

“Oh,” I said almost inaudibly. “It’s turned down.”

“Turned down,” he repeated. And then he went on to discuss their viewpoint briefly. The post-mortem was of no value even then, and still less now, so there is no point in repeating it.

Finally he said, “I want to show you that I’m trying to be fair about this,” and he took out the single sheet of paper granting him half-share of the rights which I had signed the previous time, had me glance at it, then tore it into four pieces and dropped them into his wastebasket.

I think this only made me feel worse, instead of reassuring me as he had probably intended it to, for it only pointed up to my mind how hopeless from a sales angle he must consider the thing to be, to do that.

True, the grant had been valid only in this one instance, but I was in no mood to derive any comfort from that. If he had thought there was any further chance, he wouldn’t have relinquished it so easily.

“It was a one-shot,” he pointed out. “And when a one-shot goes wrong, it goes wrong, and that’s all there is.”

“Yeah,” I assented bitterly.

The thing was beginning to sink slowly in, and I could feel myself hardening up. I realized the best thing I could do was get out of there, before I started taking it out on him. He actually hadn’t done anything wrong, I kept reminding myself, only what I had intended doing myself from the beginning; if anything, he’d expedited it.

The last thing I recall saying to him was: “I even went into a church and prayed I’d have luck with it.”

I’ve never forgotten what he answered to that. “You must have picked the wrong church,” he smiled cynically.

So I left there, as the defeated always leave the place of their defeat: heavy-hearted, leaden-footed, the world all

black and stormy around me, not a ray of light in it anywhere.

All that hard work for nothing. All those wearisome drudging weeks. A whole big chunk taken out of my life and thrown away, wasted. But far worse than the disappointment itself was the timing of it. My instinct told me very surely that this marked the ending of something or other in me. Call it being young, call it being completely carefree. Call it being wholeheartedly foolish, even; that has its place in life, too. And I knew that that was the real reason why I'd prayed. Not just for the money itself, for its own sake. (That would have been too presuming even for my nontheological turn of mind.) But to be given the money now, when every penny would have brought a dollar's worth of zest and enjoyment, and not later, when every dollar would bring only a penny's worth, maybe not even that much.

I noticed an ashcan standing by the curb as I came out of the building and made my downcast way along the street. I opened the clasp-envelope he had so bountifully given me and took my manuscript out of it.

I took the title page, which had my name on it, off it first, and crumpled that into a ball and jammed it down into my pocket. Then I dropped the rest of it, just as it was, bodily into the ashcan.

Then I scooped some of the powdery white ash over it and covered it up. Buried it, as it were.

Then I went on without it, but I felt heavier, not lighter, than when I'd been carrying it.

I came across a bar, and I went in. What more natural place to go, at such a time and in such a frame of mind? But I couldn't even drown my sorrows adequately. I had just enough for one beer on me, plus the nickel required for the long subway trip up to the hotel.

There was no one else in the place at that hour of the afternoon, and the bartender must have unnoticeably taken

in my dismal expression as I lingered there, head bowed numbly over the lone beer until it was gone. I suppose he guessed my dejection had to do with money in one way or another. Everyone's did in those days.

When he saw me start to sidle off the stool about to go, he called over from where he was standing: "Have another."

"I can't," I said. "That's all I have enough for."

"Have one on me, then," he invited, and I glimpsed a rueful cast of compassion on his face for just a moment as he brought it over and set it down before me. That told me it wasn't just business goodwill that prompted him, it was human sympathy. Sympathy for a kid, of an older man who's gone through the same thing himself and knows what it's like. Nothing further was said by either one of us. When I finished it, I nodded to him and went out. But the trifling little act of human fellowship had made me feel better.

Not much, just an infinitesimal bit better. Like when your leg is broken, and you're lying there, and somebody pats his handkerchief to your moist forehead. It doesn't make the pain any less, but at least you're not alone in the pain.

A moment after, I turned around and went back to the place again.

I flung the door forcefully inward without, however, releasing my hold on it, not wanting it to strike back and break his glass.

"Y'know something, mister?" I called in to him.

He turned, startled slack-jawed.

"No, wh-what?" he quavered, half-frightened, I could tell, by my unexpected vehemence.

"You're better, even, than God. Because God didn't give me a ten-cent glass of beer free. But you did!"

And I reclosed the door and went on my bitter, beaten, homeward way, freed forever of any further religious beliefs.

There is a brief postscript to this story. Somewhat under a year later, which would bring it up to about 1934, a new

picture opened in one of the first-run picture houses downtown. It had the word “Paris” somewhere in its title, that much I can recall. But that was nothing; the important thing about it was the reviews, which I read the next day just as I always did after any new opening. They were not overly enthusiastic about it, but they all alike mentioned that at least one thing in its favor, if not the only one, was that it brought a fresh and hitherto untouched period to the screen: the 1912 epoch.

I immediately went down there to see it. There were variations in it here and there, of course; there always are in any film derivation, even when its source has been bought and paid for. But its two leading characters were still a pair of ballroom dancers, and they still danced their highlight number to the rhythm of Ravel’s “Bolero” just as I had specified in my script. As for the dialogue, much of that had been transposed almost verbatim. Not just a few random remarks, but whole stretches, especially in the key scenes. I couldn’t fail to recognize it. I had worked too hard to try to make it witty, scintillating, brittle. It came out now sounding flat and dull to my discouraged ears, but it was still my dialogue, superimposed upon a very close approximation of my plot, set in the Paris of, not the year 1911, not the year 1913, but 1912. In fact, throughout it bore such an unabashed verisimilitude to my piece that it almost looked as though somebody had been paid for it. But it certainly hadn’t been I.

I came out of there with a sullen scowl on my face, but actually it no longer hurt. That had been last year’s grief and heartache. I was already starting on the way up again myself by now. I had no time for last year’s grief, I was too taken up in this year’s hopes and plans. And there was this note of consolation to be derived from it too: Whoever had stolen it, had stolen it as much from Irwin as from me. It had, in actuality, been stolen twice over. The biter had been bitten in turn.

It no longer hurt.